



Introduction

In this midst of the stress, confusion, and fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, Inkwell Literary Magazine has loved exploring "Refuge" as the theme of our fourth issue.

Our writers have probed the depths of the inkwell to find the light of refuge in glowing from a lighthouse, streaming into castle dungeons, and above all, shining from the glory of God. As our staff has finished their semester and our publication to the close of its first volume, we're looking forward to a rest, but we're inspired to remember that refuge is found in the midst of the storm, in the darkest and hardest fights, as well as in the light of the sun and in the peace of the mountaintop.

Inkwell Literary Magazine is also honored to include in our final Spring 2020 issue the winners of the Bob Jones University Annual English Forum Writing Contest. Our university is proud to present the winners and runners-up of this contest, in the categories of poetry, short story, and creative nonfiction. We at Inkwell also extend a special congratulations to five of our staffers who placed in this competition.

May you be inspired to search for refuge and find its light in the One who holds the world.

"Jehovah is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; My God, my rock, in whom I will take refuge; My shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower." – Psalm 18:2 ASV





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Refuge

By Katelyn Lain

Daddy's little helper on the roof? Well, yeah. Ever since I was seven years old, I didn't have any brothers around the house. I was It. I helped Daddy build the fence, mow the yard, shock wire the fence for our dog, and pour concrete — including putting my hand and feet imprints, plus a signature.

That Day, it was building a second barn on our property. We were putting the finishing touches on, the white trimming on the top of the roof.

14 feet up.

Standing on the top step. I was used to this kind of thing.

My dad was on one ladder and I was on the other. I couldn't quite figure out how to nail my side of the trimming.

I steadied myself on the step as I held onto the beam holding up the tall structure, my dad patiently coming over to help me.

Neither one of us knew that the ladder we had borrowed disguised a broken foot. My dad came climbing up the other side to give me a hand.

At that moment, we both heard a loud crack, like the crack of tree limb before it falls. Only it wasn't a tree limb falling this time.

Like someone trying to watch the light of an airborne flashlight, my vision went from the red

ladder to blue sky. Hard beam. Red ladder. Blue sky. Hard beam. Hard dirt.

Opening my eyes, it was like Christmas: red, green. That's all that I could see.

Then, there was my dad hovering over me. "Don't get up," he cautioned.

Were those tears in his eyes?

My vision cleared.

Like the wind picking up a flower petal to float on its back, my dad picked me up in his arms, the safest place on earth.

My little sister came running outside. No pity or fear showed in her eyes. Instead, she fluttered and bobbled around like a humming-bird next to a flower.

"Daddy, I didn't know you were that strong. I thought you couldn't pick up Katelyn. She's too heavy."

I glared down at her. "Thanks."

"If you can pick up her, you can pick up me!" She pouted.

Daddy swooped us both into his bronze arms.



Every time I think of this memory, I remember the way my dad picked me up. It was almost worth it to fall 10 more times to feel his strength. I think of the way God hides me under the shadow of His wing.

Psalm 91:1 "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

The safest place I can be is in His arms.

Though He does not always protect me from all harm (as He is quite capable of doing), like my daddy, He is there to show me that He is strong enough to pick me up. The fall comes before the refuge



Dr. Benson's story

By Kaleb Shelton

(written in collaboration with Dr. Benson)

 T used to have a grudge against my college **▲** dorm because of all the dorms on the Bob Jones University campus, it was the furthest away from the Dining Common. But eventually, good old J.Y. Smith won my heart and I was one day surprised to find I had become sentimental about it. So many fun, weird, and even special memories are held for me within those dirty brick walls. One night—I think it was less than a week before we had to leave campus because of the virus—the guys on my hall all crowded into the Smith Study Lounge. It was already dark outside, so the lamps in the room threw a yellow hue on all our faces, and we could see our reflections in the black windows. All the chairs and tables had guys sitting on them, and a few sat on the floor as well. The pleasant odors of shampoo and deodorant from guys who had just showered mixed with the dirty sweaty scent of those who had yet to do so. There was a brotherly atmosphere as we jostled and joked with one another. We had all gathered tonight to hear Alan Benson, the Vice President for Student Development and Discipleship, speak to us. He was standing in front of the double

doors on one end of the study lounge. A plastic, transparent box full of cookies stood on a small table beside him, and several of us eyed it hungrily. Dr. Benson was a tall, middle aged man with the broad-shouldered build of an athlete. His iron-grey hair was neatly combed, and his beardless, youthful face was complimented by a pair of black-rimmed glasses. Instead of wearing a suit like he would in chapel or in general when he was on campus, many of us saw him for the first-time wearing jeans and a hoodie.

Our Resident Assistant stood up and said a few words by way of introduction, and then he turned it over to Dr. Benson. We all perked our ears, some of us more out of politeness than interest, to hear the devotional or challenge he would share with us. However, no such thing was forthcoming.

"Good evening, men," Dr. Benson said.
"When I first got the invitation to speak to you guys, I was trying to think of a challenge from the Word to share with you. But in the end, I decided to be a little more informal and share my salvation testimony." He sighed briefly as he gathered his thoughts. "I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland."

I furrowed my brow in confusion. Dr. Benson sounded quite American. I remembered faintly that he had some kind of connection to Canada, but his history with Ireland took me by surprise.

"My father was a rock quarry worker during the time the Irish Republican Army was wreaking havoc in Northern Ireland," he continued, oblivious to my thoughts. "In the 1970s, when I was a little child, my father saw a job advertisement in the newspaper. 'Nova Construction,' a rock quarrying and paving company in Nova Scotia, Canada that was hiring. My father applied and was accepted, so we left Northern Ireland and moved to a small town called Antigonish in Nova Scotia, Canada. Economically, this was a good decision since the new job proved to be a good one. However, there was one thing my father had not counted on. We had moved into a town that was predominantly Catholic

and my father was a staunch Protestant who disliked Catholics because of the conflict in Ireland. He was a Protestant loyalist of the Orange Lodge, which is a fraternity similar in structure to the freemasons and sworn to preserve Protestant Ascendancy. It is named after King William the Orange who

defeated the Catholic king James II in the Williamite-Jacobite War in the 17th century. My father would go to bars in town and drink and was always ready to defend his point of view.

"About 8 years after we moved to Antigonish, my sister Helen, who had married and moved out, was led to the Lord by a pastor of a very small church in town. She asked him to go visit us, so he did. The pastor's name was John Banks. He was a short BJU graduate with thinning hair and a pair of glasses. John Banks was a very forthright man with a gentle spirit, and he and I spent much time together. Often, I would accompany him on ministry activities such as visiting nursing homes or other institutions, and it was then that I first developed an interest in ministry.

"His interaction with my father was often quite interesting. As a construction worker, my father was a muscular man with a rough background. He was short in stature, but he was a fighter, and a very hard worker who worked long, labor filled days. He lived for the weekends when he could work in his garden and party, and he was both a smoker and drinker. Despite all his strongly held views, he was an enjoyable person to be around. As an Irishman he was always ready for a chat and a laugh, and thus got along well with John Banks.

"One evening in October 1981, John Banks was at our house visiting. During a conversation with my parents he asked if we had a Bible. I was very surprised when my father answered in the affirmative and went to go look for it. I knew very little about the Bible. We never really went to church. While my father was out of the room looking for the Bible, the Pastor spoke to me. I was curious about the conversation regarding the Bible and waited for what the

pastor would say. What he did say hit me right between the eyes. As he read from the book of Romans, he explained that Christ died for me. Even though I was only 11 at the time, I knew a lot about death. I could remember the violence and the destruction caused by the IRA. Once while visiting Northern Ireland some soldiers had confiscated a toy gun I had been playing with. I knew of friends and family who had died a martyr's death and suffered for a cause, and it was a very real thing to me. When John Banks said that Jesus died for me, I essentially heard, 'Jesus died and it was your fault.' Because this struck me in such a real way, I confessed my sins and became a follower of Jesus Christ that very night.

"Eventually my whole family accepted Christ. My father was the last. Though he had not yet surrendered to Christ, he and my mother started taking my siblings and I to the tiny church that John Banks had founded in his basement. One day an evangelist by the name of Lin Croxton came to our little town for some evangelistic meetings. On one of those nights, my father's heart of stone finally melted, and he went forward to receive Christ as his savior. It was a wonderful day just a few months later when, after the ice had finally melted off the rivers, all seven members of the Benson family were baptized in a river near Antigonish.

"Two years after I had accepted Christ, I found out about a small Christian boarding school 5 hours away from my town. I decided to leave public school and my home to attend there and I stayed there during 8th and 9th grade."

A smile began slowly creeping across his face as he continued.

"Now some of you think BJU is strict now, and it used to be much stricter, but this boarding school was even stricter. We got demerits for things like talking or sleeping during study hall or showing up to breakfast late. Bedtime was no later than 10 pm, and we had to be out of bed by no later than 7 am. But even though it was so strict, I look back on those two years

with fondness. There were twelve of us in the boys' dorm, and I never lacked any playmates.

"However, when 10th grade came around, I decided to move back home and go back to public school. This particular public school had a rather long name: Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School. I had developed a love for basketball, and I enthusiastically joined the high school team, which was called the 'Royals.' In 11th grade, the team went out of province to play in a basketball tournament in Quebec. Fortunately, we won the tournament, and I was selected MVP. It was customary, though not allowed, for the team to sneak out and drink and party after a victory. Usually I declined their urgings, but this time they were unusually persistent. It was against the team's tradition to go party after a victory without the MVP. I am ashamed to say I gave in to their peer pressure, and I got very drunk that night.

"The 18-hour bus ride back home was pure torture. I mentally wrestled with myself. My spirit was in a struggle. I knew I had sinned. I had broken the rules, and I had gotten drunk. I came up with dozens of ways to keep my getting drunk a secret from my parents. But the minute my mom picked me up in our blue Mercury Marquis, I burst and told her everything.

'I'm so sorry, mom,' I said, hiding my head in my hands, avoiding her gaze. 'So ashamed.'

'I forgive you,' she said solemnly in her Irish accent. We were silent for a while. 'So,' she said after a few minutes, 'what are you going to do about it?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Alan,' my mother said, 'you are a Christian, and you sinned publicly in front of the other players. You need to go to each and every one of them and apologize for what you did.'

"You can imagine my dismay at this proposition, but I realized my mother was right. So, I did just that. I went to each of my teammates and apologized to them for getting drunk. None of them were believers, so most of them were amused and puzzled at my apology and blew me off. But my conscience was put at rest and I

was right with God, and that was all that really mattered.

"That summer I was thrilled to be offered the captaincy of the Royals basketball team, in addition to a scholarship to study at Saint Francis Xavier University. But I started having doubts about whether this was what God wanted for me. In the end, I turned the offer down and went back to the little Christian boarding school for 12th grade. I left my public-school class of over seven hundred students for my Christian school class of only seven.

"As my senior year came to an end in 1988, I became interested in playing basketball and studying at Pensacola Christian College, even though I knew very little about the school other than the fact that it was a Christian institution. I knew much more about BJU through summer mission teams that led VBS and a few weeks of summer camp for teenagers in my town. But I was pretty set on PCC because I wanted to play basketball. Then one day a man by the name of Wally Falconer, my Bible teacher at the boarding school, invited some of us students over to his house. As we joked and talked, he mentioned that he had recently bought a pickup truck and had plans to restore it. Interested, I followed him into his garage. As we examined the vehicle, we started talking about my college plans, and I told him I was set on PCC. He was a man whose faith in the Lord and knowledge of the Word had greatly impacted me. He listened calmly to my explanation of 'how I could play college ball at a Christian college.' Then, with a firm, peace-filled, and passionate gaze into my heart he said, 'Alan, I am going to pray you into Bob Jones.' I laughed a little uncomfortably, but my resolution stood firm.

"The weeks passed, and 30 days before BJU started classes, I was surprised when my mom asked me to apply to Bob Jones University. After another argument with her, I finally gave in a little more and told her I would go if the university accepted me, which in my heart I very much doubted, since my application would be sent in on very short notice. So, I filled out the

application to BJU and sent it off. Sure enough, I was accepted, and at the end of August I got on the BJU mission team bus to ride to Greenville, South Carolina. We arrived five days before classes started.

"I quickly learned to enjoy the atmosphere of BJU. There were more professing believers at the university than there were people in my hometown of Antigonish. I spent my days studying God's Word, preparing for ministry, and playing basketball. I developed an attitude of, 'just tell me what I need to do to stay here and I'll do it.' I was super careful to not break any rules and keep up my GPA. I found that the more I gave my heart to ministry the less I even had to think about the rules or getting in trouble.

"And now, more than thirty years later, I'm the Vice President for Student Development and Discipleship. I'm nobody special. It amazes me every day what I'm doing here and now. I was a kid from literally nowhere, education wasn't in my family, and I was the only one of my siblings to graduate from college. But God took me and brought me here. I want to encourage you guys to be surrendered to the Lord for whatever He wants you to do in your life. In the end you might be amazed at what that looks like. Back when I got saved as an eleven-year-old in the little town of Antigonish, I never could have dreamed of what lay ahead of me."

Dr. Benson smiled and looked at our Resident Assistant to signal that he was finished. Our RA stood up and prayed, thanking the Lord for Dr. Benson's testimony and asking him to work in our lives as well. After that, most of the guys quickly left. A few stayed around to chat with Dr. Benson or grab a cookie from the box. I was among those who went for the cookies. There was hardly anyone left in the room when Dr. Benson looked at his watch and decided he needed to go home. Taking his leave of us, he passed through the double doors of the study lounge and then went out the front doors of the dorm into the night. I stayed standing where I was, munching on my cookie and

reflecting on what I had heard. As a missionary kid, I had heard a lot of fascinating salvation testimonies, and I decided to count Dr. Benson's as one of them.

That was more than a month ago. Now, campus is almost completely deserted, and good old J.Y. Smith stands empty. The whole world is right smack-dab in the middle of an unprecedented historical event: the first ever modern pandemic. And here I am, typing up a little story for a student-operated literary magazine. So, what's the moral of the story? If God can use the IRA to get a Vice President for Student Development and Discipleship for Bob Jones University, I can't wait to see what He does with COVID-19.



Mask of Anger, Reign of Fear

By Kathleen Coyle

66 Who is she and what is she doing in my sight?" I tapped one finger against

my gilded throne while rubbing my other hand across my stubble. It was just thick enough to add a sharp shadow to my face without being unkempt. My gaze was practiced perfection. A combination of condescension and indifference.

"She was caught in the fields, Your Majesty." A thin guard stood just to the right of the girl in front of me. A comical pair those two were. The guard shaking, visibly nervous and unable to meet my eye, and the girl, covered in dirt with wild hair sticking up everywhere and an angry stare penetrating my skull.

"And I should care because...?" I moved my hand from my stubble to my arm rest, perching my elbow on it and resting my chin in my hand.

"Well, she was trying to set them afire." The guard gulped.

"She did what?" The corner of my mouth twitched, threatening to curl into a frown.

"She was caught in the act of burning the fields, Sire."

"This little thing made it past the guards? She should have been shot dead before she even reached the outer gates." I was a portrait of constrained rage. This tiny little rag doll had almost made a fool out of me, almost torched my crops that were surrounded by my guards.

"She's small, Your Majesty. She was unnot-ic—"

"Unnoticed? I'll show you unnoticed!" I shot out of my throne, glancing at the castle reporters in the back to make sure their cameras were poised to catch my wrath. "You're banished, stripped of your citizenship. I want you gone before the last light fades." I turned my gaze to the small figure next to the sniveling guard. "As for her? The dungeon. Until I can decide on a punishment suitable for our little arson." I straightened my lapels, then gripped the edges of my cape and descended my dais. As I brushed past the guard and the girl, that penetrating glare was still plastered upon her face. I slammed the back doors open and stalked out of the hall, dismissing court.

C

I stalked up and down the length of my opulent bed chambers. Gold clung to every surface. Only the best for the King, of course. But I was not distracted by the luxury that surrounded me. All I could think of was that audacious girl. My skin ran hot just remembering that traitorous glare adorning her face. I was the King! She should have groveled at my feet.

Wham! I slammed my fist into a carved bedpost. It came away bloody, my skin no match for the gold inlays, but my anger masked the pain. I could not let her get away with this. My people needed to know what happened to people who defy me. I must not look weak.

I threw open my door and stomped all the way down to the dungeon determined to invoke fear in that wretched girl.

Standing tall, I marched right up to her cell doors expecting to be met with that hard stare once again. What I saw instead made my steps falter. The anger was still there but two dirty tear tracks led up to red-rimmed eyes.

I didn't know what to do.

I had come to the dungeon ready to break a proud spirit but had stumbled upon a spirit that was already broken. Or was it? Maybe it was all a trick. Or perhaps her anger was the true mask hiding her fear. I was at a loss for words.

She startled at my presence, but her mask of anger snapped into place, eyes hard despite being framed with tears.

"His Majesty has deigned to grace me with his presence. How lucky I must be." She drew her legs up close to her chest, hiding her bare feet beneath her skirt.

"Such a small thing. However do you possess so much anger?"

"You seem to manage it just fine. After all, this small thing seemed to cause quite the display of anger in you."

I narrowed my eyes. I don't know exactly what is going through this girl's head, but no one insults me, I thought.

"You hate me so much? Then I know exactly

what to do with you." I turned toward the guard but not before glimpsing fear peeking through the cracks of her mask. "I want her assigned to my service. Bring her to Madeline. She can teach her what to do. But keep her in irons and when she's not working, she goes back to the dungeon." I turned back to the girl. "You're going to carry out your sentence by waiting on me hand and foot." I smirked. Take that.

I didn't wait around to hear her protests. My word was final.

C

The next morning, I found myself pacing the length of my chamber once again. Why did I think this was a good idea? I didn't need a temperamental girl in my personal space. What if her real mission here was to assassinate me? There was so much that I didn't know about this girl. So much that I didn't need to know about her. I should have sent her to the stocks.

I was still pacing when a light knock sounded against my door before it breezed open and a train of maids streamed in, the girl at the back accompanied by a guard. Her shuffling steps were punctuated by the clank of metal on metal. Her gaze was downturned. She refused to even spare me a glance as she joined the seemingly choreographed dance of the maids. They flitted here and there, making the bed, straightening my desk, dusting the flat surfaces.

The head maid, Madeline, came to curtsey in front of me. "Shall we prepare for the day, Sire?"

I nodded once and followed her into my closet. Madeline's skilled eyes skimmed my many outfits, plucking out a tie here and a buttoned-down shirt here until she was satisfied with the ensemble. After I dressed, I met her in the bathroom where she gave my hair a much-needed trim. Another of the maids, finished with her other tasks, wandered in and set to giving me a clean shave.

When my face was coated in a rich lather, I heard the telltale clank coming closer to the bathroom. The girl perched against the door-frame before stalking closer.

"May I, Lily? I've never shaved someone before." She stretched her hand out to Lily's hand which was quickly approaching my face. I intercepted her hand, gripping her wrist tightly before her fingers could touch cold steel.

"I don't think so. Don't think I'm dumb enough to let you anywhere near my face with a blade." I quirked an eyebrow at her. Her face pulled down into a frown.

"I'm surprised you let anyone near you with sharp objects. What with your temper I can't fathom that you would have many admirers."

"My temper? My temper? You are surely one to talk. I don't think you have any emotion other than hatred."

"That's because you only ever see me when I'm around you."

"Annabelle." Madeline made a face at the girl, Annabelle, widening her eyes.

Annabelle reluctantly shut her mouth.

When the maids were done straightening my chamber and prepping me for the day, they all formed a line and curtsied before heading for the door. Before I could register what I was saying, words were tumbling out of my mouth and plunking loudly onto the floor, echoing about the room.

"Not Annabelle." They all turned to look at me. "She stays with me." I could feel before I could see Annabelle's fiery wrath pointed in my direction. The other maids scurried out of my chamber leaving Annabelle behind.

"To what do I owe this great honor?" Her mask of anger was on so tightly it was easily mistaken for true hatred. But the sliver of fear in her eyes always betrayed her.

"I'm keeping you around. Just in case I might need your service." A lie. Against my better judgement, I wanted to know more about her. I was already mentally kicking myself. I worked hard to maintain my chilling cruelty. I did not need my curiosity to unravel my image.

I left my chamber, leaving it up to the guard to make sure she was following me. My schedule was quite uneventful today, unlike most days. It would be riddled with meetings, the first of which was with the general of my army.

"General Fletcher," I greeted him from where I stood at the entrance to the armory.

"Ah, Your Majesty, I'm glad you were able to meet me. We have a serious problem on our hands."

"What is it?"

"Your citizens, Sire, have been restless. My soldiers have been catching more and more people in acts of open protesting. Treason, Sire." General Fletcher's eyes flitted to Annabelle before darting back to me.

"People protest. That's not news to me, General. Deal with the problems as you see fit." I turned to leave.

"But wait! I don't think you understand what I am telling you."

"Excuse me?"

"I meant that with the utmost respect, of course. I have reason to believe that the citizens plan to revolt. They don't believe that you have their best interests at heart. Perhaps if you were to show them kind—"

"Kindness? Towards the citizens who plan to move against me? Who do you think I am, General? I am not a dog! I will not roll over at the slightest sign of unrest. Quash the radicals. By any means necessary." I heard the slightest of gasps slip from Annabelle's lips.

"But, Sire—"

"Do you mean to question my decisions?" My voice echoed off of stone.

"Of course not." General Fletcher bowed his head.

"Good. Give me a report when you are finished." I turned to Annabelle. "Let's go."

It was hard to distinguish between the fear and the anger upon her face. The cracks in her mask were now fissures. When we exited the armory, Annabelle whirled to face me.

"Any means necessary?' You mean to kill people who are unhappy with you?"

"I am king. I am to be respected, and if my people can't do that, then they are no longer my people." My own anger flared. I should not have to explain my actions to her.

"Fear," she spat, "is not the same as respect."

"No, it's better than respect! Respect can be lost, but no one ever stops being afraid. Just look at you, you've been hiding behind your anger this whole time, but I see right through you. I know you're truly terrifie—"

"You're a tyrant! Wielding your crown like a sword above your people's heads, using their fear to keep them compliant, just like my father!" Annabelle clamped her hand over her mouth as though to hold back the words she had already spat at me.

"You're not afraid of me." I brought my hand up to my chin. "You're afraid of your father. Why? Why are you afraid of him?"

Annabelle shook her head, her hand still clamped against her mouth.

"Tell me." Another head shake. "Tell me!" Annabelle backed away from me but for every step she took back, I took one forward.

"I am your king. You will do as I ask." It registered somewhere in my mind that I was scaring her into doing as I said but I couldn't stop. I was finally looking behind the mask.

Her back hit the wall of the hallway and she stilled. "My father...is a father only by name... not by character," She spoke to the floor. "He is not a kind man. I don't even think he knows what it's like to love. He's very clever, never one to get his hands dirty. No, that duty always seems to fall on me."

I could see the tears pooling in her eyes, begging to fall.

"The field. Your father made you do that?" She let out a dry laugh.

"He doesn't like you very much. He wanted to make sure you knew that."

"So he sent you. How did he make you do it?"

"Fear of course. I know better than to doubt a death threat that falls from my father's lips." She paused. "I hate you, you know that? You remind me of him." A tear crawled down her cheek. "It's a lesser of two evils really. Be sent home to the real evil or stay here with someone who only reminds you of it."

"And how are you so sure that I'm not just as bad as he is?" My heart zinged painfully. Whether I wanted to be or not, I was invested in her story. For some reason, I felt the urge to make her father pay.

"You say I wear a mask." She looked up at me. "But so do you."

There was a beat of silence. I didn't know what to say.

"You hide behind your iron fist, but you care."

"You don't know what you—"

"You could have killed me. Instead you gave me a palace job."

"No I did—"

"I should thank you really. As long as I'm here, I'm not there."

I did not appreciate my soul being so easily read by someone who barely knew me. She should not understand me so well, and yet she did. It hadn't even been a full day, and she had already exposed that which I so desperately tried to hide. Were my emotions so obvious? Or had she seen enough of her own demons to recognize one that was fake?

I was a king. I ruled with fear, just as my father did and as his father before that. But, for some reason, Annabelle's words burrowed deep beneath my skin, flayed it open, showing that deep inside I am not, in fact, made of steel. I was soft, like everyone else.

I told myself that I didn't care about Annabelle as I removed her irons. I told myself I didn't care about Annabelle as I told her that for as long as her father lived, the castle would be her sanctuary. I told myself I didn't care as I told General Fletcher to dismiss my earlier order. I don't care. I don't care. But maybe I did. Just a little bit.



Refuge in Flames

By Julia Lodi – Guest Submission

Thump da dum. Thump da dum. Thump da L da dum. Repeat. Shrieking, chanting, wild cries in a guttural language. The popping and crackle of a roaring bonfire consuming logs like toothpicks. And through it all the incessant, rolling drum beat like a death toll: Thump da dum, thump da dum, thump da da dum. Noise. Chaos. Like rushing water in her head. Emory Roberts gasped for breath and pressed her hands closer over her ears. She was drowning. She couldn't do this anymore. She crept to the farthest corner of her one-room hut and huddled in a fetal position. Tears trickled down her cheeks and beads of sweat plastered her hair to her neck and forehead. She panted through her sobs.

"Yahweh, my God, help me."

The orange glow of dancing flames splayed itself on the wall against her, slipping in through the single window in the wall opposite her. Emory squeezed her eyes shut, and the same memories that surfaced every time she saw that glow crowded her darkness. Shrieks, the popping and crackling of flames leaping for her, singeing her hair. The wail of sirens. The weight of her father as he smothered her with his body, racked with coughs, and pulled her through

the broken window. Then the crash. His body pinned beneath burning timbers. The horror and pain in his eyes meeting hers before he was swallowed in flames. The orange glow of flames. Those terrible, crackling flames.

Emory struggled to breathe. Her pounding heart wanted to leap from her chest and gallop around the room. She wanted to scream, but the invisible weight on her chest suffocated any chance for even a whisper to escape. Her fingertips tingled with the numbness of a thousand pricking pins, and she trembled like a dead autumn leaf waiting for the last breeze to break her fighting hold from a dead branch.

"God, why did you call me to this jungle tribe?" Emory cried in her heart. Why had she thought it would be such a good idea to pack up her belongings, bid farewell to her mother, and board a plane as a missionary for the jungle of Papua New Guinea?

'It will be exciting,' she had thought. 'A new adventure.'

But had she really understood everything the calling involved? Hostility. Loneliness. Rejection. Threats. Belongings stolen. Sickness. But worst of all, the monthly ritual practices to gods who would never hear. The dances. The chants. The sacrifices. The fires. She had been here for six months. It was supposed to be easier than this. Even now she should be on her face before God, pleading for these desperately lost souls; yet here she was, panicking at the sight and sound of mere flames, the memory of her father's pain-stricken eyes etched like glass in the ocean of her memories.

"Yahweh, my Lord," she gasped and fell on her face. Tongues of fire danced before her closed eyes as if taunting her to give up. "My Lord and my Rock, I need you," she cried into the darkness. "Rescue me."

For a moment all she heard was the demonic shrieks and cries of the idol-worshipping tribe, and the roaring, crackling fire outside. But then a small voice trickled through Emory's mind like a gentle breeze over a noisy, rushing river.

"The one who lives under the protection of

the Most High dwells in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

Emory remembered her mama sitting in her rocking chair, dark coffee-colored skin complementing the light tone of the wood, black curly hair blending to gray at the roots. It had been three months since Papa had died, and Emory sat curled up in her pajamas in a chair in the living room, too afraid to close her eyes, too afraid to sleep. Mama rocked slowly back and forth in her creaky rocking chair as she read Psalm 91 aloud in her rich and bold yet gentle voice.

"He Himself will deliver you from the hunter's net, from the destructive plague. He will cover you with His feathers; you will take refuge under His wings. His faithfulness will be a protective shield."

For a moment the horrible sounds outside Emory's hut faded, and peace began to creep into her heart like a tiny trickle, gradually growing until it rushed over her like a river – a blessed, refreshing river. She had memorized these words, and now they came flooding back to her:

"You will not fear the terror by night; the arrow that flies by day. ... Because you have made the LORD – my refuge, the Most High – your dwelling place, no harm will come to you..."

Ah, peace. Peace like a river. She repeated the words of the Psalm over and over to herself until her tears slowly subsided.

"Because he is lovingly devoted to me, I will deliver him; I will protect him because he knows my name. When he calls out to Me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble. I will rescue him and give him honor. I will satisfy him with long life and show him my salvation."

Once Emory's heart had slowed to a steadier pace and her limbs began to relax, she pushed herself into a sitting position and reached for her worn, leather Bible, thumbing through the thin pages to the book of Psalms. Her eyes rested on Psalm 62.

"Rest in God alone, my soul, for my hope

comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I will not be shaken. My salvation and my glory depend on God, my strong rock. My refuge is in God. Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts before Him. God is our refuge. Selah."

Pour out your hearts before Him. God is our refuge. She closed her eyes against the dim glow of her hut, and a picture began to formulate from the murky waters of her mind. A strong tower built on a slab of stone. Black mire surrounding the tower. The thick, swirling muck shifting from one side to the other, pulling at her legs, her abdomen, her chest, sucking her under. A cry for help uttered from her last gasping breath, and then strong hands reaching down to pull her up, to pull her out of the mire, onto the rock and into the strong, secure, stable tower. The picture merged to another. This time Emory lay huddled on the ground, laughing demons surrounding her, flaming arrows flying at her exposed body. And then suddenly the firm, yet soft and gentle wings of Yahweh spreading over her to cover her. Yes, surely God was her

Emory glanced out the window of her hut and drew a shuddering breath. The dark silhouettes of the natives contorting their bodies in unnatural dances before the roaring fire filled her with panic and despair. Her heart began to race again and the pricking pins in her fingers resurfaced. She remembered Peter walking on water, starting to drown when he took his eyes off the Lord. Was that what had happened all these months? Had she taken her eyes off the Lord whenever she had seen that terrible, roaring fire and the image of her father's pain-stricken eyes?

"Father, keep me from drowning. Please keep my eyes fixed on You," she whispered. She peeled her eyes from the sight outside and rested them on the words from Him who was a fountain of living water and found her refuge in God.

C

38 years later...

Emory's sandals scuffed the dust as she trudged along the narrow dirt path to the small church building near her hut. She stood at the entrance to the church and looked all around her. Visions of contorted silhouettes and roaring, crackling flames danced at the edges of her mind. This was the same clearing where, all those years earlier, the village had engaged in their idol-worshipping rituals. See what God had done with it now? The morning was still early; the sun just peeking through the branches of the sprawling jungle canopy. What a different light from that night so many years ago where the light of glowing flames had filled her hut. The light of the sun was a peaceful, refreshing light. She couldn't help but think of what a peaceful light the Son of God radiated to all who put their trust in Him. Emory inhaled deeply and smiled before entering the low door of the church.

"Halo," she greeted Miok Marabe, the young pastor who sat bent over his copy of the New Testament. Miok looked up and a wide smile broke over his face.

"Moning, Ms. Emory!"

As Emory helped Hali'a, Miok's wife, arrange brightly colored blankets on the dirt floor of the church for the congregants to sit on, she envisioned the day many years ago when she had found Miok as a young boy, the chieftain's son, face coated in the paint the tribe donned for ritual dances, weeping by himself beneath a banana tree. Concern had rushed through her heart like a broken dam as she hurried to him.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

Everything he did for the rituals seemed empty and pointless, Miok had cried to her. Emory shared the truth of the Gospel with him, and soon he came to her to study the Bible. Slowly God softened his heart to understand the truth and receive the water that would make him never thirst again, and he became the first believer of his tribe. Now he was the first pastor to lead the village in worship of Yahweh, the One True God.

It wasn't long before the villagers began streaming in the church like a desert herd to a pond, and Emory eased herself onto a mat on the floor to rest. Eight-year-old Angu came wandering through the crowd toward her and plopped down in her lap. The precious boy belonged to a different tribe located sixteen miles down the river. He, with his family, was one of the many natives from the surrounding tribes who canoed miles up the rivers or trekked through the jungle paths to worship Yahweh at this little church every Sunday.

Angu combed his little fingers lovingly through Emory's wooly gray hair. His large, dark eyes were solemn as he paused, cupped his hands around her ear, and leaned close to whisper, "When I grow up, I'm going to be a missionary just like you. I'm going to go to the tribes who don't know about Jesus and tell them about Him."

Tears of joy misted Emory's eyes at the thought. She pulled Angu close in a hug. "That would be wonderful, little Angu," she whispered back. She could see herself as a little girl on Grandma's lap, dreaming of becoming a missionary. It had seemed like such a simple calling to her then, easy but with enough adventure to make it exciting. All she had to do was convince the people that the Gospel was the truth. Oh, how wrong she had been. How many times over the years had she desperately fought the rising panic and despair that threatened to suffocate her by preaching truth to herself, falling on her face before God, and spending long hours poring over His word? How many flaming arrows had flown against her in the form of angry threats from villagers, intensified ritual practices, and discouragement over the lack of fruit? And how many times had God covered her with His wings and secured her in His strong tower through the flames that threatened to consume her? These long decades of missionary life had been hellfire, but the fount of living water had protected her from being consumed. Yahweh had been her refuge. And now He had blessed her with tangible fruit, and He was raising up

another generation of Christ-followers.

"Lamunka says he is going to be a missionary in his own village," Angu whispered in her ear. "Can you be a missionary in your own village?"

Emory pulled him away from her to look into his solemn eyes. "Yes, Angu," she said. "You can be a missionary wherever you are – in your own village or in a village across the world. But listen to me, Angu: you must only trust in God to help you be a missionary. You cannot do it by yourself."

The church service was beginning, and Angu hurried back to his mother. Emory closed her eyes. The blessed, joy filled sound of the believers singing energetic praises in a guttural language, worshipping Yahweh, filled her ears. How different from that death-toll drumbeat that had rolled so many years ago as these same tribe members had desperately, hopelessly danced and chanted before a roaring fire to gods who could never rescue them.

After the service ended the villagers shared a meal and talked and laughed while the children played long into the afternoon. And then came the sad parting when families began their treks back to their own homes and villages. But they were taking the living water with them. That blessed, living water was flowing from this fountainhead where Christ resided into the homes and hearts of so many others in this jungle.

As she trudged back up the path to her home, Emory whispered into the lengthening shadows, "Truly Lord, as Psalm 90 says, You have been our refuge in every generation. Before the mountains were born, before You gave birth to the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity, You are God."

"But let all who take refuge in You rejoice; let them shout for joy forever. May You shelter them, and may those who love Your name boast about You. For You, LORD, bless the righteous one; You surround him with favor like a shield." — Psalm 5:11-12



Midbay's Fey

By Jessi Skrade

A youngish man in an oilskin coat scratched his red beard and leaned on the railing of the lighthouse – his lighthouse, with black ivy crawling up the whitewashed sides. Dark clouds quilted the sky out across the ocean, and the waves chopped and slashed at the air like cleavers. A whistle rose in his throat; a haunting whistle that mixed with the beginnings of the tempest and fell like a stone into the water. The water shot him a smile and a wink, sending lightning down his backbone.

"What...?" He squinted out at the shape of a woman, blue and dark as the sea around her. She flipped up over a wave and landed on it as if it were solid ground, wiggling her fingers in a coy greeting just before the wave smashed into a particularly jagged rock and she disappeared in a puff of green smoke. Gordy spun on his booted heel and yanked the door open, muttering to himself.

As he ran down the spiraling stairs lining the wall of the lighthouse, he gritted his teeth and jammed his pointer finger against the rough mortar. It sparked beforehoot at the tiny orange flame, whistled it bigger and brighter until it consumed his fist, and raced out into the cozy apartment at the base of the lighthouse. He punched his fistful of fire into a large lantern, knocking over a large pile of books and herbs in his hurry. The green smoke on the rocks would wait for no one, and with this wind, Gordy was fast running out of time.

Gordy slapped the blue door open, careful not the chip the paint he'd hummed "safe home" into and bolted towards the last wisps of smoke on the rocks.

"Hey!" He shouted at the smoke. "Can you still hear me?" The smoke floated up and spun. "Siren, I need your help!" A few of the wisps pushed together to form a big, dark pair of eyes and a smirk. She winked at him again and whirled backwards into the sea.

"Siren!" Gordy's voice rasped; he snorted in frustration. "Burned my hand to be taunted. Stupid." He trudged back to his little home, righted the tomes that had been scattered across the floor, and sullenly went to bed, though it was only seven o'clock. Visions of dark green-blue women with draping seaweed dresses flipped and spun in his head, each woman: the hearts sirens rarely used. He rolled over and huffed.

Less than a mile away in the small town next to the port, a woman screamed and was suddenly silenced. Gordy shivered in his sleep.

A Monster turned from his handiwork and began to seek shelter. Amid a town with so many superstitious people, one would think it'd be easier to find a house with a proper safe home spell. He thrust his webby hand into the tangle of magic, feeling for the warmth of a fire and food, and caught onto the wisp of a man named Gordy. The Monster smiled and began to walk.



The market stalls had been open for an hour, but the street was empty except for the fishermen and the one magic-wares merchant that had bothered to stop in Midbay. Gordy beelined for Cobb's stall and leaned against a post.

"Where is everyone?" he asked. Cobb spun around, fillet knife raised. Seeing it was a friend, he chuckled humorlessly and went back to gutting his catch for the day.

"Ah, did you not hear Mrs. Pratchett go last night?" Cobb said, slicing a mackerel a little too violently.

"Go?"

Cobb raised his thick eyebrows. "Dead, Gordy. Some says she was to be taken, and she put up too much of a fight. I don't believe that, you and me know she was just about afraid of anything." He chopped another fish's head off, and a bucket floated up to catch it excitedly. "No, she was murdered, I believe."

"Why?"

"Why? Her blood, of course! Everyone here knows she's a full goblin, even if she don't look it. That woman made the best soup, and she's on her third husband! Never ran away from the other two neither, she outlived them right. A magic woman if I ever saw one." Cobb sighed and looked at Gordy. "Someone needed gob blood, and she sure wouldn't give it to them willingly."

"I don't know many folk that would." Gordy mumbled. "A crying shame about the lady. She was kind."

"You best watch yourself, Gordy. You could be next."

"Me? Cobb, I'm nothing special," he said slowly.

"You're the only real wizard we got though.

Anyone willing to kill for one ingredient is bound to be on the hunt for more, and they'll fight for it. You got all kinds of things in that lighthouse."

Gordy played with his beard and wrinkled his nose. "Not what I need though. I almost talked to a siren about it yesterday. She poofed before I could reach her."

Cobb frowned. "A siren isn't something to mess with, Gordy. They're just about gone, so if you saw one, she's desperate. She'll eat you like a meat pie." Chop. Plunk. Another head in the bucket. "And on top of that, you aren't exactly... well, strong. In destructive spells, anyway. That little whistle thing won't cut it in a fight." Cobb wiped his gutty hands on his apron and folded his arms. "Look, bud. There's other mediums to magic. Why don't you try some, I dunno, opera?"

"What, can you imagine me defending myself with an aria?" Gordy laughed. "I'll be fine! It's not like there's anything wrong with a little chat with a siren. Just need something from her is all." He turned to walk back to the lighthouse, running his hand along the magic he'd woven throughout the town. His fingers found the wisp that led home. His heartbeat quickened. A length of the wisp had turned a sticky red.

"Whatcha looking for?"

"Oh, nothing," Gordy lied.



Gordy kept the wisp pinched between his fingers the whole walk home. His ears perked at every sound. Someone – or something – was looking for him, and it meant to kill him, probably like it had killed Mrs. Pratchett. He gripped the knife in the pocket of his oilskin. Its heft provided little comfort, but he marched on. As long as whoever it was didn't know his full name, he was safe. The lighthouse at the top of the hill stood white with its black ivy. His head jerked towards the small splash by the tide pools. On the sharp rocks sat a blue-green

woman in a seaweed gown, lounging as if on down pillows.

She was beautiful, there was no denying that. But Gordy was relieved to realize he felt no pull to drown himself in the sea. Probably because she hasn't sung at me, he thought. The siren blinked her wide black eyes at him and smiled with teeth that were just a little too long and a little too sharp.

"Hiya, kiddo. You called?" Her eyes flicked over him. "You're not human, are you?"

"Who wants to know?"

The siren squinted at his red beard, ignoring the question. "Selkie? What's a seal like you doing on land?"

"Oh, everyone with red hair and a coat's a selkie?" Gordy snapped, one hand still on the wisp of spell. "Look, I need to make a deal with you, but it's not safe out here."

"No, no you ARE a selkie." Is she listening to me at all? Gordy huffed. "All right, kid," the siren continued. "You're a little rude. But I'll forgive that. Its been too long since someone's tried to barter. What do you want?" Gordy hesitated. How did one ask a woman for something her kind never used, but nevertheless would very much want to keep?

"...I suppose I want your heart?" It came out more like a question than he meant it to, and his voice cracked unexpectedly. The large man felt his face flush as the siren laughed.

"Oh? That isn't something I give for free, Selkie." She looked at his red face, and he watched as her tongue flicked against her teeth. "I'll trade it. For the coat." The color left his face as quickly as it came.

"I can't give you that," he said. "I need your heart to make it work again. I miss the sea, it's the only way for me to go back! Please, I'll trade you anything else but my oilskin!" The siren shook her black-green locks and stood, stretching her foot out to step on top of a passing wave.

"No deal, then. Goodbye, Selkie."

"Wait, please! I have stardust in the house!" He shouted after her, but the siren rode away on the water. He sang a few short notes after her, trying to grab ahold of her wisp of magic, anything to pull her back. He caught the tail end of it, but the wisp was only substantial enough for him to get her name before it snapped off and blew away. Levinia. He could have sworn she had yanked it out of his hand.

"A magic woman has been killed here!" he called out to the sea. It gave him no indication of her listening, but he might as well try to warn her. "Be safe, Levinia!" One black eye peered at him from the next wave. It glared at him, as if to say, "Why do YOU care?" then winked and disappeared.



Gordy kicked a rock into the sea in frustration. The safe home spell had gotten redder, and slimier. He hurried into his lighthouse and locked the door behind him. Gordy couldn't help but cry, just a little. With no siren's heart, there was no known way for him to return to the sea where he belonged. His discouragement would have to be put on hold for now, though. Gordy allowed himself only a moment's grief before digging through the stack of tomes. He wiped off a yellow leather book and turned to a dogeared page that was covered in ink. He'd pulled the safe home spell from the bunch and reinforced it with everything he could think of, including the precious stardust.

He'd been struggling to coax a feathered newt out of a jar and onto the spell when a wail split through the air. The sound drilled into his head. Gordy dropped the newt and grabbed a bag of gunpowder. The wail cut off into a gurgle; the Monster had found someone else before Gordy.

Outside, twenty feet away from the tide pools was a ghastly sight. The Monster that had killed poor Mrs. Pratchett held Levinia up by her thin neck, her feet kicking the air. Gordy watched in horror as the Monster's nails parted the Siren's skin like water and pulled out a large pearl, the size of a walnut. The blue skin closed up as if it never had been parted.

Gordy hadn't even felt his legs sprinting him down the hill towards Levinia and the creature, he hadn't even realized he was singing. His fingertips slid across the surface of the rough rock and burst into flames, and he grabbed the creature's wrists with his burning hands.

Levinia and her heart fell to the ground where she lay wheezing. The creature screamed, wrenching his charred arm free, and Gordy's blood ran cold.

"Cobb?"

Cobb's skin was a sickly, slippery green; his eyes bugged out of his head, but the face was his, the magic wisp was his. The fisherman swung his arm at Gordy and croaked, Levinia's heart clutched in his webby hand. Gordy ducked. The little bag of gunpowder opened with a hum and emptied its contents into Cobb's froggy eyes. Cobb screeched and shook his head frantically, dropping the heart. Gordy scooped up Levinia, along with her heart, and sprinted up towards the lighthouse.

The door slammed behind the pair, the deadbolt chunked into place, and the siren and the selkie both gasped for air.

"Will that door hold?" Levinia coughed. "He's very determined."

"I think that's a bit of an understatement," Gordy laughed in spite of himself. Levinia raised a blue eyebrow. "It'll do more than hold," he said hurriedly. "We're in the safest place on the coast. You can see the ivy if you look over the top. I don't want to, though."

A thud on the door made the siren jump. There was a shuffling noise, a strangled croak, and then nothing but the ocean crashing against the rocky shore.

C

"Here," Levinia said over her cup of tea. Gordy looked up from the book he'd been reading. Her small, damp hand held out the heart. "You did save me from becoming parts in some merchant's stock. I've never used it before, anyway."

"...Do you really not want it?" he asked.

Levinia blushed. "I'm asking you to have it." Gordy accepted the pearl and put it in the inner pocket of his oilskin coat, over his own heart. It glowed faintly, and fine hairs sprouted from the sleeves and back until the whole coat was soft and smooth as a seal. Gordy grinned, wrapping Levinia in a hug.

"Thank you."

The siren patted the selkie's back awkwardly. After all, she'd never used her heart before.



A young boy insisted that he'd seen a massive frog heading towards the wizard's lighthouse. Upon investigation, the town's police found nothing but a particularly large bundle of black ivy that grew straight into the ground next to the door. Some project of Gordy's, they agreed, and he'd better run along and quite causing trouble. The young boy kicked at pebbles as he walked away, disappointed. A song from the ocean caught his ear. He looked up. Out in the waves, a large reddish seal darted over the crest, and next to it, a blue woman in a seaweed gown laughing.



I would give you all the stars in my eyes.

I would weave you silks from my hair,

And build you palaces of my bones

In the midst of forests grown from my blood.

Grown beside oceans salted and churning with my tears.

I would give you all the songs my fragile lungs carried with them,

And all the fragrant winds I have breathed.

I would paint you masterpieces from my memory with all the ethereal colors of my soul.

I would fashion you rings from the glass of my heart,

Give you all the creatures my hands have befriended.

I would lie down and decay and grow worlds for you.

All this I would do in exchange for refuge from you.

You who remain cold to my desperation-heated pleas.

I lie in litost, imprisoned.

While the sun and moon weep for my absence and prepare the celestial ballroom in yearly hope for my return.

Soundless

By Sarah Kanoun

There's something about the light crashing against the walls, or maybe it's the way her sheets lie on the floor, the way scattered textbooks bleed into the carpet, the way her computer screen glints off her glasses, the way the silence covers everything, becomes everything.

And yet there's still something beyond the silence, a sound within soundless breaths that shines across her face, fills her with a thought that within the hazy textbooks is a life—

There's something about her light crashing against the walls . . .





No Longer Straying

I'm not sure how long I've been at it— Walking aimlessly for miles, Straying further and further away From the oasis of your embrace.

With no real reason to escape More than feeling ashamed For the things that I've done, The things that I said.

And despite the hurt that I brought, The pain that I caused, The way I behaved, You never turned your back. Even as you saw me walk away, Your eyes asked me to stay. You kept your arms open, Hoping my mind would change.

So, after miles of stubbornness I finally turn around

There is no point in straying When I can run back to your arms.

BJU Writing Competition Winners



Creative Nonfiction



Two Good Eggs

Hannah Zellers

"Rusty, where does this spatula go?" I held up a heat-weathered and browning object of undetermined age, perfect for flipping ham in a skillet.

Rusty, a heat-weathered and browning object himself, unbent himself from lifting a rack of steaming dishes from the dishwasher with a

groan. "What Hannah?"

"Where does this go?" I repeated, waving Rusty's magic ham-wand and trying to look the picture of patience—a virtue I was sadly lacking at the moment.

"Right there. In that drawer just yonder." Rusty pointed with his chin, nodded with his head, and directed with the whites of his eyes while I stood still, completely bewildered.

"No, over a little more." Rusty settled his load of clean dishes on the counter and reached for the spatula in my hand. "Here, I'll show you."

He hauled open a drawer and nestled his spatula in with a whole settlement of other spatulas, none of them looking as worn or well-loved as his own. Then he pushed the drawer shut on its rollers and gave me a nod.

"You'll get there, Hannah. There's just a lot to learn." He drawled the words in thick southern expression while the wrinkles under his eyes gave him the sad-eyed appearance of a hound dog. "It's all simple, but there's a lot to learn."

I sighed. I had been working at the elegant ten-room B&B with its panoramic view of the Great Smoky Mountains for the better part of the month. My co-workers had worked at the place for years, even decades. My former experience working at a dude ranch in Colorado had snapped up the job in an over-the-phone interview with the inn's owner, but that didn't seem to count with Rusty, the breakfast cook who moved slower than rising bread dough on a cold day. According to him I still had a lot to learn. I frowned at the spatula drawer, grabbed a pot of coffee from the coffee maker, and let the door

to the breakfast room swing shut behind me—shutting the kitchen, and Rusty, from view.

Working in the kitchen of a premier dude ranch in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado had accustomed me to a brisk, if not breakneck, work environment. I could still see my former boss moving about her kitchen like she was performing footwork in a choreographed Broadway.

I could picture the steaming pancakes, the French toast that gloried in their cinnamon soaked crust, the omelets stuffed to the bursting point with good things—and Eggs Benedict prepared just for me after all of our guests had been served. My boss's voice, just beside me in the kitchen, had taught me how to use my chef's knife, saying "Slow is smooth, Hannah. Smooth is fast."

Now, over the soft music in the breakfast room and on the opposite side of the door, I could hear Rusty banging his way through the plating process. Unfortunately, there was nothing smooth about Rusty's slow. For a split second I tried to imagine Rusty and my previous breakfast chef at work in the same kitchen, but the daydream didn't last beyond a mental vision of strife, chaos, and maybe an explosion or two. My former chef would have about as much tolerance for Rusty's take-it-slow philosophy as he would have for her cookie-dough scooping competitions. I said a silent prayer of thanks that the two breakfast chefs were separated by approximately fifteen hundred miles of American soil, each taking residence on opposite sides of the Great Mississippi River.

"Sorry about the wait," I said to a middle-aged couple seated by the window that overlooked the garden as I filled their mugs with steaming coffee. "Breakfast will be out shortly." At least, I hoped so.

I could hear the weatherman droning about scattered showers in the afternoon as soon as I pushed back through the door into the kitchen. Rusty stood with a ladle dripping Parmesan Bolognese over a sizable portion of Eggs Benedict with his eyes fixed on the television.

I blinked, surprised, as he finished the plate with a sprinkle of cayenne and a dash of chives on top of the poached eggs. He garnished two heaping plates with slices of tomato and handed them to me to be served.

"Wow, Rusty." The smell of sautéed garlic in the frothy cream sauce teased my senses and set my mouth to watering. "That looks good."

Rusty shrugged and waved a hand toward the breakfast room door with the waiting guests beyond it. "Tell 'em I don't do autographs."

I laughed despite myself and carried the plates away, breathing more easily now that hot food was in route for hungry bellies. When I returned, a lone plate of Eggs Benedict waited on the counter, complete with garnish. I frowned, puzzled.

"But everyone's already been serv—"

Rusty handed me the plate and pointed at the silverware drawer. "That is for you. Now you just take a little break and eat that. No one goes hungry in my kitchen."

I ate the Eggs Benedict and stayed quiet. The Bolognese was creamy and rich, the eggs, soft and perfect. The English muffin was toasted and buttery.

To my surprise, Eggs Benedict tasted the same served up on either side of the Mississippi. I still hoped my two breakfast chefs would never have the misfortune of meeting, but, strangely enough, they had similarities. Both of my chefs held the conviction that breakfast was a cause worth rising early to achieve and that feeding people was a way to serve up home-cooked care with each plate that headed out to the breakfast room. For them, food was a common ground—a way to treat people as people—a way to see past differences and show care.

I cut past the sauce, beyond the gentle wobble of egg and rich yolk, down through the Canadian bacon and through a happy crust of English muffin before taking another bite. It seemed that no matter where I was—and whatever kitchen I happened to inhabit—there was going to be a lot to learn.



TieShort Story



Adam's Journey

By Kaleb Shelton

I was exhausted, but my excitement gave me an energy I had never known before. My eyes were glued to the silver shape that hung in the blackness like a diamond on black velvet beyond the round porthole I was looking through. It seemed like the humming thrusters that were propelling my shuttle into the docking position were taking forever. I had already flipped the switches and pushed the buttons that my coaches back on earth had spent months training me to push when I got here, and now the rest was up to the crew on the station. After what seemed like hours but had not been more than twenty minutes, I finally heard the hydraulic pressure on the hatch to my cabin release,

and an unseen force opened it from the outside. Bright white light flooded my cabin, soon followed by the cool scent of recycled oxygen. Seconds later I floated through the round opening and was greeted by several men and women in blue uniforms who had anchored their feet under poles fastened to the floor. I awkwardly wiggled my body to do likewise and shook hands with each of them. It was a very strange yet exhilarating experience to shake hands with other humans while experiencing weightlessness. I could see smiles of amusement creep onto the faces of several of the crew members as they watched my reaction to my first time in outer space.

A short man with the Japanese flag sewn onto the shoulder of his uniform introduced himself with a name I could hardly pronounce. He was broad-shouldered, with streaks of iron gray in his black hair, complemented by a neatly trimmed moustache. Myriads of light reflected off his black rimmed glasses like will-o'-thewisps in a swamp. Seeing my perplexity at the unintelligible sound he had given as his name, he laughed good naturedly.

"You can just call me Dr. Fuj," he said.
"Everybody does. Welcome aboard the Kitty
Hawk."

The commander, as Dr. Fuj turned out to be, introduced the other crew members to me, who were mostly computer scientists, technicians, and engineers. After the introductions were made, the crew returned to their work and one of the engineers, an American named Andrews, offered me something to eat. I accepted and followed her to a section of the station where a small plastic surface resembling a table was floating in midair. Soon she handed me an aluminum package filled with lemonade, a small plastic package with two vitamin D tablets, an apple in a plastic bag, two cookies firmly encased in plastic, and a warm, transparent plastic package of reheated and rehydrated spaghetti, along with a spoon. I ate greedily, and after I had finished my meal, I realized just how tired I was. Dr. Andrews showed me a blue sleeping

bag that was tethered to the wall. After applying ear plugs and an eye mask, I soon drifted to sleep.

When I awoke my body was expecting to feel some sensation of morning, but I was greatly disappointed. The white lights hummed overhead just as they had before my slumber, and the vast darkness of the universe still swirled beyond the portholes. After a crew member showed me to the restroom and supplied me with another meal in the "dining room," Dr. Fuj somersaulted himself into the tight quarters with a large smile on his face.

"Ready for your big day?" he asked cheerfully, grabbing hold of some handholds overhead.

"Just about," I replied, waving the breakfast bar in front of my face. The mention of my special mission set me to shaking again. I feebly returned the commander's smile.

"Good," he said. "Once you've digested your breakfast, we'll meet in the projection chamber."

After he left, Dr. Andrews vaulted in and invited me to watch a movie with her and some of the crew who were off duty. I accepted and followed her to a section of the station were several of the floating crew had tethered themselves in front of one of the computer screens. I hardly paid attention to what we watched. For the entire two hours my mind was completely fixated on what I had come to do. I was on a mission no human being had ever gone on before, and that many thought was impossible to accomplish. And yet here I was, watching movies in outer space, just before I would make history in a few hours!

Finally, my food digested, and I visited the tiny restroom again. Then Dr. Andrews and I pulled ourselves into the projection chamber. The projection chamber was a large hexagonally shaped section of the station, the walls of which were filled with lights, gauges, switches, buttons, levers, monitors, and all the technological gadgets imaginable. Three crew members equipped with headsets were strapped into seats and working the equipment. Dr. Fuj was

also fitted with a headset and conversing with someone. Lying along one of the sides of the chamber, a large, cylindrical capsule beckoned me to its side. Half of it was made of metal, but the other half was glass, and I curiously peered through it to see if my suspicions were true. Sure enough, the outline of a human form was shaped into a surface inside the capsule. Straps intended to hold a human body in place were located at the wrists, ankles, and torso. A helmet-like device was situated above the place where I would lay my head. Finally, Dr. Fuj stopped talking to the person on his headset and floated over to me.

"Where's the projector?" I asked.

"Out there," the commander replied, tapping the ceiling above his head.

I shook my head incredulously. "Even after all my training and preparation, I still can't believe this place it real."

Dr. Fuj proudly nodded in agreement. "For over a century mankind has dreamed about the technology we are going to use today. The entire world has worked together to build this baby. Ever since H.G. Wells' novel The Time Machine was published in 1895, we have wondered if there could be any science behind time travel. But, just like human flight, it was considered an impossibility by the scientific community." The scientist grinned. "Hopefully today will change that. Just like the Wright brothers proved the world wrong about flight, so we will prove the world wrong about time travel." Then he turned to me. "You have been informed on how our technology functions?"

"Yes," I replied, giddy with enthusiasm. But when I saw disappointment flash in Dr. Fuj's face, I quickly added: "But that was a while ago. I wouldn't mind if you refreshed my memory."

"Excellent," Dr. Fuj beamed. He wasted no time in launching into his narrative. "Before we commence the time voyage," He began, "you will be securely strapped into the body capsule, and have the consciousness transferring helmet fitted over your skull. We will then seal the capsule air-tight. When this is completed, we will turn on the time travelling engines, carefully monitoring their activity and running diagnostics the whole time. Then, when my engineers give me the thumbs up, I will press the button that will transport us to the past."

"How far back will we be traveling?" I interrupted.

"We didn't want to go too far back in time in case we ran into complications," Dr. Fuj replied, "but we also wanted to travel far back enough to see some visible differences in the civilization on the earth's surface through our telescope. So, we are traveling about 6000 years back in time at about a thousand years per minute. It's a pitiful start, honestly, but it's a start, and no one has ever done any better." Dr. Fuj cleared his throat and resumed his technological explanation. "If we survive the time voyage — "

"Wait," I interrupted yet again, alarm bells going off in my head, "why wouldn't we survive the voyage? Is there danger?"

Dr. Fuj laughed. "Traveling into previously unexplored territory always brings with it the danger of the unknown. We have no reason to not believe in our survival, yet we also have no reason to believe the contrary. No one has ever done this before, so we must take all into consideration. If we are killed, I think it will most likely be the result of violating the Pauli exclusion principle. Does that ring a bell?"

I shook my head.

"The Pauli exclusion principle," Dr. Fuj explained, "states that no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. However, if the Kitty Hawk were to stop her time voyage in the same space as, say, an asteroid happened to be in at that point in time, we are almost certain that an atomic explosion, or maybe something worse, would result, since two things would be trying to occupy the same space at the same time."

For a moment my enthusiasm abated. I didn't remember hearing that in my training. I felt like I had been tricked, and I probably had been.

"But that's the whole reason why we've spent

billions to do the voyage in space," Dr. Fuj added quickly, seeing my change of demeanor. "On earth, there is no way to know what matter occupied what space when in the past. But in outer space, there is a lot less matter to account for, and no living organisms to keep in consideration. The risk of an explosion is infinitely less." Clearing his throat once again, Dr. Fuj changed the subject. "Once the time voyage is over, our technicians will try to get a visual of the projection area through the telescope. After they give the affirmative, we will turn on the projector. It will take a few minutes for it to warm up. Then we'll release the beam, which will produce a hologram-like projection of yourself on earth and transfer your consciousness to it. Your selected projection area is ancient Mesopotamia, somewhere between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Although we highly recommend that you stay out of sight, it is most desirable that you at least catch a glimpse of another human being."

I nodded. "I will certainly do my best."

A moment of silence ensued. I looked through one of the portholes at the blue planet I had been born on. It was a strange feeling to look at earth and know that I would be back soon, but not know my mother planet, and it not know me.

"Whenever you're ready." The words came slowly, solemnly out of Dr. Fuj's mouth. The light of enthusiasm had gone from his eyes. It was time to make history now.

I was trembling as the straps closed over my body and tightened. Then the glass encasement slid shut over my face, sealing off my last connection with familiarity. The consciousness transferring helmet slowly slid over my skull. Then I raised the thumb of my right hand to signal Dr. Fuj, who had been staring at me intently through the glass, that I was ready. He nodded and floated away so that only his head remained visible from my supine position. His lips moved, but his words were only an unintelligible mumble to me. It seemed like hours, although it was probably only minutes, went by before a voice blared over the station's intercom system. "Crew, take positions for time voyage."

A few minutes later, the voice spoke the words I had dreaded and anticipated for years.

"Time voyage commencing in five."

My stomach churned, and I realized for the first time that I had been sweating profusely. "Four."

Maybe I could still stop them. Out of the billions of people on earth, there must be someone more qualified for this mission than me.

"Three."

I opened my mouth to protest, filled my lungs with air, but no words came out.

"Two."

Would this be the end of me? Was I ready for death? Was there a God somewhere out in that infinite depth of space, just waiting for us to break the laws of time so that he could snatch us out of this life and tumble us into hell?

"One."

I did something I had never done before. It was instinctive, even though I had never done so before in my life. "God, please don't be angry. Save me!"

"Start!"

For a few seconds nothing happened, but then I suddenly felt like going crazy. My whole body started feeling sicker than it ever had before, but at the same time there was this feeling of pleasure and comfort that made it bearable. I realized my body was actually shaking violently.

The six minutes felt like six years. But finally, the horribly good feeling left, and I collapsed in myself, exhausted. I think I even fainted.

The next words; or the last words, I should say; I heard before it happened came from Dr. Fuj. He sounded exhausted and sick, just like I felt.

"Commence projection."

And then I went to a place that was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.



TieShort Story



Deirdre the Beautiful

By Kathleen Coyle

That dress is much too heavy for you. Give it to me." Deirdre snatched the violet silk gown from Cynthia's arms.

"But it's mine. My father gave that to me." Cynthia made to grab the dress back, but Deirdre held it further away.

"Yes, and your father is a man. He has no clue about women's fashion. There's no way he could have known it doesn't suit you."

Cynthia's gaze fell. "Well, yes, I guess you're right."

"Shouldn't you be getting started on your chores? You don't have time for dresses, there is work to be done." Deirdre spun away from Cynthia to admire her reflection in the mirror, holding the gown up to her figure and fluttering the skirts back and forth.

"I don't understand why I must do all the chores. Wouldn't it be fairer if you and Alicia helped me? Then we would all have time to try on gowns!"

Deidre's eyes slid to Cynthia's reflection in the mirror. Her long blonde curls. Her thin petite frame. Her smooth pale skin. Deirdre clenched her teeth to hold back a scowl, her hold on the dress tightened.

Thinking of how perfect Cynthia was made Deirdre's cheeks heat up. Her eyes moved back to her own reflection. Deirdre, like many girls her age, was not a stranger to looking in the mirror and hating what she saw.

"Alicia and I are older, Cynthia," She hissed from between her clenched teeth. "We don't have time for chores. Our time must be spent learning how to be proper ladies so that we might attract a husband."

"I'm not that much youn--"

"You're young enough! When Alicia and I have husbands, then you may learn to be a lady worthy of your own. Go begin your chores before I tell my mother of your disobedience."

"Yes, Sister." Cynthia bowed her head slightly and left the room.

"Stepsister," Deirdre said to the empty room.



"Look at her. She's talking to the chickens again. What a proper loon." Alicia pointed out the window to where Cynthia was below. Deirdre glanced in Alicia's direction but quickly went back to her needlepoint. "I think she's even singing to them! Deirdre look! She really is a lunatic. Deirdre you're not looking." Alicia waved her hand wildly in Deirdre's direction.

"I'm busy. Let me work."

Alicia wandered over to the chairs where Deirdre was methodically stitching a line of thread and flopped down in the chair across from her. "But you're only doing needlepoint. Needlepoint is so boring." "A man looks for a lady that exhibits quality skills like needlepoint and painting and piano playing. Mastery of the arts. If you want a fine husband, then you must hone your skills or no man will ever want to marry you." Deirdre flinched as she stabbed her finger with the needle for what seemed like the thousandth time that day.

"But painting is smelly and stains my hands and playing the piano makes my fingers cramp. Don't even get me started on the dangers of needlepoint. Whose idea was it to make something so tiny also so sharp?"

Alicia's eyes wandered towards the window again. "I bet Cynthia doesn't need to hone her skills. Any man would take one look at her and they would be begging Mother for Cynthia's hand in marriage. She's so beautiful, I bet even the princ--"

"Ouch!" Deirdre held her finger close to her face and saw the blood pooling on its surface. She stuck her finger in her mouth and looked down at her stitches. A single drop of blood seeped into the crisp white fabric.

Deirdre stood and threw her ruined handkerchief onto the floor. "I am so sick of you talking about how beautiful Cynthia is! I work and I work to make myself an acceptable wife, I don't need you reminding me that I will never be able to compete with Cynthia!" Deirdre stomped out of the room slamming the door behind her.

Alicia jumped at the sound of wood hitting wood and stared at the door with lips turned down. "But Deirdre, you're beautiful too." Alicia wished her sister was still there to hear her.



Deirdre made it all the way to her own room before locking herself inside and collapsing against the door. She slid all the way down to the floor dissolving into a pile of fabric and tears. When her mother had married Cynthia's father, Deirdre had been ecstatic to gain a new sister and to have a new father, even if he wasn't her real father. But Cynthia never shared the same interests as Deirdre and her father never had eyes for Deirdre and Alicia. He only ever cared for his own daughter.

When he would leave for his travels he would return with gowns and jewels for all the girls but the most beautiful always went to Cynthia. For Cynthia's birthdays he always lavished her with gifts. For Deirdre and Alicia's birthdays, he always seemed to be away selling his wares. Deirdre believed that Cynthia's father could never love another girl as much as he loved his own daughter, not even Deirdre's mother.

Deirdre wiped her tears away on her sleeve and stood. She walked over to her mirror and peered at her reflection.

She smoothed her hands down her stomach and rounded them out towards her hips. Waist is bigger than hers. Hips are wider than hers. She ran her fingers up her right arm. Skin is darker than hers. Her fingers danced across her cheeks. I have more freckles than her. My face is rounder than hers. She pulled a lock of her hair over her shoulder. My hair is thinner than hers, darker than hers.

Deirdre's arms dropped to her sides; hands clenched into fists. Why did I have to be born so ugly?

"Deirdre! Alicia! Come quickly!"

Deirdre cringed at Cynthia's voice. What now? She exited her room and wandered over to the top of the staircase. Alicia was there too, eyeing Deirdre warily. Cynthia stood at the bottom of the staircase panting heavily.

"It's a letter from the palace! There's going to be a ball! And every eligible young lady is to attend! Isn't that just fantastic news?"

Deirdre's stomach took up a new residence upon the floor, along with her jaw. Cynthia. At a royal ball. She would be snatched up by a man before they even made it to the palace doors. No one would notice Deirdre if Cynthia were there. She had to think fast. She slowly began to descend the staircase.

"But Cynthia, it says every eligible lady." She reached the bottom of the staircase and reached for Cynthia's hands. "And you're not eligible."

Cynthia slid her hands out of Deirdre's grasp and took a step back. "What do you mean?"

"I told you this morning, you're not old enough."

"But surely that doesn't matter all that much. I--"

"It most certainly does." All three girls whipped their heads up at the sound of Mother's commanding voice. "It would not be fair to your other sisters if you went out into society with them. Imagine the embarrassment if you were to be engaged to a man before your sisters? No, you will not be going."

Cynthia's face crumpled and she dashed out of the foyer, flinging the royal invitation onto the floor behind her.

Deirdre's heart zinged a tiny bit at Cynthia's displeasure, but it didn't keep her from stooping to pick up the invitation and reading it with awe. A royal ball. Everyone will attend. Surely, I can find one man there who will want to marry me.



The night of the ball Deirdre prepared herself as though she were entering into battle. A dress weighed down with thousands of little jewels that sparkled in the light. Layer upon layer of skirts that flared out at her waist and swooshed around her legs. A corset done up so tight she almost couldn't breathe. Heavy earrings and an elaborate hairstyle adorned her head. Still, as Deirdre looked in her mirror, she couldn't help but think of how much prettier Cynthia would look.

At the ball, Deirdre danced with many handsome men and even saw a glimpse of the prince. Of course, the prince didn't give Deirdre the time of day. He didn't even know who she was. Probably didn't even see her. Deirdre heard whispers that he spent the entire evening dancing with a beautiful blonde woman. When Deirdre heard this, she couldn't keep the picture of Cynthia dancing with the prince darting to her mind. No, she's at home.

Deirdre, Alicia, and their mother arrived home just as dawn was breaking the horizon and Deirdre flopped into bed as soon as she was freed from her fabric prison. She did not awake until well into the afternoon when a loud knock sounded from the front of the house. It jolted her out of her deep slumber, and she stumbled about her room clumsily getting dressed.

When she was presentable, she exited her room and crept to the staircase. When she peered down to the first floor, she saw Alicia being fitted with a shoe, a shoe that was obviously much too small for her foot. What's going on?

"Deirdre, there you are. Come here." Deirdre's mother motioned her to come closer.

Deirdre descended the stairs and stood by her mother. "What's all this, Mother?"

"These men are from the palace. They're looking for a girl who danced with the prince." Deirdre's mother leaned closer and whispered, "Apparently she left in such a hurry that the prince didn't even learn her name. She left behind a shoe in her haste."

"Oh, but I didn't--"

Deirdre's mother gripped her arm tightly and then spoke loudly, "I know, I was just about to tell them that you didn't get to say goodbye to the prince. Such a shame. Why don't you try the shoe?"

Deirdre's mother forced her down into a chair and Deirdre watched frozen as the palace guard held a small violet shoe up to her foot. A violet shoe that she had seen mere days ago. A shoe she knew was much too small for her because it was Cynthia's shoe.

"May I try the shoe?" Deirdre's head shot to the left where she heard Cynthia's voice. Cynthia stepped into the light, a small smile on her face.

Deirdre shot up from the chair, tottering on

the too small shoe. "But...but you weren't even at the ball!"

"Please, Sir?" Cynthia asked, ignoring Deidre.

"Of course. All ladies of the house must try the shoe." His expression was tight, his eyes ringed with dark circles. Deirdre watched in horror as Cynthia sat and the shoe, tailored for her petite foot, slid into place, fitting perfectly. Deirdre couldn't breathe. No. No, no, no.

The next moments passed in a flurry of motion. Palace guards were swarming the house helping to pack all of Cynthia's things. The prince wanted to marry her. Deridre felt as though her head was full of water. She continued to stand there, in the middle of the foyer wondering why, of all the people in the world, did the prince have to marry Cynthia?

"Deirdre? Deirdre?" Cynthia waved her hand in front of Deirdre's face. "I just...I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why are you so beautiful? Why am I so ugly?" Deirdre's eyes filled with tears. The water in my head is pouring out, she thought.

Cynthia gripped Deirdre's arms tightly. "You're not ugly! Deirdre, sister, what ever made you think that?" Cynthia gathered her up into a hug, squeezing hard.

"I could never be as beautiful as you, skinny, pale, blonde, perfect." Deirdre's tears dropped onto Cynthia's head.

"You are beautiful, Deirdre. Curves like the rolling hills, skin kissed by the sun, hair as soft as silk. You are unique and talented, and I am proud to call you my sister."

Deirdre pulled back and looked into Cynthia's eyes. "Really?"

"She's right." Alicia stood off to the left. "I never understood why you said you were ugly that day when you were sewing. I understand it now. You were too focused on how much you didn't look like Cynthia that you couldn't see that you are beautiful in your own perfect way."

"Time to go milady." A guard stood at the door waiting for Cynthia.

Cynthia looked back to Deirdre. "You are perfect the way you are. I'm lucky that the prince saw me first. For if he saw you first, he surely would have married you on the spot."

Cynthia hugged Deirdre one last time and then walked out the door. And Deirdre, for the first time in a long time, was sad to see her go.



Short Story



Junie

By Jessi Skrade

Let ME OUT! June felt a screech rise from the back of her head. She pinched her eyes shut and shook her head irritably. Stacks of order forms and their meaningless words swam in front of her.

"I can't," she hissed to herself. "Unfortunately, we're stuck here, kiddo." A folder slapped across the top of her cubicle. She looked up to

see Adam's dull face. "Can I help you?"

"Meeting in the conference room in five minutes. Let's go," he said, drawling as always. June stood and ran a hand through her short red-brown hair before scooping up a yellow legal pad and pen and stalking down the hallway behind him. These meetings almost never have anything to do with me, she thought. They're just an hour of nothing. Her eyes flicked to a window, its beige blinds sagging like droopy eyelids. I could just tear those down and break the glass, she thought. I could do exactly that. Break the glass, jump out the window, and then I'd have wings, no, not wings. Too cliché; start over. Tear down the blinds, break the glass, fall all the way down but while I'm falling, it'll be slower. Floating. I'll float down, and then-wait. Float is such an odd word, spelled out. Eff ell oh ey tee. All next to each other, just like that! I bet those letters are friends, to make such a good word. Except it doesn't even look like a word anymore. I'll bet-

"For Pete's sake Junie, snap out of it!" Adam's hand gripped her arm, face lined with concern. She had reached out and touched the blinds. "We're going to be late if we don't hurry."

"Sorry." Float, she thought. Eff ell oh. . . .

"You've been talking to yourself a lot more than normal," he grumbled, powerwalking down the hall. "What's going on in there?" June pursed her lips.

"I'm bored out of my mind. Nothing new."

"No kidding, you're always bored!" he spun to face her, his fingers resting on the doorknob of the dreaded conference room. "Look, I know it's always been hard for you to pay attention. But this one is a big deal, and I don't want you to get called out again like you did last time. Please, try to be at least a little cognizant." June nodded. Adam sighed. His glasses were crooked, and the left lens smudged. June began to tell him, but he opened the door too quickly and her mouth snapped shut as he ushered her inside.



"I apologize for how cold it is in here, again," the supervisor, Mr. Burton, said. June felt a tingling ache begin in her toes and work up to her knee. It hurt too bad to ignore. Her foot tapped restlessly. While tapping her foot did alleviate some of the pain, her knee still throbbed in protest. June pressed a hand over the offending knee and titled a page of the legal pad. "Our sales have gone up, but not nearly enough to make up for the absolute wreck that was last month...."

Her knee smacked against the underside of the table in a violent twitch. Adam gave her a warning look from across the table and shook his head.

"Don't," he mouthed. June nodded and forced herself to watch Mr. Burton. His mouth moves, and I know he's saying words, but what is he saying? Her attention slid almost immediately to the colors of the room. Almost a perfect gradient of dull button-downs and ties all along this side of the table, and then a nice candy-stripe of purple and blue across the way. June began to tally up all the shades in the margins of her paper.

"Ledbetter, you seem to be taking notes intently," June jumped at hearing her last name. "Do you have any ideas?" She glanced around the room frantically. What on earth had he been talking about?

"Um...I think that everything is fine now?" she chewed the inside of her cheek, anxiety rising in her like a flood. Burton stared at her and sighed.

"Do you know what I asked you?"

"If I had any ideas for, uh, um...I'm afraid I don't know," she admitted. "I'm sorry, sir." He frowned and turned to Adam.

"What about you, Wallace?"

"We all could do well as salespeople to a more genuine interest in our client's personal lives," he began to drone on. June felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. What if Burton asks me to stay behind? She thought. He's going to ask me to stay behind, I just know it. Junie, why are you like this? Oh, people are standing up. Meeting over?

"Ledbetter, can we have a talk in my office, please?"

"Sure," she squeaked, managing a stiff smile. Adam's brow furrowed as she followed Burton into the stuff of her nightmares.

June tried to swallow the lump rising in her throat as she shuffled out of Burton's office to gather her little brown purse and sweater. She started as Adam spoke behind her.

"Everything ok?"

"You didn't have to wait for me," she said, voice quivering.

"It was almost time to go home anyway." He shrugged. "Come on, let's go get coffee." He held out his hand, and June stared at the fine lines of his palm. She took it and allowed him to lead her out of the building.



Adam fiddled with his half-emptied paper cup of coffee, one heel kicking the wooden bench they'd settled on. June could feel him looking at her. Tears welled in her eyes and she fought to keep them from spilling out.

"So. What happened, Junie?" She broke down, cringing at the snotty sniff that echoed into the evening air. Thank goodness the park was empty of people.

"I got written up," she said, her voice rasping. "Burton said I wasn't dedicated enough to my job, and I need to get my act together or he'd have to let me go." A fly landed in her hair. Junie wept harder. "I wasn't made for a desk job! I wasn't made for ANY job!" Adam patted her shoulder awkwardly.

"Oh, now don't go saying things like that." She whipped her head up and glared at him.

"Don't lie to me! You know I can barely even sit still long enough to type up one report, and just that one is awful! And I have to do that several times a day?! I don't know what's wrong with me; I just wasn't wired to be an adult!" Adam didn't respond. June threw her hands up in the air. "I know I sound silly and immature; you don't need to tell me. I don't know how you do this every day with no end in sight."

"I don't think you're immature," Adam said slowly. "It sounds to me like you could use a little different perspective is all." He offered her a tissue. Junie drained her cup and tossed it halfheartedly at the garbage can.

"How do I get a different perspective?"

"June, what do you really think is the most important part of a job?" The question took her aback. "What?" She sniffed.

"Come on, what do you value about your job? Why are you afraid of losing it if you seem to hate it so much?" Adam probed. Junie watched a thrush peck at some bug and frowned.

"I guess...I guess I thought maybe if I got a job like this one after school I'd somehow feel more grown up. Like I'd just know what to do and how to do it. I was wrong, though. I don't know what I'm doing and I'm miserable." He huffed and folded his arms.

"Okay, now take a step back and look at that thought. Do you see how many times you said 'I' in one sentence?" Junie's eyes widened behind her glasses. Oh.

"Yeah."

"Do you think I just absolutely love being a salesman?" He asked. "June, I majored in cinema in college. This isn't at all what I wanted to do. That doesn't mean it's the end of the line. There's more to our lives than that office building." She wiped her nose and laughed thickly.

"How?"

"There's people I care about in there. They might not be my best friends in the world, but they are still people who I can get to know and appreciate. I don't like selling software. But I like seeing you every day, and I like talking to the baristas at that little café." For the first time, Adam didn't look dull to Junie. He was warm, and comforting. He smiled at her. June's ears tingled. "And," he continued, "when I get done with the day's work, I get to go home and

write, or cook a new food, or fall asleep reading. Yeah, the job is the bulk of my day, but I make an effort to look for the good in and around it."

"That sounds nice," June said softly. "I guess it's been too long since I've really thought about anything like that."

"It is nice. Tell you what: I can't tell you how to be more aware. But if you promise me you'll try, I'll share as much of the good as I can with you." He stuck out his hand. "Do we have a deal?" June shook his hand, then pulled him into a hug.

"Okay."

"It's getting dark out earlier, huh? I'll walk you home."



The next day, on her walk to work, June looked around. Patterns and shapes and colors caught her eyes as always, but everything felt brighter, more alive. As she stepped onto the elevator, she was ashamed to realize she couldn't remember her coworkers' names. Not an overnight process, she thought, but she found when she looked beyond the walls of her own thoughts, there lay an infinitely more meaningful world. Think about other people, she told herself throughout the day.

It had been weeks since the conversation in the park. Junie scrolled absentmindedly through a document on her computer.

"So? How're you feeling today?" Adam asked, shuffling some papers on his desk.

"A little bit better. Less afraid," Junie replied. "You're right. There is a lot more to see the beauty in than I remembered."

"Good." An awkward silence hung in the air. Adam leaned back in his chair to look at June. "Um, would you maybe want to get dinner sometime?" June's ears began to tingle again.

"...Alright. Why not?" She looked at Adam. He's wearing a patterned tie for once. Tie. Tee eye ee. A good word that suits a nice man, she thought. "Adam?"

He leaned his chair back again.
"Thank you. For helping me, I mean." Adam

smiled, and Junie's stomach flopped. "You're very welcome, June."



Child of the Mud and Meadow

By M.J. Scoggins



Poetry

Still here a child of the mud and meadow

With sunshine curls and eyes of darkest pine

There's one from whom our hopes and dreams will grow.

With feet that dance unclad in hardship's snow, And lips that choose on songs and smiles to dine Still here a child of the mud and meadow.

Though fear may set the fire of hell aglow,

And stars of death and lawless dearth align,

There's one from whom our hopes and dreams will grow.

The bliss of innocence only to know

Though hate and greed their carnage intertwine,

Still here a child of the mud and meadow.

Through crumbling worlds or valley of Shadow,
Biding so safe in nature's quiet shrine,
There's one from whom our hopes and dreams will grow.

In smog of war and wave of sickness' woe,
While feet in grass do run, this peace is mine Still here, a child of the mud and meadow,
There's one from whom our hopes and dreams will grow.





I'm looking back,

As I oft do when thinking of you

And I wonder,

Are you remembering those times, too?

If I asked you, what would you say?

I'm looking back,

I see the steaming cups of coffee,

The silly grins,

The gazebo, that park now empty--

Why are they how I feel inside?

I'm looking back,

I hear the light-hearted laughter,

The late night talks,

When we discussed our deepest wonders

If I asked you--are they still there?

I'm looking back,

We're older now, those times have long passed--

But I wonder

If you understand the hole so vast

That inside of me you have left

If I asked you, what would you say?





Faded doors,

Faded lives.

Hearts will always sacrifice

The things we want,

The things we need,

And at the end,

Our hearts impede

This lie we live

Of up and down,

And all around us lies are found,

But it's okay.

We learn to breathe

And in the end.

We'll lay down.

He

Will know what meant our best,

And after all,

It's in our chest.

The thoughts we think,

The lies we choose,

And what our hearts

Will will to use.