



# Elements

# 2017

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Af Sanni

Orange Jumpsuit

When the spring lifts,  
the white lilies grow beautifully.  
I'd be watching at the window,  
as the rain poured past the glass.

The white lilies grow beautifully  
after the coldness of winter has passed.  
As the rain poured past the glass,  
I would count the days until I returned home.

After the coldness of winter passed,  
I was ready to get back to my family.  
I would count the days until I returned home,  
until there were no more days left.

*I was ready to get back to my family,*  
yet here I am still writing.  
Until there were no more days left,  
I'd write one day after another.

Yet here I am still writing,  
drowning sorrows in black ink.  
I'd write one day after another,  
until the white lilies grew beautifully again.

Drowning sorrows in black ink  
when the spring lifts.  
Until the white lilies grew beautifully again,  
I'd be watching at the window.

(Cordell Larner Award)

Af Sanni

## Changes

Do you remember  
a time when we were combustible?  
When we danced on Charles street  
as moisture dripped from your red hair.

Do you remember  
when the sky exploded?  
Purples and oranges stirring above  
as we laid under the parting clouds.

Maybe I remember  
all of it a bit differently.  
Nostalgia about brown eyes and sunsets  
cloud how I remember everything.

Af Sanni

Waiting In England

I'm standing at the clock tower, waiting for the rain.

Remembering how Lisa said she'd be here by dark,  
even though it's past 8 'o clock by now.

So I'm stuck in a country that I don't even know,  
with some change and the box I got for her.

*Maybe she just needed some space?*

Or maybe I need the space.

Walking down the street, my feet splashing in the rain.

I wonder what she's up to. Does she know I'm thinking of her?

Shaking my head, I continue to move forward in the dark.

Feeling lost amongst these people I don't know,

I decide to stop in a bar and relax for now.

Time quickly passes as I look into the glass now,

the brown liquid glowing like the stars do in space.

*Maybe we were just too young, you know?*

I finish the glass and look out at the rain,

thinking about walking back to our hotel in the dark.

And how missing a date is just like her.

*Do I really want to spend forever with her?*

My thoughts are cut off by the woman next to me now,

her legs long and slender, brown eyes smoldering and dark.

After following her out of the crowded space,

I find myself under the cover of the rain,

making new memories with a woman I did not know.

I wake up to something that I do know,  
which is the sunlight beaming on me and her.  
That means I've been gone longer than the rain,  
and I should get back to my hotel now.  
So I close the door to her vacant space,  
and walk through streets that feel so empty and dark.

When I get back, the room is dark  
and Lisa is still, like all the beautiful sculptures that I know.  
Not wanting to invade her space,  
I sit in the chair across from her.  
The box uncomfortably jutting out my pocket now,  
my clothes still wet from the rain.

Somewhere in the dark, I forgot about her  
and made mistakes I know not to make now.  
But as I sit in this space, I find myself still waiting on the rain.



Arielle Henry

The Lonely Wall

There was an art in the way he charcoaled my eye. And picked me apart,

Rock hard sums of gold, flying off after every clink.

Creating massive sparks as they hit the ground

Cracking and chipping

Away.

An art it was.

I simply couldn't resist the cold pointed metal digging into my skin.

Ugh, it feels so good to be used again.

Laurence L. Leff

## Ode To a Rowing Machine

written December 2016

One morning, I arrived nice and early at the Spencer Campus Recreation Center. The Concept Rowing machine near the stair case that I usually use was occupied so I walked to one of the two at the back of the center. It was still dark. As I was doing my thirty minutes, through the East-facing window, I saw the sun come up.

My father loved to sit at his breakfast table in the kitchen and watch the Sun come up in the East. Five years ago, I bicycled from Nashville to Charlotte, North Carolina. Being disciplined, I was up and on my bike just before dawn and rode into the sun rise. I told him that, thus, on that bike ride, I thought of him and vowed that whenever I took a major bicycle ride, I would plan it to ride from West to East.

So here I am, riding nowhere, but riding into the sunrise, thinking about him--who passed two months ago.

And the electronic doohickey on top of the machine told me I averaged eighty-seven watts over my session.

Maria Chiaradonna

Nothing

I knew, I knew,  
I truly did know,  
I saw You  
Old friend, daring my very  
Word, You taunted me and laughed at me  
Mocking me while you poked and prodded at the core  
The snake in the Garden knew when to stop,  
Yet two is one and you are two  
Scales that hide lives, and eyes that mask your many lives  
I was the Man, I was a Crusader  
Or the lion in the derisive, confining pen, But dear old Friend  
An ode to the great fight, harr harr, swords to the slaughter!  
Pride torn and cut open, vessels to flesh, crimson river oh how you've come!  
Lacerations, sweat, bewilderment, not the warriors best  
My roots are rotten but I had planted my healthy seed,  
Dear old Friend, you have won the battle, yet as I, the  
War as my banners displayed running through the  
Melancholic streets, while my blood and tears drain into the ocean  
It is not shallow, but deeper, deeper, deeper, I see it!  
Deeper than the wounds, roots, and ruts  
Then sharp prod while you, being flushed out of me  
No longer does the cumbersome pain I bear  
Slipping, slipping, slipping  
Here, dear old friend,  
Where have you gone? I am here and you are not to be found  
My worn soul is replenished, for it no longer thirsts  
Ahh, indeed, this is nothingness, this must be  
Peace.

Maria Chiaradonna

## The Machine

I am me. Therefore I am I .I am loved But not loved.Hated, full of distaste, Foul. I am weak, Predators watch with anticipation Dangerous eyes, They see me But do they really? I am beautiful, A dove, Graceful and strong,I am a giraffe, I see above so I can see others, But from all of this, I am me, Human. Since this, I am hated and a hater, Of both the same circumstance . Reflections. I see what I want, not who I am. I am beautiful, but I am horrific,Athletic, but manly, Vivacious, but annoying, Strong, but weak. Underneath, A fistful of life ,With every pump, Every beat ,Every hit of a hand, Life flows through this Beautiful yet horrific, Athletic yet a manly ,Vivacious yet annoying, Strong but weak. Look upon me, Then the reflection. Not of me .What is the difference ,Let me say, If I dare to dismay you, I have a life in my chest Words that grasp the wind from my mouth. Two souls that see through and out, Into the universe I wish to amount A machine, working and quenching me, Wisdom inside my beauty Workers that multiply every day, The beautiful words, Giving me life .So let me ask, Do not concede dear friend. What is different, From the reflection, Then to me? How can it be the same? Look away, Turn around. That enemy you saw, A contorted, And twisted, And manipulated, And hateful. That Thing that you saw, It's you but not true. That is not you. A perception of hate, A seed planted by a foreigner yet native. The hate and you. It's claws gripping at your machine, manipulating your two souls. Poor ,Poor, Poor, Poor. Heal your thoughts, For I am me, Therefore I am I. There was two now there is one, One was low the other high. Soaring like a dove in the sky, Stop. Stop...Curl your lips,Release that high pitched life full voice, And scream, Then scream louder. Let them see what you are.

Michelle Sierra

Mad Love

When Time is violent  
Calm is quiet, lying silent beneath cement  
Deep breath grapples with dead air  
Rationale drips slowly amidst raging waves of media and twisted fists  
Gnarled words hide common sense  
Hope slips away

When Time is violent  
Panic invades sidewalks  
Worry seeps, separating dreams  
Hatred hangs up on humanity  
Fear shuts off all light  
Freedom can no longer see

But when Time is up and violence has lost breathe  
Calm will rise and settle in  
Humanity will wash the wounds  
Common Sense and Hope will return  
Because somewhere...  
Love has left the light on

Michelle Sierra

Sunday Dress

Red Wagon filled with church clothes strolls to the laundromat on Saturday morning  
Rusted handle pulled by mama, I trail behind  
Five cent hopes of bubblegum and soda spins my Sunday dress  
Cousin Carmella chomps loudly trying to teach me how to snap gum

Saturday morning rituals  
Arroz con leche as music dances in the kitchen  
A full load for mama after late night shifts washing dishes at the American Café  
Automatic loaders, a blessing sent from St. Veronica  
Saved her hours of wash tubs and boiling hot water  
Decades of scrub boards and hanging clothesline

Red wagon filled with church clothes strolls to the laundromat on Saturday mornings  
Automatic Fluff-n-Folds twirl my Sunday dress

Natalie Jacobson

It rained last night

The sun hides behind the thick grey clouds  
the world damp and gloomy  
A tunnel of the deepest darkest wettest brown  
Large green leaves heavy with the rain

Wet damp cold seeps through my shoes  
The air is warm and still  
Moisture clings to my skin

Lush fields of verdant green  
Dewy with rain  
Trees dance with the whispering wind  
As the cold moves in

The clouds thicken  
A solid steel dome

The small puddle of a pond  
its water clear  
its water cold  
The bed soft with slime and moss

I slide so easily into the clear water  
I can see the goosebumps on my skin

The cold sets in  
Deep within

Natalie Jacobson

The night is

The night is that type of night  
That is cold and deeply dark and pinches at your skin.  
The stars are out, bright dots on the dark swath of the sky.

The faraway stars build themselves to dark oblivion  
Their light still shines, billions and billions of miles away it dances in my eyes.

You stand next to me. It is silent.  
The wind rustles the leaves of the trees and rushes at my ears.

We don't speak. There are many things to be said.  
I wish you would tell me them  
I wish you could tell me them

The night is cold and dark  
The earth moves slowly past the stars  
Maybe we will turn to the sun the dawn will arrive

Slowly I begin to see them now  
The patterns in the stars  
The shapes they create  
The mysteries and wonders they reveal

I wish I could show you them

But the earth moves on  
And the morning star looms.



Shelby Davin

End of the Beginning

I still remember,

The time you professed your admiration

Your gaze set in mine

I remember, the way you braided my hair

Your fingers entangled in my tresses,

Like a confused seamstress

The way you lit up the room,

Like radium in the darkest abyss;

That's what you fell into,

Darkness, muted, eternal

As you sank I watched, I remembered

The end of time, your time,

My time.

Shelby Davin

Pocket Change

I feel you in my pocket

Weighing me down

Making noise when I crave silence

You are virtually, useless.

Until this morning,

While waiting for my morning coffee,

You rescued me

\$1.42 for caffeinated bliss

Finding paper money, effortless

Making change from the twenty in my pocket

Was simply a pain, instead

I reached in and caressed you

Cold to the touch

Yet the warmth of your heroism persuaded me

Today I deem you useful,

Today.

Af Sanni

### Girl With The Pixie Cut

We sat in the homely coffee shop, keeping warm from the gusting fall winds outside. It'd been awhile since I saw my best friend. We tried to stay in touch, but we never actually met up after I transferred schools the year prior. Now that thanksgiving break was finally here, we had the chance. Sitting in the chair across from me, she didn't look any different than the last time I saw her. Her red hair was still cut into that short pixie style, her sweater was still just a little too baggy, and her purse once again took up most of the space on the table. It felt like we were back in Champaign.

Jean was always the wild child type. Everyone wanted to be her friend, guys couldn't stop themselves from asking her out, and she balanced the party life and school like no other. Hanging out with her, it always felt like there were just a couple more hours in the day. More time to do something new, another chance to go somewhere that nobody had ever heard of. We'd been friends since high school and she'd always been like this. Bright and optimistic. Qualities that I wished I had.

We ordered our coffee and started talking about memories we had from my time at University of Illinois. She spoke in her singsong voice about the time I went to a barn dance and ended up laying in the grass in an alcohol-induced stupor, in front of my at-the-time crush and her boyfriend. We laughed and also talked about friends I hadn't seen in ages, and I filled her in on how it was getting adjusted to my new school. She originally wanted to go to Western Illinois University herself, but got accepted to University of Illinois and chose to switch at the last second. At the time in Mooseheart High, it seemed like a miracle, someone getting accepted to

such an awesome school. But not to Jean, she was rarely ever phased, even by her own accomplishments.

Eventually our coffee came and Jean said she wanted to fill me in on something serious, her high-pitched voice dropping flat. “I dropped out of school.” It took me a second to process the sentence. She shuffled in her seat and explained further. “I spent too many semesters on academic probation, and now I have to take a semester off to have a chance to re-apply for the spring.” As she continued on, I just looked at her in disbelief.

Between all the trips to the bar, all of the house parties, and the nights that turned into mornings, she failed her way out of school. I didn’t judge her, as I had been down that road myself. But I wasn’t Jean. She told me about her plan to stay on campus and avoid telling her grandparents, who would’ve blown a gasket at the news. We spent the next couple of hours talking, and later on said our goodbyes, promising to hang out again soon. I did see my best friend again later on that week. But her brightness and optimism never came back from that warm coffee shop in St. Charles.

Destiny Thomas

Family Affair

*Dear Diary, I never wanted it to start off this way. With...this..lust. But his body, his smell was so alluring and I couldn't help myself. If anyone ever found out what I did, it could ruin so many lives. But, I love him and I know he loves me too. He has to.*

Yuri sat alone in her window sill staring aimlessly at the two lovers in the house across from her. They were kissing, hands caressing each other's skin as if they were silk. The man was now anxiously tearing off her clothes about to wander into her paradise. Yuri was hot.

"Yuri!" her mom yelled. "Yuri, come here for a second."

Yuri rolled her eyes and said. "Coming mom!" She gave one final glance at the two across the street and went downstairs.

"You called?" Yuri said walking over to the fridge.

"Yeah. Your school called. What the hell were you thinking ditching school? I'm not gonna put up with this."

"I wasn't feeling well mom. So I came home," Yuri said eyeing her empty fridge, "Besides what's the big deal? It was only one day."

"Yuri. I paid a lot of money to get you into that school."

"I didn't ask you to do that. Did I?" Yuri's tone was acerbic. "If you don't believe me, ask Jake."

"Why would I ask your brother?"

"He knows I was here. I'm not lying mom."

Yuri's mom sighed and got up from the kitchen table. Yuri's eyes were cold and empty. Yuri smirked as she bit into an apple. "I'm going back to my room now."

Yuri hurried back to her room. It was dark and she knew she wasn't alone. She felt a warm and heavy breath on her neck. She knew better than to move. The dark figure pressed his lips firmly to her neck and her head flew back in delight. His strong, muscular hands wrapped themselves around her small waist and moved slowly towards her pants. Her mind fluttered back to the couple across the street. Without warning, Yuri was flung onto the bed. The dark figure climbed onto her and found his way to paradise. They rocked together until he finished and they lay there in bliss.

"I have to go now," he said as he got dressed. Yuri watched him leave the room as she drifted off to sleep.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.* Yuri reached over to her desk and tried to search for the snooze button. Her hand slammed down against the button as she groaned. She rolled out of bed and ran her hands through her brown hair. "I fucking hate Wednesdays," she mumbled to herself. Slowly, she walked to her closet. She chose a navy-blue sweater with white jeans. As she laid her clothes on the bed, she couldn't help but think about last night. She smiled to herself as she walked over to the mirror. "Fuck." she exclaimed as she noticed three red marks around her neck. She searched for her white scarf to hide her hickeys. As Yuri changed from her PJ's into her school outfit, she heard her door open.

"What the hell?!" Yuri yelled before she turned to see her mom standing in her door way. "Have you ever heard of knocking? Or privacy?" Yuri pulled her pants up and threw on her top.

"Yuri, stop sneaking Malcolm in the house at night. Especially if you two are going to be...sexually active."

“Woah. Mom. Thanks.” Yuri said as she carefully put her scarf on and grabbed her backpack.

“Can I have a ride to school? I don’t want to be late.”

“Go ask Jake. I have to get to work”. Her mom left the room and went downstairs to leave.

Yuri walked across the hall to Jake’s room.

“Knock knock,” Yuri said opening the door. Jake was asleep with no covers and was only wearing his boxers. “Jake, mom left and I need a ride to school.” Jake mumbled something unrecognizable and turned away from her. “Jake seriously, come on. I'm going to be late.”

“Ughh fine. I need you to get a license Yuri.”

“I’m working on it,” Yuri rolled her eyes. “I’ll be downstairs.”

She walked into the living room and sat on the couch as she waited. She turned to look outside. She smiled gently as her neighbors shared a kiss and the husband left for work.

*I can’t wait to have that. A man to love me and will always come home to me. A man who will never leave me. Not like he...*

“You ready?” Jake asked interrupting her thoughts.

“Yeah, let's go,” her eyes never left the window as she spoke.

Even in the car Yuri was distracted. Her father left them when she was only seven. She took it hard but never spoke about it. Jake and her mom seemed to forget about the whole situation but Yuri thought about it often. She had walked in on her mom and dad having sex a lot but it was shocking when she caught her dad having sex with his secretary.

“Jake. Did dad love mom?” Yuri asked sadly. Jake looked at the road ahead with blank eyes.

“Uh, yeah. I guess so. Why?”

“Well he just left us. No explanation or anything.”

Jake shrugged. “Yuri, look. Mom wasn’t happy. She knew about the affairs he had been involved with.”

“Why didn’t she say anything?” Yuri questioned.

“There was nothing to say. She stayed for us and when he decided to leave, why would she stop him?” Jake stared ahead with hateful eyes, “Dad was a coward. He was supposed to protect the family. Be there for mom...and you. He wasn’t supposed to go around screwing other women. He was supposed to love you two.”

“Do you love me?” Tears fell from Yuri’s eyes as she spoke.

“Of course,” Jake said glancing at her. He gave her a hopeful smile.

“Always?” Yuri asked.

“Forever,n” Jake replied smiling.

Yuri couldn’t get what Jake said out of her mind. She was so grateful to have Jake. She knew that he would never abandon her like her father did. Jake was always there for her since their dad left when she was seven. Every soccer game Jake was there. He was her savior. Yuri couldn’t focus in any of her classes. She kept falling into a daydream of how happy her family was before her dad fucked it up. Movie nights were her favorite. They’d watch all of their favorites and when Yuri fell asleep, her dad would carry her upstairs and tuck her into bed. Some nights, he’d stay there with her.

The final bell rung waking Yuri up from her daydream. She was anxious to get home. She rushed out the front doors of her school and quickly walked home. Once she got home, she walked to her closet and pushed back all the clothes, revealing a locked chest. Yuri grabbed the necklace around her neck and put the key into the lock. With a smile, Yuri unlocked the chest.



Dressed in skimpy black-laced lingerie, Yuri waited in her room for her next trip to paradise.

Soon enough, her door creaked open.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Yuri said seductively.

“Is that right?” the dark figure asked in a husky voice.

“Yes. Come here.” The dark figure walked towards her. She grabbed him and pulled him onto her. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and began to kiss him passionately. “Tonight, I’m the dominate one,” she said through her kisses. She rolled so that she was on top of him. She wasted no time and they both went to paradise. Lost in ecstasy, Yuri broke the one rule that the two had set in place.

“Oh Jake. Make love to me.” Yuri moaned. Jake tried to grab hold of Yuri and cover her mouth but he forgot that she had tied his arms to the bed.

*Fuck* Jake thought.

All he hoped was that they didn’t get caught. Soon Yuri was going over the edge. She leaned down to kiss him. Lost in their moment, they never heard the door open.

“What the fuck is going on?!” Their mom stood in the doorway.

Haley Helgesen

## The King and Me: My Many Meetings with Stephen King

This is the very real story of the times I met Stephen King. I say real not to impress you, but to impress upon you the reality of what happened and give you a sense of the mortification I feel whenever I recall these encounters. Without further ado, I present my tale of woe: The King and Me.

Twas a long time ago, longer now than it seems, in a place that perhaps you've seen in your dreams... it was Florida. (That's the only part of this I'm doing in verse.) Five years ago, I was living in Sarasota, which Tripadvisor will tell you is known for its stunning vistas over the Gulf of Mexico, for being the home of the Ringling Brothers Circus, and for having somewhat-decent seafood. Tripadvisor will not tell you that Sarasota is mostly populated by people over the age of 70 who are basically waiting around to die. It's a stagnant town, punctuated by beautiful beaches, and wrinkly old men in speedos.

I'm working at a Ruby Tuesdays on the day I first meet Stephen King. For those unfamiliar, I advise you to stay that way. It's a glorified salad bar made famous for somehow pioneering worse versions of White Castle burgers. I've just gotten off a catering job, and am dealing with the subsequent existential crisis that comes from serving miniature burgers to nursing home patients and Viagra-hocking pharmaceutical reps. My wonderful boyfriend, Max, is sympathetic to my tiny burger crisis, and takes me out to lunch at the most romantic restaurant in town: IHOP. I would like to point out that Max is very romantic, and much better at picking out date spots, but alas, Sarasota is awful and IHOP is indeed its most romantic dining option. I don't actually like IHOP, but I am thankful for Max's kind gesture.

Surprisingly, we're the only ones in IHOP on that fateful Tuesday afternoon. As we struggle to decide which French Toast Special to order, I notice a man walk into IHOP and go directly to the bathroom. Seeing a skeletal, geriatric-looking man immediately beeline for the bathroom upon entering a building is an everyday occurrence in Florida, so it doesn't raise my suspicions in the slightest. A few minutes pass and the man exits the bathroom. This time I cannot help but notice how familiar he looks. Had I just served him a mini burger? Was he the guy that sneezed on the salad bar earlier? I blatantly stare at him as he passes, and either he doesn't notice my deer in the headlights look or he chooses to ignore me. The man walks out of IHOP and strolls into the Barnes & Noble next door. I know I'm obvious about watching him leave because our waitress comes over and smiles at me.

"You recognized him," she asks.

"Bathroom guy? Yeah, he looks really familiar."

"Which of his books is your favorite?"

"Bathroom guy writes books?"

"Yes," she laughs, "that was Stephen King."

My world stops. Creepy old bathroom guy is actually creepy old bathroom Stephen King! I've read every one of his books. He's the first author I metaphorically followed, and I just missed my chance to literally follow him. He had walked right past me because I was too distracted by IHOP's dumb seasonal French Toast Specials. I'm devastated, but I also have so many questions.

"Why was Stephen King eating at IHOP?" I ask our waitress.

“Oh, he doesn’t eat here,” she says with a surprising degree of awareness. “He just comes in to use the bathroom.”

“He does what?”

“He comes in, uses the bathroom, and leaves. We have very nice bathrooms.”

“I don’t understand, is he driving out here specifically to use the bathroom, or is he doing other stuff and just happens to stop by?”

“Honestly, I’ve never asked him, but a couple times a week he uses our bathrooms, and then goes to the Barnes & Noble next door.”

Max grabs my hand and we race to Barnes & Noble. After some discrete searching, we manage to corner Stephen King in the new arrivals section. Max selflessly asks if he is in fact Stephen King, and he responds with a cheerful yes. At this point, I completely lose the ability to speak, partially due to being star struck, but also because I can’t stop wondering why my favorite author doesn’t just use the infinitely nicer bathrooms in Barnes & Noble. In any case, I manage to blurt out that I love him and his work, and I thank him for creating the stories that fostered my love of reading. He appears genuinely touched until I awkwardly hug him. I’m too self-conscious of what I’ve done to let go immediately, so the hug lasts for an uncomfortable duration. He doesn’t say anything when I finally let go, and since there’s no eloquent way to leave an interaction where you’ve stalked a person out of IHOP and into Barnes & Noble to tell them you love them, I proceed to run out of the store. I am giddy all over, and my intense embarrassment over the whole affair is assuaged by what I now recognize to be naive confidence that I’d never see Stephen King again.

Fast forward a few months. I am recruited out of salad bar hell into the classiest seafood restaurant in Sarasota. The place is reservation heavy and servers seldom have walk ins. This evening, I have a table of three booked with a cordoned off section. Such requests for privacy are not out of the ordinary given the caliber of the restaurant's clientele, so I think nothing of it and continue to prep. From the kitchen, I see the hostess seat my reservation and draw the privacy curtain up between them and the rest of the dining area. As I make my approach, I review the spiel I've prepared where I introduce the specials and encourage patrons to spend \$65.00 on a bottle of wine. I walk up, confident in my craft, but lo and behold, Stephen King, his wife, and his son are all sitting at my table eager to mortify me.

In that moment, I question if any gods exist and whether they are cruel or benevolent. I decide to give no indication that we've met before, or that I even know he's Stephen King. I smile and deliver my spiel. When I finish, I ask if they have any questions.

"Yes." Stephen King says plainly. "Are you the girl who followed me into Barnes and Noble a few months ago?"

And just like that I discover that the gods are indeed cruel, and I find myself at an impasse. Should I lie for the sake of carrying out the rest of the evening with a shred of dignity? Or do I answer honestly and offer him another server. I decide that since my constitution is already faltering I might as well be honest.

"Yes, yes I am." I say.

His wife and son begin laughing, but Stephen King only gives an amused smile. His son, also a noted author whose books I read, kindly points out that this must be incredibly awkward for me.

"Yes, yes it is." I answer.

To my surprise, King himself starts to chuckle.

“So you’re a big fan?” he asks.

“Yes, I read Tommy Knockers when I was seven and I’ve been seeing a therapist ever since.”

This makes the whole table laugh.

“Have you read my newest book?”

“I have.”

“And?” he asks.

“I didn’t like it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... was that a dumb thing to say? Do you want a new server?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. You’re a bit odd, but you’ll do fine.”

“Wonderful! So... will you be having wine this evening?”

And like that, Stephen King and his family become my regulars. They are always kind, quirky, and polite. Stephen King orders the same thing every time, a BLT with fries, which is not what you order at a renowned seafood restaurant, but whatever, he’s Stephen King. During his visits, we talk about different TV shows, books, and movies. I end up reading *The Hunger Games* on his recommendation, and think it is just okay. At some point, I let slip that I am an aspiring writer and from then onward he always asks me how much I’ve written since the last time we saw each other. Spoilers, but no matter how much you write it’s never enough for

Stephen King. It's kind of surreal to be lectured by Stephen King, but his son and I end up bonding over being disappointments to him.

The end of our peculiar relationship comes when I inform the Kings that I am moving to pursue higher education. That evening, he leaves me a generous tip, and thanks me for all our conversations. He also tells me to put him down as a reference and to add him on LinkedIn. To this day, I have done neither because it feels too weird. I also think he may be aware that the \$65.00 wine I sold him every week was only worth \$8.00.

Maric McLean

## Head Games

This is not my paper and you are not my audience. Is there anything more beautiful than terrible art? I don't think so. In fact, why don't we just sit in this white room right here? Yes, right there. Don't mind me, I'm just laying carpet down. Raise your feet please and thank you. My office needed some redecorating. A lot of crazies visit me here. Now then, would you mind telling me why you are here?

....

Oh fascinating! Not what you said, I didn't even hear you. It's just that this carpet is so soft! It's like cat hair. But oh no, it's not made out of cat hair is it? You see, I'm allergic to cats. You understand that though, as I see on your medical form it specifically says "Bleep Bleep is allergic to cats." Oh I'm sorry, did you want me to say your name?

....

Well that's a shame! I don't know your name, and no you can't tell me. Moving on—you know my cats have really long hair. They're soft and fuzzy, kind of like cheetahs but without the ferocious, tearing you to pieces part. Or I guess I could say 'the tearing you apart part' but that doesn't quite roll of the tongue now does it?

So...are you just going to stand there reading or are you going to talk, hmm? Because it's kind of weird with this whole monologue thing. Now, I know you tried to talk to me earlier, but it just didn't feel like you were trying hard enough. Here, let me help you. I just going to put this here and you use it to say something all right?

---



---

Now, you see, you were supposed to write something there. You aren't even trying. Oh well. I can't blame you for not being talkative. After all, you are allergic to cats and I brought them up, didn't I? Three times now to be precise. Now, if you look to your left, you will see a door.

....

No, your other left. Do I need to teach you directions? Anyway, that door there will take you out of here. If you want to leave—hey, I wasn't done talking to you—oh now look what you've done. You've gone and fallen through the door. If only you had waited for me to tell you that it was a trap door. What a shame.

He should be here right about, thud, now. It's nice of you to finally join me. We wouldn't even be speaking if you had any brains. You should have waited for the other me to say that specific door, not any of the others, was a trap door.

....

Wait, there was only one door? Are you sure? The other me sure is sadistic. Anyway, welcome to the land of honey! It's not the metaphorical land of honey where all of your dreams

come true. However, I'm afraid it is the actual land of honey. You know, where everything is made out of honey. It's all over your shoes by the way. And your back from when you fell earlier. No matter. How does it feel to finally be rid of those cats and in this sweet smelling, syrupy land of honey? It's so sweet it could make you sick to your stomach. Err, one moment please.

Ah, that's much better. The only thing that tastes better than honey going down is honey coming back up if you know what I mean. You do know what I mean right?

....

What do you mean that's gross? No wonder the other me wanted to get rid of you so bad, what with the only giving you one door and all. That cruel bastard. Oh look, some cats have made their way down here too. They are just falling from the sky, meowing at nothing in particular. They make the funniest sound when they hit the honey too. Listen.

You hear that? That plop sound that makes you laugh because you know the cat landed in honey but you still think it is animal cruelty because we pushed the cat through the door and made it fall hundreds of feet. Oh, but it's ok. The cat enjoys licking the honey off of its paw. Now if only we could look that elegant while licking our hands. Here, you try that. Just take your hand, bring it to your face, and lick it. Not too hard now. We don't want any skin coming off. Do you taste the honey? No? Good because that would be really weird.

So, do you have any last words?

....

What do you mean “what do you mean”? I just assumed you were having a stroke or something since you have been completely oblivious to everything I have said. Except for the licking your hand part. That was adorable. You were like a fuzzy little kitten trying to be all adorable and such. Licking your paw when I told you to. Oh well, I’ve had my fun with you. You should be sinking into the honey any minute now. Any minute...ah, there we go. Now, before you go, I need to tell you this important life less--.

I just love it when a plan comes together, don’t you? Here you are in this rock hard chair, struggling against the hand and leg restraints you so graciously put on yourself. I bet you are wondering something like, “What am I doing here?” Well, let me tell you. You are here to learn how to read and write.

....

What? You already know how to read and write? Well, that’s just nonsense. If you knew how to read and write, then you wouldn’t be learning how to read and write now would you? Yeah, how do you like that logic? I should write a book. I’ll call it, *How to Read and Write by Reading and Writing*. Sounds glorious doesn’t it? I would buy that book. I would even get it signed by the author, Bleep Bleep.

....

No! You didn’t write the book silly. Just because you were told that your name is Bleep Bleep doesn’t mean that every little thing by Bleep Bleep is by you. Silly human. Don’t mind

that smell in the background. That sweet, greasy bacon smell. Haaaaw-yeah, that's the smell.

Actually, scratch that, let's mind the smell. That sweet and savory smell of cooked cat. Wait, you did know that it was cat we were cooking right?

....

Oh, well this is awkward. The cat sure is tasty though. Smells like bacon, tastes like chicken, is chewy like frog legs—you've had frog legs right?

....

God you're lame! I think I'm just going to leave you here while I enjoy my tasty cat...Actually, you should leave. I think it's time for you to get back to your life, just not yet. Remember, I'm, trying to help you. Is it too repetitive to use another trapdoor here? Oh who cares, bye bye!

So, here you are again. Back in the office type room with the nice cat-hair-like carpet. What's that? You don't want to talk about cats anymore? Well, all right then. There is nothing I can do about cat, I mean that. You know what I meant.

It looks like it's time for us to say our goodbyes. I'm sorry it has to be this way but we both have better things to do. I have to get back to my research and you have to get back to...sitting there I guess. Anyway, you have my contact information if you want to do this all again. Just don't schedule another appointment soon. I have much better things to do.

....

What? You don't have my information? All right, then. My number is \_\_\_\_\_ and my email is \_\_\_\_\_@\_\_\_\_\_.com. See what I did there? That's called being mysterious and playing hard-to-get. Like that one person you can't get to talk to you no matter how hard you try. You know, your cat. Don't you wish you had more control?

Morgan Cusack

### Pancakes at Penny's

I have long since lost faith in God but there is no getting out of Sunday mass with my mother. Normally, I count the tiles on the floor, or stare blankly at a random brick in the wall. Sometimes I have staring contests with the six year old two pews over. Recently though, I have had something new to hold my attention.

I don't know anything about him, not even his name. He and his parents moved to town a few weeks ago, and no one seems to know much about them. That doesn't stop the rumors of course, but I learned a long time ago town gossip meant very little.

I spend most services sneaking glances at the boy, trying to glean some understanding of him from afar. Sometimes I think I feel him looking back at me, but that's probably just wishful thinking. I have been trying to work up the courage to talk to him since I first saw him. Haven't had much luck yet.

Today, mass ends and people file out of the little church. The front entrance is a bit crowded because everyone has to shake the priest's hand and tell him how good his sermon was. I give him a passing wave and go to wait by the car. Mom's going to take her time talking to all her church friends. I lean on the passenger side door and turn my face to the sun steadily raising in the sky. It wasn't nearly as hot as it should be for the beginning of summer.

"Hey," I jump slightly at the sudden hand that touches my shoulder. I look up at the person it belongs to. It's *the boy*. He looks older than I originally thought. A few years older than me, at least sixteen, maybe seventeen.. He had thick dark hair and the warmest brown eyes. His lips were strained in an awkward smile.

The boy pulls his hand back at my reaction, it goes to rub the back of his neck. “Sorry,” he mutters, staring at the ground.

“Hi,” I say. Nice, very eloquent.

“Uh, hi.” He gives a small wave. He pauses for a second before continuing, “I’m Az.”

“Gray.” Apparently I can’t say more than one word at a time.

“Gray,” he says my name, testing it on his tongue, before nodding. A long silence stretch between us, neither sure what to say next.

“Az? That’s a nickname right?” I force the words out, something to fill the silence. Five word, though. Progress.

“Yeah. It’s a long story, believe me.” He shrugs with a small smile.

“I got time.” Shit. That sounds weird. Don’t creep him out. I take a breath and force myself to relax. He’s just a guy. No reason to be so nervous. I can handle this.

He chuckles, “It’s a long, *embarrassing* story. Got to know me a bit longer to get that kind of information.”

“I can understand that.” I get a little bolder, his laugh giving me courage. “Don’t want to give away your secrets too easily.”

“Oh, no, that would ruin my mystique.” He says without missing a beat and I find myself laughing.

“We can’t have that, now can we?” He shakes his head; that brilliant smile never leaving his face.

“I came over here for a reason.”

“Yeah? It wasn’t just for my amazing small talk?” Az snorts and it makes me smile even bigger.

“Sorry, no. My parents are going out to eat with some people from church and I really don’t want to go. I was hoping you could point me to where I could get breakfast.”

“Mm, if you’re looking for good food,” I swing around to look down Main Street and point to a little place near the end of the street. “Right there, a dinner called Penny’s. All their food is great but I can personally promise their pancakes are amazing.”

Az follows to where I’m pointing and nods. “I’ll definitely be going there then. Thanks for the directions.”

“Sure thing,” I figure that he’s going to go but he lingers there on the sidewalk.

Az rubs the back of his neck again, “Uh, if you don’t have plans already, do you maybe wanna maybe join me?”

“Yes!” Az looks a little startled at my enthusiastic answer. I blush a nice shade of red and backtrack. “Oh, uh, sorry. It’s just that I don’t want to go to brunch with my mother either.”

“So we’re in the same boat then.”

“I guess so, just let me go tell her I’m leaving. Then we can go.” I leave Az there to go to find my mother. I spot her talking with a few other parishioners, two of which I recognize as Az’s parents.

“Gray!” My mom beams when she sees me approach. She grabs my shoulder and pulls me close to her. “This is my son Gray. Gray this is Catherine and Felix Chase.”



“Hi,” I wave in greeting.

“It’s nice to meet you, Gray.” Mr. Chase says as he offers me his hand. I shake it and nod.

“We saw you talking to our son, Az.”

“Yeah, he’s actually why I came over.” I glance at my mother. “I was going to grab breakfast with him, if that’s okay?”

“That’s a great idea!” Mrs. Chase says with a wide grin.

“It’ll be nice for Az to make a friend.” Mr. Chase looks almost relieved by the news.

“Of course you can go sweetheart.” I can hear the forced cheeriness in my mother’s voice. “Just don’t be out too late, okay?”

“Yes, I promise.” I say and my mother releases me. I leave before she can change her mind.

Az is leaning on my mom’s car, fingers tapping a rhythm on his thigh. He straighten when he see me, I smile and say, “Come on, food is calling.”

The walk to Penny’s is a quick one. I pull open the door and our arrival is announced by the tinkling of a little bell. The diner’s mostly empty other than two men talking at a table in the corner and a woman sipping coffee and reading the paper at the counter. I grab Az’s hand and lead him to the counter, a few seats down from the woman.

An older woman comes bustling out of the back carrying a plate of eggs and toast. She smiles warmly at me, “Gray! Where have you been hiding? I haven’t seen you in weeks!”

“Hiya, Miss Lilly,” I say as she sets the plate before the woman reading the paper. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around. Finals had me swamped.”

Miss Lilly comes to stand before me, “And how did those go, sweetheart?”

“Great, few As, few Bs. Better than I thought I’d do.”

She waves her order pad in a dismissive gesture. “You’re a brilliant boy, I’m not surprised.”

I flush a little under her praise and shift uncomfortably. I glance in Az’s direction and realize he probably isn’t acquainted with our server. “Oh, Miss Lilly this is Az, Az this is Miss Lilly.”

“Well, hello there young man! I haven’t seen you around before.” Az jumps slightly at Miss Lilly’s bright and boisterous tone.

“Oh, yeah, no, my family just moved into the area. It’s taken a while to get things settled so I haven’t really been around town.” Az looks at his hands, fingers fidgeting for something to do.

“Welcome then,” Miss Lilly beams brightly. “Now I’ll stop talking your ears off and take you orders.”

“You know me, Miss Lilly,” I lean against the counter and grin.

“Pancakes and chocolate milk,” Miss Lilly nods, writes it down, and looks to Az.

“The same, please.” He says it almost sheepishly.

Miss Lilly points her pen accusingly at me, “He’s gotten to you has he?”

“I don’t—?” Az looks at me confused.

I roll my eyes, “It’s nothing, Miss Lilly just thinks I have an unhealthy love for pancakes and that I inflict it on everyone else.”

“*Thinks.*” Miss Lilly scoffs, “I know you do. Anyway, I’ll get these to Art.” With that she disappears into the back, leaving me and Az in silence.

After a few beats Az speaks up, “Miss Lilly is very lovely if only a bit... loud.”

I laugh, “Yeah, she takes a bit of getting used to.”

“I think that applies to the whole town.”

“Without a doubt. Not use to small town life are you?” I hazard a guess.

Az stares at the counter, tapping his fingers against the cracked linoleum top. “Yeah, things here are a lot different than where I grew up.” He looks up at me, the smallest smile touching his lips. “But that’s okay, I think I am going to like this different.”

We don’t really talk about much else. The silence is long but not unpleasant. Soon Miss Lilly comes out with two glasses of chocolate milk, which she set them in front of us.

“Here you go boys,” I don’t even hesitate to take a big gulp of mine.

“Don’t drink that too fast, Gray.” Miss Lilly tries to sound authoritative but the smile curling at her lips kind of ruins it. “You would not believe what happened once—” She starts to tell Az but I cut her off.

“Don’t tell him that!” I have to force myself not to blush again. She laughs but thankfully leaves without another word.

“So...” Az stirs his drink with a straw. “What are the chances that I get to know that story?”

“If I can help it, zero.” I point my own straw at him, “Now try it, I swear it’ll be the best chocolate milk you ever tasted.”

Az laughs quietly and take a sip of his drink; I watch carefully for his reaction. He hums happily. "It's pretty good."

"Pretty good"? That's it?" I scoff in mock offence.

"It's just chocolate milk, Gray." Miss Lilly returns and set two plates down before us.

"And we were getting along so well." I have to fight to keep a straight face.

"You know, not everyone has a sugar dependency like you." Miss Lilly teases.

"It's not a dependency, I just have a sweet tooth." She responds with a hum before making her way over to one of her other customers. I glance at Az and see he's taken his first bite. Nudging him with my elbow I ask, "Amazing right?"

"They're really great," It was muffled by food in his mouth. He shoots me this little smile that I can't help returning it.

It's easier to talk as we eat. He tells me about the city he's from and what his parents are like. I tell him about my two older siblings and slightly overbearing mother. I didn't notice we had both finished until Miss Lilly came by with the bill. Az made a move for his wallet but I wave him off.

"Let me get this," I pull out a few dollar bills and hand them to Miss Lilly. "Consider it a welcome to town present." Az tries to protest but I won't hear any of it.

Miss Lilly frowns at me as she counts out the bill, "This is far too much," I shake my head when she tries to hand be back the extra.

"Keep it, it's your tip."

“Gray,” She chides, about to protest but I hold up a hand to stop her.

“You know you earned it, Miss Lilly. You work so hard every day.”

She sighs in defeat but a smile touches her lips. “You’re too good to me.”

“Only because you deserve it.”

Az smiles politely, “Thank you very much, Miss Lilly. It was great to meet you.”

“Of course, sweetie!” Miss Lilly chirps cheerfully, “Make sure to come back in sometime.”

Az nods vigorously, “I will, I promise.”

“Good, now out with you both.” Miss Lilly waves her hands in a shooing motion. “Go enjoy your summer.”

I lean over the counter and press a quick kiss to her cheek. “See you soon.”

“I’m holding you to that!” Miss Lilly calls as I guide Az out.

“That was great.” Az says as we walk up the sidewalk. “Thank you for that, really.”

“No problem.” I nod, “Honor Point can be kind of boring but there are a few good things around here. Penny’s and Miss Lilly are just the start.”

“Care to show me the rest?” Az asks hesitantly.

“I would love to.” I grab Az’s hand and tug him along. “Come on, I know just the place.”

“Oh yeah?” Az laughs, a sound that warms my chest, “And what exactly is this place?”

“It’s a surprise!” I say, a teasing smile curling at my lips. “Don’t ask questions-”

We're barely off Main Street before I hear someone call, "Gray!" I look up, startled, and see my mother standing by the open driver side door of her car.

"Mom?" Horror washes over me and I rip my hand out of Az's grasp. I take a few steps away from the other boy, putting a bit of space between us. I keep my eyes fixed on my mother, afraid to see Az's reaction to the sudden distance.

If my mother had noticed our closeness she isn't showing it. "Good, I found you." Her face was unreadable and it was putting me on edge. "Come on sweetie, let's go home."

"But I was gonna show Az around." Mom looks at Az, taking him in for the first time. Her face pinched, looking completely unimpressed.

"Gray." She says, tone hard and clipped, leaving no room for argument.

"Right, of course, sorry." I turn back to Az, sheepish.

"Rain check?" Az asks hopefully.

"I—" I stop, flinching as my mother yells my name again. I back away from Az. "I'm sorry, I really am." I turn and run to the car.

I barely hear Az say, "Bye, Gray."

I climb into the car and my mother starts heading home. The silence is long and heavily. Finally I speak up, "I thought you had brunch?"

"We finished." She says, her eyes never leaving the road.

"Ah, well how were Az's parents? They seemed really nice. I think me and Az are going to be great friends—" My mother cut my rumbling off with a sharp look.

“Don’t want you to see that boy ever again.” Her tone is icy and demanding, this is a demand not a request. Yet I finding myself questioning it.

“What? Why? Az is really cool, he—”

“His parents told me he’s gay, Gray.” She spits the words out like they’re venomous and my heart stops.

“Oh,” I whisper, suddenly it all makes sense.

“I won’t have you tempted, not again.” I flinch, trying not to think about that party. James and the game of spin the bottle that got out of hand. My life was ruined the moment that boy kissed me.

“That was one mistake,” my voice said small and pathetic to own ears.

“One that I am going to make sure you never repeat.” My mother hisses, “I will not have you turn out like Dean. Do you understand me Gray?” Dean, it’s the first time I’ve heard her say my older brother’s name since she threw him out last year. Since he came out as bisexual. I shiver at the memories.

“Yes, Mother.” I say, looking out the window and trying to banish Az’s brilliant smile from my mind.

Rebecca Gonner

## The Photograph

The unlatching of the door barely catches David's notice from his desk chair across the room. His knuckles strain white as he grips the controller, mashing X in a furious attempt to take down the CPU fighting him as the scantily clad sword hoop wielder Tira. Playing as Maxi—known for his speed and easily combined nunchakus moves—he still couldn't evade Tira's attacks. David pounds his fists, still clenching the remote, as the CGI character again swings her deadly hoop around her disproportional hips to knock down his character, his health bar taking a substantial hit.

“Soul Calibur still?” His roommate Chris dumps his backpack by his desk as he watches David dodge the next attack, finally getting a hit in on Tira and managing a critical attack.

“I don't know why you always play as Maxi, he's totally OP.” Chris's point is proven as David's character swings his nunchakus dramatically, delivering three powerful and unblockable blows to his opponent and sending her flying off the stage.

“K.O.” The deep announcer voice declares David's victory as David quickly taps A to skip Maxi's taunting.

“Who cares if he is more powerful than the other characters? I like playing him and I can win with him, who gives a fuck?” David pushes his blond hair out of his eyes. Normally this length would bother him and he'd have gotten it cut by now, but he can't bring himself to care.

The next battle begins, this time with Maxi paired off against Natsu, a lithe female warrior with two short blades and an acrobatic move set.

“Dude, can you actually look at me for like two seconds, I think we need to talk.”



“Later,” David begins smashing buttons again as soon as the announcer says “fight,” ignoring the cramping in his fingers from holding the controller for so long. He also ignores the twitching in his legs. He’s filled with restless energy since he’s started sitting in his desk chair for hours on end.

“No dude, now.” Chris crosses their small dorm room to David’s gaming set up in the corner, reaches for the remote sitting in front of the TV, and promptly turns it off.

“What the fuck, man?” David finally looks up, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“I feel like asking you the same thing,” Chris throws his arms up in frustration, still holding the TV remote. “What the fuck are you doing? Look, I’m not one to tell people how to live their life, but when was the last time you left the room for a reason other than food? Have you even been going to class? Every time I come in here it’s like you haven’t moved an inch since I left and it’s always you fighting some female Soul Calibur character. Why?”

“Look, I go to class, alright?” David slumps back into his chair and grabs the chain around his neck, fiddling with it absentmindedly as he avoids eye contact with Chris. “I’m not an idiot, I’m not gonna pay thousands of dollars and put myself in debt to fail my classes. Now back off, and give me the remote.”

“David, what happened?” Chris runs a hand through his curly mop of hair in frustration.

“You don’t geek out to me about your comic books anymore, you completely stopped going to the gym, you haven’t even touched your guitar in days.” His arms reach helplessly towards the acoustic guitar propped against the post of David’s lofted bed, in the same dismal position it’s held since David got frustrated with the song he’d been trying to write the other week.

In the whole first year that Chris had roomed with David, he'd constantly grabbed his guitar whenever he needed a break from homework or a distraction from his own head. There was hardly a day that went by that he wasn't plucking at the strings three or four times, whether he was working through a 30 Seconds to Mars song or writing one of his own. David's songs were usually about break ups. Chris had a secret joke with his girlfriend that David was the male Taylor Swift.

David looks over at the abandoned guitar. As he does, his face shifts from closed off and stubborn, slowly melting into quiet despair. He leans his elbows on his knees and drops his head into his hands. His whole body slumps with an exhaustion that seeps down to his bones.

"Chris," David's voice sounds hoarse with emotion, as though the words were getting caught in his throat. "I can't talk about it, ok?"

Chris sighs, the tension leaving his body now that he's finally gotten through David's hard outer shell. He walks toward his desk and grabs his chair, pulling it over next to David's. He plops himself down and checks the time on his watch.

"Look, I gotta be at a rehearsal for Rent in like an hour. Until then, I'm here if there's anything you want to just get off your chest. You can't keep isolating yourself like this, you're gonna have to talk about it eventually."

Silence fills the room for several seconds. Eventually, David huffs out a breath and shifts in his seat. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something small and crumpled, then hands it to Chris without looking at him.

As Chris takes it he realizes it's a folded photograph. He unfolds it to reveal a girl standing next to a rope swing, holding the rope and smiling at the camera. It's very Senior-

picture-esque. Her short brown hair curls and frizzes in a wild mass around her face, and braces shine on her teeth.

Chris looks up at David, still slumped in his chair, green eyes filled with surprise and concern.

“This is the picture that used to sit in the frame on your desk.”

David nods.

“Why do you still have this? I assumed you’d stored it in the box with the rest of her stuff months ago. For Christ’s sake David, it’s been a year.”

“No,” David’s voice cuts out sharply. “It’s been six days. A year ago she broke up with me. Six days ago she blocked my phone number, officially cutting me out of her life.”

Chris shakes his head in disbelief, “I thought you stopped talking to her before the summer. I remember that you video chatted a few times after the break up, but I thought you were done by the spring.”

“We’d meet up whenever we were both home from school, and we texted for a while over the summer. Until she decided to cut me off again.” David’s eyebrows furrow in frustration, he begins to wring his hands together in agitation.

“Oh, man...” Chris looks from David to the crumpled picture in his hand. He’d had no idea that all this time, David still hadn’t moved on.

“Look,” Chris sets the picture aside and tries to catch David’s eye, “you can’t keep being so down on yourself man, you should start working out again and pick up your guitar, might help you feel better.”

“There’s no point. She’s never gonna take me back, she doesn’t even want me in her life anymore.” David sits up straight, finally looking Chris in the eye. His voice raises slightly.

“Getting in shape, writing the songs, it was all for her, man. And now it’s for nothing. She’ll never see the progress I’ve made, she’ll never hear the songs I wrote for her. I can’t stand to look at that stupid guitar.” He stands, cringing slightly from the ache of having his legs bent too long.

When he makes to head for the door, Chris stands and blocks his path.

“It doesn’t have to be for nothing,” Chris reaches and grabs David’s shoulders, as though he could channel hope into his friend through this simple contact. “Maybe you blew it with her, but there are other girls. And honestly man, her loss, ya know? If all this working out and getting healthy has really been for her then she clearly can’t see what’s good for her. Stop doing it for her and start doing it for yourself. You can’t just keep moping and feeling miserable all the time, you deserve to be happy.”

“But I don’t Chris!” David shakes out from under Chris’s grip. “That’s just it. It’s not her loss, she was right to cut me out. I don’t deserve her, I’m not sure I ever did.”

“Bullshit man, you’re a great guy and a great friend.”

“You don’t know what I did to her. I loved her more than I loved anyone, and I still did that to her...” David stays quiet for a few seconds, breathing heavily as though it took a lot out of him to admit this. “I don’t deserve another chance. With anyone.”

“What could *you* have possibly done that was so bad?” Chris takes a step back, now that it seems like David isn’t about to make a break for the door.

Silence settles in the room as David struggles to find a way to let out what’s been writhing inside him. His eyes dart around the room, looking anywhere but Chris.

“Do you remember those skits they made us watch at freshman orientation? About the consequences of drinking underage and different rules in the dorm halls?”

There's a pause as Chris tries to decide if this is David's desperate attempt to change the subject.

"Yeah, I mean I didn't pay much attention cause they were boring, but I remember them."

"There's one that I haven't been able to stop thinking about for months. Two people were playing a couple that had been together for a while. In the skit, one of them wanted to have sex but the other wasn't interested. The one who wanted to tried to convince the other, saying how good it would feel, saying they'd done it in the past, saying how much they wanted it. The other one tried to say no for a while, but eventually gave in. After the skit was done they said that that was a form of sexual abuse." David has grown distant, his eyes unfocused, like he's forgotten Chris is even there. Chris waits for David to explain, giving him time to come back to the present.

Finally, David seems to remember his surroundings. He runs a hand through his hair, his eyes darkening with anger. "I did that to her, Chris. For years. We were together for over three years, and the only complaint she ever had was that I pushed her too much. Not only that but she told me she felt guilty, *guilty*, that she couldn't want me more, that she didn't want to make out all the time like I did. I never pushed her for sex but we did other things...god, I'm glad she never agreed to have sex with me, who knows what I'd have done to her then." David's voice cracks here, as though this is the first time the thought occurred to him. The horror of his past is written across his face. "She told me over and over again how awful I made her feel, and I just kept doing it..."

David collapses into his desk chair, all energy seeped from him after revealing what he's harbored for so long. Chris stands stunned in place; he wasn't sure what he expected when he confronted his roommate earlier, but it wasn't this.

"I don't deserve a relationship...if I'm alone, I can't hurt anyone else the way I did her."

The silence in the room is almost palpable after the whirlwind of emotion that just swept through. Chris works to process all he's just been told as it becomes clear David has no more to say on the matter. David reaches for the T.V. remote Chris had set aside and turns it back on. The sounds of Maxi fighting Natsu pull Chris from his reverie.

Chris glances at his watch and makes a decision. He steps forward and once again takes hold of the T.V. remote. The screen clicks to black.

"Dude, what the fuck?!" David jumps out of his chair, ready to fight Chris for the remote.

Chris quickly reaches the remote behind him so David can't snatch it, "I have to leave for my Rent rehearsal, come with me."

"What, no, why would I—"

"Look man, that was a lot of crazy shit you just told me. And it's awful that it happened. But you realized you were wrong, and clearly you're sorry for it. There's no way you're gonna let it happen again. You were in high school man, you were still just a kid. You know better now. You deserve a second chance—not with her, but with someone new. And the first step to that is getting you out of this room and interacting with people again. C'mon, we could use an extra hand back stage, I know you used to do theater in high school."

David stares at Chris in disbelief, controller hanging limply in his hand.

"Dude, you're making me late, let's go."

After a few seconds, David sets down the controller and grabs his coat. As Chris heads out the door, David turns back into the room. The crumpled picture of the girl lies abandoned next to the T.V. where Chris had dropped it. David crosses to it and picks it up. He thinks of her. The way she looked sitting next to him on the front porch swing, eyes closed and enjoying the breeze through her hair. The way her face turned tomato red when she was embarrassed, which was often. And the last time he'd seen her, the hurt and desperation in her eyes when she'd confronted him, wet trails shining on her skin, not a trace of the smiling face he sees now. He refolds the picture and slips it back into his pocket. Taking a deep breath, he follows Chris out of the dorm.