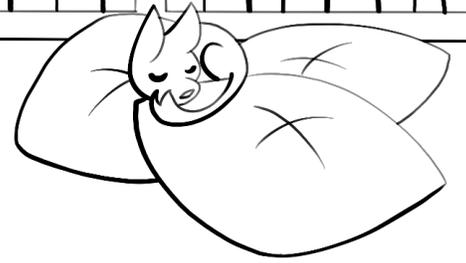


Refined ink



pearland H.S

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by

Refined Ink

Pearland H.S. Writing Club

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Table of Contents

Poems 2

Stories 12

The Builder by Tessa & Maia

They told me,
“Build a tower,”
And so I did.

Brick by brick,
Stone by stone,
Like the robot I am,
Only following directions,
I constructed a tower
For all.

And they came
And they razed it
To the ground.

The fires raged
From their words,
Their beliefs,
Their actions,
Until it was nothing but rubble.

And they left.

Without a word of apology,
Of recompense,
Of help.

And I stood there,
Unable to cry,
Unable to ask, “Why?”
Unable to even deny
This inane, meaningless occurrence.
Stony-faced and cold-hearted
I watched,
For I am nothing but a robot
That does as it is told.

And then,
When the dust cleared,
And the fires were extinguished,
I surveyed my construction.

I resolved myself
To construct a new tower,
A bastion
For myself.

Towers are all I know how to build
But without instructions,

Without direction,
It is meaningless.

A poor foundation,
I tell myself.

Inexperienced supports,
I whisper.

An inept construction,
My appraisal continues.

But it's mine.

A tower
All my own.

And yet,
It's not enough.

It shakes
Under the burden
Of knowledge.

It shudders
Under the encumbrance
Of my own actions.

It crumbles
Under the weight
Of the future.

And still they come.

To my collapsing tower,
A decaying monument
To all I've built.
To all I am.

They come,
With their words,
And their beliefs,
And their actions,
Until it's gone.

Must they do this?

Must this world take away
All that I work for?

I stand there in the sand
The ruins of my own design
And I wonder to myself,
"Why?"

And I ask,
"Can't someone

Anyone
Offer help
Instead of hurt?"

And they stop
And they turn
And they offer me
A lighter.

And I stare
Uncomprehending
Unwilling
To accept
Such a burden.

And so they leave.

And I stand here
Once more
Building a tower.

For I am a tower builder
And that's what I do
And that's all I ever can do
For if I do not create,
I must destroy.

And I refuse to accept such a future.

So as meaningless as it may be,
As many times as my tower may crumble into dust,
I shall remain.
Ever building.
Ever watching.
Ever hoping.

Every Time A Door Closes by Nova Wallace

Every time a door closes,
the same door opens,
and I walk through them like an endless portal,
why does this beginning have no ending?
Can't run
can't hide,
the only place I run is right back to the door that once closed
and has reopened,
I willingly walk through the door, knowing what's on the other side,
once crossing the frame,
only being reminded why it closed. Why can't a new door open,
why is it this door that always opens
If only I was strong enough to close it on my own
And not look back

plastic bottles in plastic bags by eros

katy perry asked me once
if i ever felt like a plastic bag

i like to think
all fellow sorrow-minded people
are like plastic bags
wanting to start again

i like to think
our sadness is like plastic
how others are like the earth
a harmful relationship, some may say

some people want to eradicate us for this purpose
but
we are still human
with no pinch of mental solitude?
we join the cause

to others, the earth
we ask for her plastic bottles
because
the others don't want plastic, right?

so here we stand
plastic bottles in plastic bags
and we look to others, the earth:
she looks cleaner, doesn't she?
we are some other-worldly creature
in comparison to her cleanliness

we are proud
we are the ones that led to her beautiful state!
until we look and reflect upon ourselves
and the truth is...
she's still the same

we never really got rid of the plastic
we just kept it all
nearly overflowing
as we get hung on a branch
of one of her brilliant evergreen trees

and it all comes down
to one realization

if we want to eradicate the plastic
we must eradicate ourselves
so, let the bottles overflow
and hope next time
we will do better again

Fallen Leaves by Meadow

Deep in Melody Meadow
Where the blue birds fly
The sun was high in the crimson, blue sky.

There in the center
Lay two lovely evergreens
Their branches were upmost, strong, and lean.

The evergreens were imperative to the forest's life
Housing strong snouts,
Working day in, day out.

For the evergreen tree
Center of allottee
Was the animals' most prized key.

It was an ordinary day for the critters,
They rose for work and play
Though the sky was cloudy and grey.

It had begun to storm.
The critters thought none of it,
And continued their work without a thought of quit.

Thunder struck

BANG! BANG! BANG!
Then in a flash of white light,
A bolt of lightning hit their evergreens
Sending critters as frightened as they had ever been.

The time was 9:03 am,
A time the critters would remember forever.

The animals scurried, ran, and rumbled
Get out of the trees before they crumble!

The evergreens were on fire,
The animals were dire

Watch Wasps and Rescue Rabbits were on the scene
Get Out! Get Out! Before your burnt clean!

Confusion and chaos broke out at the meadow.
Why, oh why, do this to your fellows?

Have the gods cursed us
with this terrible fuss?
Or was it simply an accident
they did not discuss?

The escape branches were filled
With creatures all skilled

They pounced, prodded, and panted.
Oh, what has happened to our beautiful enchanted?

Watch Wasps and Rescue Rabbits were far to small
To put out a fire just this tall

So, come 10:28
The evergreens fall
Taking out 3,000 critters, tall and small.

Why, oh why, must we be put under this spell
The disgusting degrees done to this cell.

Animals of all shapes and sizes, weep, sob, grieve
In hope that their family may arrive at their knees.

It was truly a sorrowful day for Melody Meadow.
Which did not deserve this dreadful blow.

The surrounding trees were soon caught too.
Crackling and Sobs were all that was heard.
Not a single body stirred.

The critters watched,
As their meadow burned to ash.
All the leaves had fallen, down to trash.

The grieving would never end
From that sorrowful day
Only fallen leaves
Would leave them at bay.

They placed rocks and flowers
Where the trees lay,
And some still cry
To this very day.

The fallen leaves blow
Within the very wind
As a reminder to the world
A hero never wins.

Dancing by Tessa

Dancing.

Like a puppet free from its strings.

Thriving through all that impedes.

Effortlessly,

I move.

Dancing.

The freedom

to leap,

to soar,

to dream.

The feeling

of happiness,

of excitement,

of hope.

The energy

to fly,

to celebrate,

to perform.

Dancing.

Merely a puppet on strings.

Devoid of life, following the past.

Hopelessly,

I continue.

Ghost by Rare

Dying was not what Jayden had in mind. She was a tired high school student with a coffee addiction. She should have known, really, that her drink was poisoned. It was plausible, with how many people that seemed to despise her these days. But really, could you blame her for being, quote, unquote, “rude?” No, you couldn’t, because everyone in her life was an apparent idiot.

She kicked her body with the tip of her shoe, watching the lifeless thing twitch. So, not dead yet. Why was she here if she was not dead? The cafeteria had gone completely silent upon her rather embarrassing display of sputtering and choking on what was probably poison. Jayden hoped to never experience it again. 0/10. Would not recommend.

The fact she wasn’t technically dead yet probably should have bothered her; actually, this whole “death” thing should’ve. For now, she stood, pale and transparent, right above her still form. The ambulance arrived with a grieving wail, and Jayden found she couldn’t be bothered. Was there a way to get coffee in the afterlife? One that wasn’t poison. Her eyes narrowed on the cup that had caused this whole mess, a faint purple fog of steam wafting out of the brown of her drink. *Deadly*, her mind read a little belatedly.

She wandered over, stepping over the crowd of concerned and screaming students. Would it matter if she bumped into one of them? She had made contact with her own body, after all. But at the same time, she was dead. A ghost. The thing standing in the corner of your room at a**-o-clock in the morning. She stared at the cup, not only seeing the purple fog, but smelling it as well. The familiar coffee smell was drowned out by an acrid tang of...oranges? Mixed with lemons and fish. Not pleasant at all, is what she was saying. She scrunched up her face, and only then did she spot the shiny orange glowing in the top right of her vision. Looking up, she saw a raccoon. Why a raccoon of all things was in a school was beyond her. The raccoon stared right at her, a little gray thing with vibrant orange stripes.

The world had taken on a gray tint ever since she died, and it only seemed to worsen. But it also made things stand out, like her cup of coffee oozing that disgusting purple odor. The raccoon chattered lightly before fleeing. Jayden had the brief impression that it was going to fall right before it did, plummeting to the ground. Luckily, everyone was too busy mourning her dead body, that was currently being transported into an ambulance, to be hit by the flying raccoon. The poor thing hit the floor with a sickening crunch, leaving the ghost girl to just gawk at it in horror. That was horrifying, traumatizing, something she would never be able to unsee. The orange glow seeped out and disappeared.

A little furry head popped out of the raccoon’s body, transparent in its nature. Jayden squatted down beside it, finding she could lift the ghost gently into her arms. “Guess it’s just you and me now, huh?” She asked, shaking off her trauma. This was fine. The creature nestled in her arms stared at her with beady little eyes, recovering from the trauma it just went through. “Let’s get out of

here. Before everyone starts making me depressed.” Another wail sliced through the room, cutting at Jayden’s heart. She turned to see her best friend, Alex, absolutely losing their cool.

Jayden swung her head away, grip on the raccoon tightening. It squirmed in her grasp before getting comfortable. Jayden focused her attention on it, if only to block out the sounds of her death. Why had she decided to drink coffee today?

Exiting the school, she headed immediately to the forest. The raccoon started to squirm again, wriggling right out of her grasp and diving to the floor. It raced towards the trees. Jayden wished she had its energy. She followed after, weaving through tree trunks and ducking under leaves. It was a miracle that she knew where the raccoon was; otherwise, she would have already lost it. A branch snagged at her clothes, tearing through the fabric. She startled, whipping around and grabbing the branch to tear it away from her uniform. She’d rather not continue through the woods completely nude, thank you very much.

The raccoon stared giddily at her from an overhanging branch. Its paws were planted over its mouth, tail quivering with delight. “Oh yeah, you’re just enjoying yourself, aren’t you?” She scoffed, tugging on her coat. It let out an echoing noise, sounding suspiciously like laughter. The raccoon then began back on its journey, glancing at her briefly to make sure she was following.

The forest opened to a lake. A creature stood in the shadows on the far side of the water, silver eyes landing right onto her. She felt almost alive again, heart thundering in her chest, rabid and scared. The raccoon began to fade, giving Jayden a sense of dread. First, she died. Then, she followed a raccoon ghost into the woods. Now, her new friend was gone, leaving her with the boogiemán. Or whatever it was.

The newly dubbed boogiemán slunk out of the cover of trees, revealing a woman with the bottom half of a horse. *Could this day get any crazier?* She thought in awe as the woman-creature gracefully made her way over. A name flooded into Jayden’s head, *Life*, where it came from, she was unsure, but she knew it belonged to the beautiful creature.

“Hello, Jayden.” Life spoke gently, her smooth voice ringing across the leaves. “Don’t worry about your little friend. He’s moved on.” She towered over Jayden; a complete skyscraper compared to her measly little body. She moved away some bracken, revealing a small family of raccoons. A fuzzy little shape suckled at the mother’s belly. She put the bracken back and turned to the smaller girl.

Will I be like that? Start a new life? Jayden pondered briefly; did she want that? Uneasiness settled, there was still so much she wanted to do. Like throw one of those parties you see in movies, the ones where hundreds of teenagers somehow manage to fit into one single house and body slam each-other into furniture. Life chuckled, shaking her head as though reading her mind. “You will not be like that, dear Jayden. You have an entirely different path as a Guardian.”

“A Guardian?” like protecting people?

“Yes, Jayden, answer me, are you dead?”

Jayden blanched, because well, yes. She was, in fact, dead. Or at least she thought so. She was transparent, and as far as biology class has taught her, humans aren't supposed to do that. "Are you?" she shot back instinctively. Life laughed heartedly at that, shaking her head in amusement that really wasn't called for, in Jayden's humble opinion.

"You aren't dead." Life told her softly. Jayden gave her an incredulous look. Was Life blind or something? "You're in an in-between, and if you want, you have a chance to live again. You have a unique gift, only given to the most selfless of souls."

Yeah, ok, this lady was definitely crazy in some capacity. Jayden wasn't selfless. She was a coffee-addicted, selfish, risk-taking teenager that would rather save herself than anyone else. Where did Life get that she was 'selfless'? Jayden raised a brow in disbelief. Life just ignored it.

"OK, so then how do I live again?" She asked skeptically, convinced the other was handing her a load of bull. It was simple. Jayden had lived; then she died. She wasn't supposed to 'get to live again,' 'half-dead'. Was she a zombie?

"You'll figure it out." Life said like the b**** she was. Jayden scoffed. Alright, very helpful. "You have around a week to return to your body. I hope you use the time wisely."

Jayden resisted the urge to flip her off, instead turning around and walking away. This felt like too much for her, honestly. Not paid enough to deal with it all. Actually, was she getting paid? But with like... life? If she didn't complete this, she would never be able to talk to her family and friends. And wasn't that ominous. Wait, didn't Oscar have a Ouija board? Jayden had never believed in that stuff, but now she found herself quite swayed.

She walked back in the direction of her campus. Life said she had a week. What happened after that? Not to mention she was a supposed guardian. Like a guardian angel? Would she get wings? All questions that needed to be answered. Upon arriving at the campus, Jayden noticed Alex sitting on a bench yelling into their phone. She walked over, curiosity blooming.

Alex had never had much of a home-life. Usually, they and Jayden had sleepovers at Oscar's place. Oscar's parents were cool with the whole ordeal, as long as they behaved themselves and didn't break anything.

A shattering noise startled the ghost; she turned to see that Alex had thrown their phone straight into the wall. They cursed and picked the thing up, checking it over. "Dumb thing," mumbled Alex, "What was she thinking?" They brought their hands up to tug at their hair. "Come on Jayden, why'd this have to happen? Why today?"

"I'm still here," Jayden murmured, her heart tugging her forward. Her words fell on deaf ears; she was alone in this afterlife. Would she always be lonely if she didn't make it to her body in time? She wanted to hug Alex, but she did not. She sighed shakily, unable to watch for much longer. This would destroy her otherwise. She would never have imagined that she'd be present for her own funeral. She trudged away, not turning back.

The school seemed a lot more daunting now, towering over in threat. Who had killed her?

Anger bubbled. She was dead, and it had been planned. Clenching her fists, she turned away. Every step seemed to burn, leaving imprints in the ground for only the dead to see. What had she done to deserve this!? Sure, she'd done some pretty cruel things, but she was *15!* She was bound to make mistakes! She took a breath. She wasn't usually angered so easily. Maybe being dead was getting to her more than she thought. ~~*Or maybe it was because of Alex's reaction.*~~

She rounded the corner and stopped in her tracks, taking in a surprised breath. She'd walked herself right to Oscar's house, completely unaware! Could she bear to see his reaction right now? Alex's reaction had messed with her head. She didn't get much of a choice as the door creaked open, and Oscar stood. "Oh, Hey Jayden!"

That wasn't right. Jayden was dead, but Oscar was looking right at her, which shouldn't be possible because the boy was, well, blind. A dawning sense of horror overtook his face. "Oh, you're dead."

"Really? I couldn't tell," she snapped. Oscar surged forwards, raising his hands with eyes wide as saucers.

"Follow me!" He breathed, turning around and racing back into the house. Jayden stood there, dumbfounded. It took a moment for the cogs in her head to turn before she was following in after him. The house had a welcoming aroma, seeming to calm her nerves. A few objects glowed with an assortment of colors, not unlike the poison and raccoon. They traveled upstairs, a few of the floorboards giving ominous creaks under her own feet. They did not react when Oscar had walked on them. Jeez, what had she gotten herself into?

They eventually entered Oscar's room, a messy place that the blind boy navigated with practiced ease. It was unnerving, Jayden didn't think she'd ever seen Oscar more sure of himself. Every action he took held a breath of confidence, a knowledge that Jayden didn't think she'd ever understand. He wasn't acting like Alex, who'd been so distraught upon her death. Oscar looked like he always had, not seeming to mind the fact that Jayden was dead. *Didn't it bother him?* "Do you even care?" She asked quietly, burning a hole into the back of her friend's head.

Said friend turned around. "About what?" he asked, a little confused. Something inside Jayden snapped.

"I'm dead, idiot! A ghost! I shouldn't even be here, but I am, and you can see me, but you shouldn't be able to-"

"I do care!" He squawked in response, having been completely caught off guard. "I guess..." He looked away, thoughtfully. "Death is different for me, I guess. I can't really see you as much as I feel you, Jayden. Plus, it's not like your dead, dead, being a guardian and all.

Not this stuff again. "What does that even mean!?" Frustration flickered in the corners of her stomach. Why did everything coming out of someone's mouth have to make no sense at all? What was she missing?

Oscar's brows furrowed. "Did Life not tell you?"

“No, she did.” Jayden waved away his worry bringing up a hand to rub at her temples. A headache was starting to form. She was dead. She shouldn’t even be experiencing pain! Right? “She was just... wasn’t very clear.”

Oscar relaxed, nodding once. “I see. Well, the poison didn’t kill you, your body is stuck in a coma. Since you’re a guardian, the only way to return to your body is to save people.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

Oscar shrugged. “You’ll figure it out. I’m not exactly qualified to tell you. And before you ask, no. There is no other person who is. This is something you must figure out on your own. The only other thing I can help you with is to tell you that you can interact with the physical world.” He shrugged and turned away, rummaging through a bookcase, when suddenly Jayden’s eyes were illuminated by an orange light. *Like the raccoon.*

Horror swept over her as she looked up and saw the once dusty brown ceiling now swimming with yellow color. It worsened when it collapsed.

Dear Sophia by Blurryface

Dear Sophia,

The memory of that day is still vivid in my head; I remember it like it was yesterday. December 28th, 2020 seemed like a good day when it started. I went to get my blood drawn and was so excited to call you so we could be on the phone for hours, just like always.

And then out of the blue came your message. It started with just a “hey,” so I did not suspect that this conversation would be so memorable. I responded, and then you said the words that have always brought horrible news in my life, “I need to talk to you about something.”

My heart sank. I started to think of all the possible things I might have done but decided to be positive because the fact that you said that did not mean anything bad. Or so I thought. Then you dropped the bomb. “I don’t think we should be friends anymore.” I started feeling the tears, slowly falling down my cheek. I tried to find out what I did wrong, you wouldn’t tell me. That was the end.

I guess it was all just a lie. “I love you.” “No matter what happens I will always love you.” Lies, lies, lies. Was any of it true? Did you mean any of the things you said? Or were those lies too? You know what the worst part is? I still don’t know what I did wrong. Thanks to you, I can’t trust myself to be me around others because I think I’m too annoying and they’ll get sick of me after a bit. You made me lose all kinds of trust I had placed in others.

After that day, I cried a lot. I wouldn’t talk to anyone, and nothing made me feel better. Let me be honest with you. I have other friends now, and they have slowly helped me heal, and I will forever be thankful to them for that for that, but I still cry about you at times. Even after I realized how much of a bad person you are, I still miss what we had, calling every night, daily checkups... I miss us. I just graduated and thought that writing to you would help me finally close this chapter of my life. So goodbye forever, Sophia.

Sincerely,

Joy

Human Nature by Sophie Adams

Drowning in grayscale and swimming in slow motion, I sink into apathy and anticipate how much the floor of the ocean will hurt me when my back reaches it, still not caring enough to land on my feet. And it wasn't like I jumped in here on my own accord. No, someone thought it'd be funny to push me in and tell me I ended up here myself, tell me that hell was something I conjured up so that I could be miserable for fun rather than a cruel punishment brought upon me by a liar. That someone keeps calling to me, saying sugary words every time I climb up, stomping on my fingers each time the shore is within reach. By now, escape is elusive. I just want a breath or two—for a moment, please? Perhaps?

I gasp.

I'm gun-shy. I wish I didn't care enough to keep trying, crying, getting smacked down like a dolphin peeking its head above the surface. I wish I didn't care enough to let it hurt each time; I wish I didn't forget what was important to me with the rays of the sun obscured from my vision for so long that I can't remember what color they are at each time of day. There's this crippling sense of isolation that I cannot assuage when all I want is to keep from going belly-up. The parting waves and schools of fish that leave behind whale bones shall remain the least of my worries.

The furthest from space I'll ever wind up, I vaguely wonder how freeing a sense of zero-gravity would be—if I could rise by myself without limits and soar to the sky and the moon and beyond. I tell myself the idealistic flame that counters morbid realism shall be staunch as the water chills me to the bone and leaves me with a hint of anguish—more so than anything I've experienced in a while—and makes me believe that failure is not as close as it seems.

Unlike the first time I fell into this familiar façade, I find that I have some desire to resist and not revel in the sweet pain that once made me delirious. Burning fight provides me with the impetus to swim up again and again and again... the surface coming into view in the photic zone rather than the trenches... getting closer, I think... spiraling thoughts now opaque...

(Hm, why do I worry so much about trivialities and people who want to tie coal to my feet?

Maybe...

If...

I...)

...With a sharp inhale, alas, I find my fingers so numb that I find my way out despite the distant yelling of that someone, dragging myself out with the expectation that nothing has changed in this metaphysical absence. Someone new shouts, "It'll hurt in the morning." I'm just glad I'll see the morning come, really.

With the ticking clock beside the lighthouse and the slow drag of its glow across the water, something of a pretty, present bow to make the loose, unsightly ends feel a little better. I can't help

but wonder where exactly I strayed from the coast in the first place. I focused so much on finding a safe harbor that, when I open my eyes once more, the imperfect field before me has given way to a desert with an oasis; that is to say, I realize my mistake was in shutting down rather than opening up, and the closed floodgates give way to drought and destruction that was entirely preventable—assuming I had never quite cracked open, which made me peculiarly lucky.

Simply put, the enormity of another passing year crashes down like a tsunami, and although I've always wanted to make up for lost time, it seems to slip further away in this gyre where I'm spinning and spinning and spinning until I'm stuck in some place of former nightmares with the inability to leave a newfound basin of quicksand. Outside the water, the time when I was surrounded by people was the loneliest, yet the time when I'm surrounded by the least feels homely. And there's that *spinning* feeling from the turbulence as I hit rock bottom and try to scale up, and when I reach the top, it is nothing like what I desired and everything I've ever wanted all at once. I want the bouquet and not the field of flowers; I want the mountain without ever having tried to scale it because I've conquered the hill. It's hypocritical, I know. I know better than anyone else that my actions and words are so fickle that even the oscillation of a heart monitor by someone's death bed is more predictable. I have the rocks beside me without the butterflies. The people who I love and want stay, but those who have caught my interest in more fleeting ways have slipped from the net. I rest in the midst of it all while on my knees, the grains of sand burning and becoming nuisances.

In this small, sanitized world I accidentally created—not even slightly of my own volition this time—I have wrought havoc upon this little ecosystem I had and thrown it off balance. Here I am, unsure of what to do with this sand and soil around me despite endless possibilities and no way to bring them to fruition. I am content yet selfish, and I long to grow something else within this expanse without losing what I already have. No pain, no gain, as the saying goes, but I wish to sever the two from each other.

Come a few weeks, I'll know that wishes always backfire. Ideally, one would want benefits without suffering, but there's always some sadist in the corner or off to the side who desires otherwise. The lost, lacking time will catch up and expire, thrown out with whatever else I've wasted, and the last chance is incorporeal and ghastly, haunting. It will dissipate as if it were never there.

What I mean to say is, if perhaps I had cared a little more in the first place, I wouldn't have to worry myself between dusk and dawn on the savanna now. Regret. Isn't that the most novel of clichés?

Will I—or anyone else—ever learn better? Will anyone ever learn to juggle whatever good is thrown to them rather than mistakenly dodge it? Is this a curable affliction, and can one hope to find a panacea?

(No... For all their touting from the meadows and mountains, the hero or heroine still fails to defy human nature as much as they want to be deified...)

Salem by Anonymous

April 1957

Arriving at the gate of the carnival, I reckoned Salem was excited. She was very jittery and smiley; gosh, she was adorable. Her face could light up the whole room. We met in our freshman math class, and it was basically love at first sight. Our one-year anniversary had to be special, right? It was either here or the Passion Pit, but it was playing 12 Angry Men, and I assumed she wasn't a big fan of the flick, considering she wanted to come here. The sounds of people tearing it up the parking lot faded as the music got louder. The sounds of Elvis and ankle-biters having hissy fits made for an interesting environment.

"Hey, hot mama!" a grease hollered at my girl. She ignored him.

"What a bird dog," I muttered.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Let's go," I said as I smiled at her, admiring her porcelain face lit up by the neon surroundings. She really was a dolly. Holding my hand, she guided me through the crowd towards the games. There were rows and rows of impossible games with prizes that were bigger than all the curtain climbers that were there. She was eager to try all of them.

We started off at ring toss. Even though the rings were too small to even fit around the bottle rim, we still tried. Unsurprisingly, neither of us could get it right. The bottles taunted me as we walked away from the game. Regardless, Salem was still bright eyed, wandering around like a kid in a candy store.

Next up was the balloon darts game. Not to brag, but I was always boss at this game. I let my girlfriend go up first. The dart in her hand looked dull, and she obviously didn't know how to throw it right. It was cute watching her try, though. She hit a balloon on her second try. I clapped for her.

"Good job, baby!" I congratulated her.

"See? I told you I could hit one!" She giggled.

"Hey, I never said you couldn't!" I said in a joking manner.

She handed me a dart and challenged me to play. I accepted and took it from her hand. I hit a balloon, and it ricocheted to the others, causing four or five others to pop. The worker behind the counter looked shocked. He handed me the biggest prize in the game. Salem looked up at me with a surprised expression.

"How?" she asked.

"Don't question the master," I said smugly. She laughed as I handed her the teddy bear. She was grinning from ear to ear while hugging it.

“Thank you!” She exclaimed. I blushed as she kissed me on the cheek.

“So, what do you want to do now?” she peered at me with her large yet curious eyes. I eyeballed the surroundings.

“I don’t know. Do you want to just walk around?”

“Sounds like a plan!” she said cheerfully. I grabbed her hand as we walked down the dirt pathways. The soft sound of footsteps was audible as we drew away from the big crowd.

“Hey! What’s buzzin’, cuzzin’?” I heard my friend Jonas calling to me. He had a slight slouch as he walked towards us. I waved to him.

“Hey, friend, how are you?” I said to him while extending my hand for him to shake. He grasped it firmly.

“Oh, I see you’re on a date,” he said while glancing at Salem.

“Yes, actually. It’s our one-year anniversary!” I said happily.

“Ooo, how exciting! I’m just here watching the kid. Either of y’all want a weed?”

“Oh, no thanks, Jonas,” she butted in. “We don’t smoke.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Hey, I gotta bounce, but I’ll catch up with y’all later!” He ran back towards the direction he came from.

“Sorry about that,” I remarked awkwardly as I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Oh, it’s okay. I like your friends.” I nodded back at her as we continued walking.

“Good to know,” I muttered. As we were walking, my love caught sight of the food stands. She tugged at my hand to lead me towards the funnel cake vendor.

“Please,” she begged with her puppy dog eyes.

“Of course!” I replied as we went up to the shop. She walked ahead of me to order.

“Can I have one funnel cake and two cokes, please?” she asked.

“Sure, that’ll be \$1.00.”

I pulled the money out of my wallet and handed it to the man while he handed my date the order. I put my arm around her as we walked to a vacant bench. We watched the sunset as we ate our food and drank coke. The sky was painted a vibrant orange with hints of pinks and yellows.

“The sunset is so pretty!” Salem exclaimed.

“Not as pretty as you,” I replied as nonchalantly as I could.

“You’re too kind,” she said cutely. Gosh, she was adorable. As the sun went down, it got significantly colder. I could see her shivering. Being a man of chivalry, I handed her my jacket. She took it and draped it over her shoulders as she put her head on my shoulder.

“It’s getting late. Want to do one last thing before we go to my house to sleep?”

“Yeah! Can we go on the Ferris wheel?”

“Of course! What could go wrong?” We got up and started walking.

As we got to the destination, we noticed nobody was there. Perfect! We climbed into the cars, opposite each other and waited for the ride to start.

“This is such a ball!” she exclaimed. I smiled at her. She was so cute when she got excited. I adored the way she sat wearing my letterman. Her auburn hair shone as well as her green eyes. She was so sweet that I wondered why she'd be with a guy like me. She was way out of my league. She was destined for prom queen!

The car we were in jolted back, then started rotating. Salem seemed a bit startled at first, but quickly overcame it as we both looked over the railings at the antsville below. I was so nervous around her that I never knew what to say. She always told me she was on the hook, and I always got flustered when she said it. I was as well, but she was my first girlfriend, so I didn't really know how to act. She was a paper shaker, and I was a goof.

“Vincent?” she called out to me. I turned to face her.

“Yes, doll?”

“Have you noticed no one else is on the wheel?” Confused by her question, I looked over the railing. There were people on every other ride, but this one was vacant.

“That's... odd,” I commented. She looked anxious. I kept looking into the crowd to see if anyone noticed we were up here. One big daddy did and ran up to the ride. He was frantic, making me instantly feel worried.

“Everything okay down there?” I called below. He looked up and yelled something I couldn't make out.

“What?” I screamed again, but he ignored me. I looked over to Salem, who was shaking.

“What's wrong, hun?”

“What's that man doing down there?”

“I think something may be wrong with the ride,” I guessed. I really had no clue what was happening. I tried to hide my anxiety, but she could most likely tell.

Suddenly, all the lights on the ride shut off. She gasped and moved over to sit next to me. I put my arm around her as an attempt to calm her nerves. The ride jerked again and then came to a full stop. She screamed and jumped closer to me. I wrapped both my arms around her. I was just petting her hair because I didn't know what to do. I tried to look around, but everything was basically pitch black.

A sudden eruption of light blew up the sky. I could tell it was coming from the ride. My eyes widened with fear as I had a eureka of what was going to happen. I don't know how I knew, but I knew we weren't making it out alive. I held her tighter. Tears were pouring down both of our faces.

A hard drop made us both scream. The car was rocking, and we were falling. The wall we were up against took a dip, and Salem and I fell backwards. I watched almost in slow motion as we plummeted to the ground. I saw the look of terror on Salem's face as she realized what was happening.

“I love you!” I called to her.

“I love -” A pain went through my body, and everything went dark.

The Scariest Thing by Jackson Caballero

This is one of the scariest things that has happened to me. A couple years ago, I was at summer camp with some of my friends. Their names were Michael, Jackson, and Joshua. One night while we were at camp, we played a really elaborate game of hide-and-seek with the entire camp. I'll try to briefly explain the rules. Basically, some of the camp counselors would get on ATVs and try to find you. Only, you were with your entire cabin group and your cabin counselors, and the only lights you had were the flashlights that you brought with you.

Anyway, we were on our way to a hiding spot when one of the ATVs started coming down the road we were on. We all scrambled to hide as the ATV drove past us. We checked to see if we were clear, and then headed to an empty cabin. As our counselors were counting heads they noticed that Michael was missing. As Michael's friend, I started to get nervous. I couldn't imagine him getting hurt, even though he wasn't the brightest one in our friend group. My friends Jackson and Joshua looked at me in fear. Suddenly, we heard rustling in the bushes near the cabin. We all ducked into hiding, as Michael walked out of the bushes. My friends were relieved he was okay, and so were the counselors. The counselors asked what happened to him, and what he said still haunts me to this day. He said he was hiding, and when he saw us leaving, something gently grabbed his shoulder. He turned around and saw a man dressed in black wearing a mask. He stifled the urge to scream and ran until he found us. I was terrified, especially since we had to stay there at camp for another two days. After the game, we all went back to our cabins, but I wish the story ended there.

I was asleep in the bottom bunk of our bed when I suddenly woke up. I checked my watch. It was three in the morning. "That's odd," I thought. I had never woken up that early at camp. "Maybe I heard something," I thought to myself. The bunk I was sleeping in was near the window. "Maybe something was making noise outside?" I wondered. Then I heard it. Tapping. Deliberate tapping on the window. I sat up in shock. I almost couldn't bring myself to look out the window. When I finally did, I screamed. There was a man, dressed in black, wearing a mask. The rest of the cabin started to wake, and a couple other people in the cabin screamed too when they saw the man. The counselors woke up, but the man was gone. The camp staff emailed everyone's parents to come and get their kids in the morning. When my mom picked me up, it was one of the happiest times of my life. I have never gone back to that camp.

Praeditus by Syche

The brutal cold of the open Atlantic tore away at his skin, the harsh wind slapping at him like an abusive father doped up on booze. It was a stark difference from the place he had left behind. The shoddily maintained county jail in Fredericksburg had been defunded, and everyone inside of it had to suffer weeks on end of no air conditioning. Right about now, temperatures were at an all-time high and had practically cooked anyone alive who couldn't afford the luxury of cool air.

Of course, that included him. He had been admitted to the county jail for five counts of grand theft auto, three counts of property damage, a count of both public intoxication and public indecency. He had been placed there for the time being until he was able to be shipped out to a proper prison. He had rotted in that insufferable brick building for two whole weeks before he had been informed by the sheriff he had people coming to pick him up to transfer to a different building. It was odd; though he didn't think they would transfer him to such a remote location for such a minor crime. In fact, he didn't even know where he was going.

He had been on a boat for at least two and a half days, confined to the deck of the ship with minimal food to eat. The best they provided was a stale steak with some of the driest mashed potatoes known to man. For most of the trip though, it had just been MRE packages hardly prepared with love for him. All he had to look forward to was the endless expanse of blue water in front of him. Time was only signified by the sun rising and setting, as they didn't indulge him in any activities or let him into the bowels of the ship where most of the crew was staying.

The third day was drawing to a close with a black night enveloping the sky above him when he saw a light off in the distance. After a few more minutes, he saw that light was actually due to a lighthouse blaring a bright spotlight over the empty ocean around it. Some more minutes passed, and he was finally able to see what he assumed his destination to be.

What awaited him was a large island, but not much greenery could be seen as it looked to be infested by a concrete jungle of buildings akin to that of a city. He was expecting an offshore prison, but this looked like a place where people actually lived. He heard a bit of commotion coming from the guards, but he only managed to hear a tidbit of their conversation.

“Hold on, this isn't like the picture of the island.”

“Yeah, did we go off course?”

“The GPS doesn't look like it's wrong? Maybe we should just dock. We're nearly out of supplies anyways.”

And with that, the boat made way for the strange island they had found themselves on, and he just went along with it. There wasn't much he could do anyway; the handcuffs hadn't gotten any more loose over the 70 hours they had been traveling. So, he just waited until anything happened. Of course, that was when he heard the boat crew hit the floor.

CHAPTER 1 - The Good Ol' Days

He heard it before he saw it. Three loud slams against the floor made his eyes shoot open. He had decided that if they were just gonna go make a supply run, he might as well take a nap while he could. It was hard enough to get sleep on the ocean, so he tried anytime to get some hours in. He didn't know what the prison he was getting sent to would say about sleep anyway. He looked over to see where the sound came from, only to see the two guards and the ship's captain slumped onto the floor with small darts imprinted into their skulls.

His hands were cuffed, but he shuffled around the floor where he was sitting to try and get a better look at what was happening. The boat was barely ten feet offshore, and over the railing he noticed two figures, both covered by cloaks but wielding very noticeable blowguns which he concluded had been what knocked the guards out. He pressed himself up against the side of the boat, trying to hide himself from these people. They were obviously the ones who had taken down the guards, and he didn't wanna risk getting seen by them.

However, it looked like he wasn't going to be so lucky. One of the cloaked figures jumped onto the ship and lowered down the ramp for the other figure still on the shore. Their gaze swept around the ship, like they were looking for something. He tried to hide, but they saw him eventually. It wasn't exactly easy to hide on an open transport vessel. They made eye contact; however, under the hood of their cloak they were wearing a mask, making the only thing he could see their eyes. When they did find him, one of them made a hand motion for the other. The other pulled out a sheet of paper from the cloak and looked at it for a few seconds, switching his gaze back between it and him. "Yeah, that's him. Glad you didn't put the cargo down under this time. Maybe you're actually half decent with this thing after all."

He was still incredibly confused at what was happening and didn't break his position. He knew being backed up against the wall wasn't exactly good for possible escape, but at this point he wasn't sure if that was even an option. He wasn't sure if he could even take them in a fight as he'd been cooped up in that jail for weeks, and during his time there, he hadn't thought about keeping in shape. Along with that, he couldn't get a good grasp on their potential to hold up a fight as their cloaks covered their whole body.

"Oh man, that was an honest mistake. Don't you hold that over my head for it happening once." The first cloaked figure spoke up in a rebuttal to what his partner said before facing him once more, holding their gaze there for a moment before speaking up again. "Well, Marshall Fry, bet you're wondering exactly what's going on. Don't worry your little behind all too much. We're just getting the pleasantries through with." The man speaking lifted up the hood on his cloak and pulled off the full head mask he was wearing, revealing a pale, white face along with pure, white hair. He outstretched his hand, making a motion for a handshake. "The name's Adam, welcome to the rest of your life!"

Marshall hesitantly shook Adam's hand; however, he remained slumped against the side of the boat. He couldn't make heads or tails about what was happening right now, but the rest of his life? What exactly was going on? It looked like Adam could see the confusion on Marshall's face, so he spoke up again. While he talked, Marshall noticed the other person that Adam came there with placing his hand over the heads of the slumped over ship crew, but his attention was torn back to Adam when he coughed loudly, making it clear he noticed Marshall wasn't paying attention.

"Hey, anybody home? Knock, Knock, Fry, I'm telling you some important stuff here, so you better listen up, alright?" Marshall turned his attention swiftly back to the white-haired man in front of him, and once Marshall's focus was back on him, Adam smiled. "Alright! So, guess I'm gonna have to start at the beginning again since you decided to look over at Ol' Al instead of the important info I was detailing to ya!" Adam rolled his eyes before sitting down with Marshall, on his eye level now since Marshall hadn't stood up yet. "I get it. You're scared. Two random people just showed up, and I'm monologuing right to your face. But! Trust me, we don't wish you any harm! In fact, you were chosen to come here!" Adam whistled over at "Al" and when he got his attention, he asked for the sheet Al had produced earlier. He took the sheet and stole a glance at it before looking back to Marshall.

"Now, it wasn't my choice personally. I'm not in charge of who comes over here. So, I don't know much about you except for what's in this sheet, y'see. Here it says you've got quite the track record; enough to put you behind bars for around half your life. Now that's all well and good, so lemme broadcast what's gonna happen with your life now. Fifty years in the pin does something to ya. It crushes down your soul, and if ya don't get out of it early, your life is destroyed when you come back." He motioned with his hands as he talked, and Marshall noted that this guy seemed to ramble a lot. His accent was vaguely American, though it was tough to pinpoint where exactly it came from.

"Now, interject us. If it weren't for us two, you would be rotting away in some old dusty jail cell by now." Marshall had to pause here; Adam had said so much in such little time, but he still couldn't wrap his head around it.

"And you've done what exactly? Killed three people and stole me from the place I was legally obligated to go? It's only a matter of time before the cops find out about this, so I've got no clue what you're rattling on about "saving me" from my fate. In fact, you've probably just made it worse."

Al noticed the conversation between the two and walked over from where they had been tending to the people on the floor. They whispered something in Adam's ear, and Marshall could just barely make out the words, "I'll take it from here." Adam got up and Al replaced his space, sitting down and uncloaking like Adam had before. Marshall could now see the face of Al; he was notably older than Adam, and his skin was lined with scratches. The most notable feature was a large scar across his cheek which had turned white from age. When he spoke, his voice was much more gravelly, and Marshall could practically smell smoke from the vocals.

"I'm sorry this idiot told you so much yet so little, he's got the spirit but he lets himself get on

tangents too much. I'll put this short and sweet so you know exactly what's going on as I can see you're confused." Marshall exhaled and gave Al a nod of thanks. It was true he was feeling incredibly lost and didn't know what the hell was happening. "My name is Algor, and currently you're somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. As Adam already established, this obviously is not the prison you were expecting to get transported to. Also, crew aren't dead. They're currently just knocked unconscious. They'll be awake and fine in a few hours. Now, for the important part."

He sighed, coughing a little between phrases. "With your rapt sheet, you would've already spent the rest of your life in prison. If you were an absolute model citizen, you would've got out when you're about sixty, but I doubt you'd be perfect enough over four decades to warrant an early release. Plus, all of your family has cut ties with you, and you were left on the streets to die by everyone who you knew." Marshall knew that everything he was saying was true, but it didn't help hearing it out in front of him so blatantly like this.

At the time of his crimes, Marshall had been living in the streets after being laid off by his employer, thus not being able to afford rent for his apartment. His landlord evicted him without a second thought as Marshall was already bad about paying rent on time; he had been kicked out to suffer in the immense heat of the day with no roof over his head. He had to resort to begging and getting food from a homeless shelter. However, Marshall's tie to the drink only got stronger as he delved into poverty, and he would frequent a nearby bar when he felt he had money to spare.

At the bar, he was harassed by a group of prissy rich kids, going into the bar underage to try and get some booze for themselves. Marshall was one of a few people who told them to get out; however, these kids were used to throwing their money around and with a couple of bills, they managed to shut up everyone in the bar. Marshall was tempted to just let it fly, but it kept nagging at him at just how the kids believed "money was no object," and how he had been forced into poverty while these narcissistic a-holes got to have everything they ever wanted. After a few beers and a drunk conscience taking over, he walked back into the garage and found the cars they drove over there in. He popped open the trunks of the five cars and hotwired each one of them, letting the engines run and... you see where this is going. The five cars crashed against the wall they were parked beside, and that got the attention of the local police force, which came to arrest the man. They had him sit in county jail for around a week until his court case finished.

From there, Marshall had been notified he was transferring prisons, but he hadn't been told where he was going, which has led to his current situation right now. Algor continued talking, snapping Marshall out of his self-reflective thoughts. "Of course, this isn't the prison you were expecting to be transferred to. As I mentioned, you're in the middle of the Atlantic, as this place is supposed to be the Long-Term Sentenced Correctional Facility. However, practically nobody here knows it by that name. You've not been brought to a prison, Marshall. You've been brought to the next phase of your life."

Marshall's gaze at this point was even more confused than before as Algor was being

incredibly vague. Al picked up on that. “I can see you’re still trying to figure everything out, so I’ll try to keep it simple. This is no longer a prison. Say hello to Runea, a criminal’s den unlike any other. We’ll get you more acquainted after you get on land.” With that, Algor stood up and joined back with Adam, whispering something to him before Adam nodded and moved over towards the ramp leading onto the mainland. “Step off into the city Marshall, we’ve got much to discuss.”