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* Winner of the Aaron Brand Memorial Chapbook Prize (2024)

The House Knows

Chloe Fincher

A simple color changes everything.
Will it matter in the end?
Building the place to bring you home;
Making it perfect, cozy, and warm.
Parents are stressing,
Rearranging,
Cleaning,
Wanting everything to be planned and waiting.

Your room is waiting for you,
The crib unused and white,
Your rocker clean and covered with care,
The dresser handmade by your dad with love,
The curtains black to keep out the sun,
A green rug to bring in some color we choose . . .
The shelf is covered with books that one day we'll read
And blocks decorated by your family who waits.

Not even here yet, but your presence is known.
Your throne is in the car with carrier in tow.
Diapers are in every room.
Wipes are there, too.
Photos of you hang on the fridge.
Your tub's in the bath, and soap's on the ledge.
Small hangers in the closet
Are waiting to be used.
Bottles are in the pantry
Cleaned and new.

You may still be weeks away from being due,
But the house knows there's something new.

Old Cups on the Vanity

Niko Santos

Old cups on the vanity
waiting for something
as they nurse stagnant water,
never changing.

In that way, they remind me of him,
and, in that way, I can never get rid of them.
Not anymore.

He's never late
but never there when I need him most,
as if waiting for me to reach my most
desperate.

Barely man and more of a shade
bound to Hades, he tells me,
lets me know why he's always gone,
and I understand.

“You know me so well.”

I never needed to know you
because I always have,

but, perhaps, I wonder
if I just didn't want to.

I didn't think I had to.

Paper Napkins

Ciaran Cooper

I remember the sting on my cheek, a white handprint against hot skin, my mother's wedding ring clacking against my teeth when she told me to put out the good napkins and I grabbed the ones from McDonald's, not the ones from Jack-in-the-Box we normally used, and she said to my burning face, "Don't you embarrass me on this day of all days, God damn it! I'm not like your father's family. My people come from good stock, not trailer trash. We were raised in brick houses with solid roofs and no chickens in the front yard, either, but I met your father and against the advice of my family fell in love with a pair of strong hands and sloe eyes I thought were truthful, but now I'm stuck in this wretched state, broken screen doors and a leaning house that's only once seen a brush with paint—the day we bought it with all the money I had in the world—and now he's gone and left me here with you on my own, surrounded by his illiterate kin in this hell-hole valley and you embarrassing me with paper napkins just when his people are about to arrive and invade my grief with memories of their precious son who walked up out of this mud-puddle town just long enough to woo me at the dance hall and drag me back here pregnant and disowned with nowhere else to go but down. How dare you seek to embarrass me on this day of all days with everyone bringing over food like they think I can't cook and taking up all the air in the room with their idle talk and sloth. Now go get the good napkins out of the drawer like I told you, and we'll lay them in a basket with what should have been my good silver if your father hadn't forced me to sell the set, serving spoons and all, to cover his debts. Go on now, before I slap you again for indolence, and then wash up so when they get here we're presentable in a way that says we welcome them but we're not of them."

Too stubborn for tears, I walked off to the crooked pantry and pulled open the drawer my mother pointed to, then lifted out a stack of twelve neatly pressed cloth napkins I'd never before set eyes on—cream-colored with lime-green edging and tiny embroidered sparrows in the corners—and I placed them in the basket on the dining table, mouthing a silent oath as my mother smoothed her skirt and tucked a single stray strand of hair into place. Then we stood facing the door in grave expectation: my mother waiting for the crowd to burst in, no doubt remembering better days before I was born, and me behind her like a shadow, waiting to learn who shot my daddy.

The Cat Was in No Danger

Mark Spann

“Incurious,” Jonathan agreed with his cat. “Thank you, Eliot. That’s precisely it.” He’d searched his thoughts all evening for the appropriate word to describe his freshmen students. Eight weeks into the school year, he believed he’d taken their measure. Eliot had settled in Jonathan’s lap as he drowsed in his recliner and put one front paw on his chest. The word flashed to Jonathan’s consciousness. These high-schoolers were *incurious*.

He decided on another a glass of Pinot and lifted Eliot from his lap. It wouldn’t help him sleep. “Alcohol is a stimulant,” Eliot cautioned as Jonathan settled him on the recliner.

He’d likely be up more than once during the night. However, it was a mild—no, a temperate night for mid-October; the sky was clear, and he wanted to study the stars. Eliot left the recliner and followed Jonathan reluctantly out to the deck. Jonathan tended to wax morose when he drank, and Eliot much preferred the recliner; however, he was not without sympathy.

Jonathan spotted a planet angled above the waning gibbous moon. Which one? Not knowing was a disappointment. His younger self, the one who’d fantasized about being an astronaut and studied the planets and stars, that boy would have known. “We’ll check when we go inside,” he assured his companion.

“To be fair, Eliot,” Jonathan admitted, “I am apathetic about the students.” Eliot purred. “I have no interest in them this year, beyond the mental notes I use to associate names with faces.” Their thinly disguised impatience with Jonathan’s instruction during class was . . . uninspiring. “I find no joy being with these children, Eliot. It’s . . . dispiriting, yes.”

They weren’t badly behaved—no ruder than was to be expected. They did the work he assigned. None of them had so far asked a question about anything but deadlines and the parameters for acceptability of their work.

How should he respond to the situation? Should he respond? Or accept it as a manifestation of his excellence as an instructor? “A tempting thought, but most likely delusional,” he confided.

A few stubborn crickets still thrummed, persisting beyond their season. The oak trees clung to brittle leaves, which rustled in a light breeze. This would be Jonathan’s final year teaching. His principal had already encouraged him to take retirement, even intimated it would be a wise choice. He’d been eligible for over a decade. In the dim moonlight he could just discern a stray, surrendered leaf drifting on the air currents. “Perhaps he’s correct,” Jonathan mused.

Eliot mewed. Indifferent. That was the word Jonathan sought. He was indifferent to his situation.

Eliot brushed against Jonathan's leg and curled his tail around Jonathan's calf. The blinking light of a distant plane progressed across the sky. Who would get on a plane this time of night? Where was it going? Jonathan opened the deck door and followed the cat into the house. What would he do? Travel, he supposed. He'd traveled with Ollie for years during the summer breaks, leaving Eliot in the care of a neighbor before Ollie's cancer advanced. Eliot had never offered any objection. "Do you miss him as much as I do, Eliot?"

In the morning he'd ask his students if they'd noticed the planet. They won't have, he expected; they will have been gaping open-mouthed at their phones or playing one of the infinite varieties of computer games he knew nothing about. He would ask anyway because asking the question would prove him right—*validate*, Eliot would say, his judgment of these students and their disinterest in anything beyond their parochial interests and immediate experience.

Lived experience, he was reminded. That's how one said it now; it was a person's lived experience that mattered. Jonathan chuckled and fetched another glass of wine despite Eliot's caution. "Should we therefore assume, Eliot, that there are non-lived experiences? Post-life experiences? How shall we characterize a zombie's experience? What of the dead? If Jesus scraped his knee after the Resurrection, was that a lived experience or a post-lived experience?" He'd bring this up in the break room tomorrow if any of the staff sat down with him. He doubted there would be any discussion.

In the morning Jonathan checked with his students to ensure there were no allergies. In the absence of any definitive response, he brought Eliot to his classroom the following day.

The students were delighted. Jonathan was disappointed but not surprised that no one asked why he'd brought the cat. The school already had a therapy dog; Jonathan speculated that the presence of a therapy cat seemed logical. "It's an experiment," he told the students anyway. No one asked a follow-up question. One student pulled her phone from a backpack and clicked several photos. Other students looked to Jonathan; he had a strictly enforced prohibition on cell phones in the classroom. Jonathan shrugged, and clicking phones surrounded Eliot. The cat, always photogenic, absorbed their attention with stoic grace. Jonathan had a clever explanation if anyone asked why he'd named his cat Eliot. No one asked.

It was over in less than two minutes. Students returned to their desks. Eliot found a sun-drenched cranny atop a bookshelf. He stretched languorously then curled up and slept until the next class. Shifts changed; students came and went every fifty-five minutes. The afternoon classes made a similar fuss over Eliot, who

endured it with a grace Jonathan could only admire. Jonathan presented information and assigned tasks to the ether.

Jonathan lifted Eliot from his perch after the last class and placed him in a carrier. The principal stopped them in the parking lot. “You shouldn’t have brought your cat to school, Jonathan. You know animals aren’t permitted in the building without authorization.”

Jonathan nodded contritely. “It won’t happen again,” he said. “Besides, the cat was in no danger.”

Eliot mewed as Jonathan pulled away from the parking lot. “Yes, yes!” Jonathan answered, laughing at his little joke.

He's Not Coming Tonight

Dillon Rouse

Cast of Characters

ALICE, 12-15, the oldest sibling

ANAHY, 8-9, the youngest sibling

DAD, 30-40, ALICE and ANAHY's father

MOM, 30-40, ALICE and ANAHY's mother

Time and Place

The action takes place in Alice and Anahi's bedroom on December 24, 2022, at 10:30 p.m.

(Lights come up on ALICE and ANAHY's bedroom. However, it's not just a bedroom. Each side of the room shows a different personality. ALICE is awake and on her phone. ANAHY is watching a Christmas movie on their television. SHE checks to make sure the volume is not loud enough to wake up their mother. SHE looks out the window, and ALICE notices. SHE comments without looking up from her phone.)

ALICE: He's not coming tonight.

ANAHY: Yes, he is. Don't say that.

ALICE: Mom said he's staying at Grandma's tonight.

ANAHY: Why would he be at Grandma's?

ALICE: Because he's "taking care of her," as Mom puts it.

ANAHY: Santa is taking care of Grandma?

(ALICE realizes that ANAHY is talking about a different person.)

ALICE: No, I'm talking about—never mind.

(SHE changes the subject.)

ALICE (CONT.): Where do you think he is right now?

ANAHY: 3233 88th street.

ALICE: That's very precise.

ANAHY: That's the street where Alex Anderson, the girl who's mean to me in class, lives. I asked Santa to bring her coal for Christmas.

ALICE: You actually wrote that on your Christmas list?

(ANAHY *nods.*)

Kudos to you kid.

ANAHY: She made a rumor that I "liked" Duncan and ate my boogers.

ALICE: Karma. One minute you're starting a rumor, and the next minute you receive coal from Santa.

ANAHY: Exactly.

(*Beat.*)

Also, she said Santa wasn't real. We got into a big argument, and she said, "Look it up on the Internet." But I don't have a phone.

ALICE: You don't need one. Besides, the Internet tells lies.

ANAHY: Really?

ALICE: Yes. They said Tupac's dead, but I know he's hiding on Pablo Escobar's island.

ANAHY: I don't know who any of those people are.

ALICE: You will.

ANAHY: I'm staying up tonight to see him.

ALICE: People never get to see him.

ANAHY: We just need to hear the sleigh bells that he carries on his bag of goodies. We'll know for sure that it is him.

ALICE: Good luck.

ANAHY: Were you talking about Dad earlier?

ALICE: Yeah.

ANAHY: I didn't get to talk to him tonight.

(ALICE speaks under her breath.)

ALICE: Because of Mom.

ANAHY: Remember when he used to let us open presents the night before Christmas?

(The actors playing MOM and DAD enter. THEY act out the moments from the girls' stories.)

ALICE. Yeah. I remember.

(ANAHY giggles.)

ANAHY: Remember that stupid sleigh-bells ringtone he'd play every year?

ALICE: No.

ANAHY: Oh, come on, Alice. You know.

ALICE: I don't.

(SHE gets up and walks around the room.)

I want my own room.

ANAHY: Why? I like sharing a room with you.

ALICE: You're just a kid.

(DAD exits, but MOM remains.)

ANAHY: I hate when people say that. Mom says it all the time: "You're just a kid. You wouldn't understand."

ALICE: When did she say that?

ANAHY: Today. She was yelling at Dad on the phone. Usually, she'd be happy later, but she wasn't this time.

(Beat.)

She just hung up and started crying. I asked what was wrong, but she wouldn't tell me and just said I wouldn't understand.

ALICE: It's her fault anyway. She's the one who told Dad to leave.

ANAHY: I thought he left on his own.

ALICE: That's what she told you. Besides, you were at basketball practice that day. I was there.

ANAHY: She wouldn't lie.

ALICE: Adults lie.

ANAHY: Not Mom.

ALICE: Especially Mom.

ANAHY: You're being mean, Alice.

ALICE: She's the one who always complained about something when Dad got home. Or the time when Dad got in late, and she started shouting at him. Then he shouted at her. They fought about something.

(Beat.)

ALICE (CONT.): Can you remember a time when they both did something nice for each other?

ANAHY: *The Simpsons.*

(*DAD enters and sits with MOM. THEY pretend THEY are watching television.*)

ALICE: What?

ANAHY: Every Sunday when *The Simpsons* came on, we'd all get together and watch it in the living room. Everyone laughed. Mom, Dad, and you. We were all happy.

(*Canned laughter rises until an awkward silence abruptly appears. ANAHY looks outside.*)

You think we'll get snow for Christmas?

ALICE: Anahi, it's Texas. We'll get a dust storm and rain before getting snow.

ANAHY: Maybe we can get both? Snow and Dad's coming home.

ALICE: Whatever you say. Get some sleep.

ANAHY: What? You don't believe it could happen.

ALICE: I believe that snow will happen in Texas before Dad's coming home.

ANAHY: Well, I believe in both! I do!

ALICE: Will you be quiet?! Mom's in the next room. She'll bust in here thinking I'm messing with you. Just stop. He's not coming tonight, okay? Grow up.

(*MOM and DAD exit.*)

ANAHY: I hate you. I want Dad!

(*ANAHY goes to her bed. ALICE knows that SHE went too far. SHE walks over to comfort ANAHY.*)

ALICE: I'm sorry. I miss him, too. Why don't you get some sleep, and I'll stay up? Then, once he gets here, I'll wake you up. I love you, and I'm glad you're here with me.

ANAHY: Okay . . . but just for like five minutes. Then wake me up.

(ANAHY gets up and turns off the television. SHE goes back to her bed and goes to sleep. ALICE lies down next to her and plays a Christmas tune on her phone. SHE whispers to herself.)

ALICE: He's not coming tonight. I know he isn't.

(The sounds of sleigh bells can be heard offstage. ALICE wonders to whom those sleigh bells belong. However, SHE hears a jolly laugh and believes that it is Santa. Blackout.)

The Back Yard

Carolyn Wilson-Scott

It's on the way to the back yard, the man's shadow eclipsing hers on the graveled path, that she begins to doubt herself. He'd been on the porch as she came back from getting coffee. Carhartt and a ball cap—a worker, but she hadn't scheduled anything, too early in the season for mowing—a balaclava under the cap, and sunglasses, to keep out the sun or the allergens. She could have kept walking when he'd called out did she live there, but she'd said yes, all ingrained welcome.

It's his story that doesn't add up, that he lost something over the back fence. Would it be okay if he went to take a look? He didn't want to just head back on his own without checking first.

That nod to propriety that had her thanking him for asking, all accommodation. Even though he hadn't said what he'd lost. Actually, that was her word, *lost*. What he'd said was *accidentally thrown*, like a boy with a ball. Maybe if she hadn't just texted her nephew. Or if the fence didn't back to an alley where local high-schoolers loitered during their lunch. Maybe then she'd have thought faster.

She could have told him the truth, that she didn't feel comfortable being alone in the back yard, hidden from the street, with a strange man; she could have offered to go look for him. That was understandable—a reasonable precaution, not impolite.

But this only occurs to her now, leading him down the steps to the back gate. Too late. He follows a step behind, through the gate, six feet high for privacy, the man himself taller than that.

She knows a little self-defense: a strong hand to the ear, cupped, to break an eardrum. C'ed hand-strike against the throat to collapse the larynx. Undertaken with all the force you're capable of, torquing at the hips, driving up with body weight. Imagine you're a boxer, trained, that you've eaten for bulk, strong through the shoulders, across the back. This is your best chance for escape.

As long as he doesn't get you first.

Meta Ivory

Hollis Thompson

Cast of Characters

HENRY, 19, a frustrated Pygmalion

JOHNNY, 22, HENRY's next-door neighbor

GABRIELLA, 19, a pre-school aide and HENRY's ex-girlfriend

Time and Place

The action takes place in the backyard of Henry's duplex. The time is the present.

(Lights rise on the backyard of a small duplex. It is obviously summertime. The grass is green and recently mowed; there are two trees that are visibly healthy and a back porch roof with a string of light-up, inflatable starfish. A hammock hangs between the trees. HENRY is in the hammock. His laptop lies beside him. JOHNNY enters through a gate from his own backyard.)

JOHNNY: What's happening, my man?

HENRY: Nothing at all, Johnny. Nothing at all.

JOHNNY: Aw, come on, Henry! You're wasting this gorgeous summer day! You should be playing Frisbee golf at the park or something.

HENRY: That might be how you roll, but not me. Summer means no school, which means no papers or tests or projects. I can finally breathe. This right here is my ideal summer pastime. I hang in a hammock; the sun rises, hangs, then sets; that's summertime.

JOHNNY: Maybe that's good for a while, but there's more to summer than that.

HENRY: You do you, and I'll do me.

JOHNNY: I'm not trying to get into your business. It's just, I know you've been having a rough time, man. It's okay to take some down time, but don't sleep your life away. You don't have to be out.

(Beat.)

HENRY: Thanks, Johnny. I really mean it.

JOHNNY: Any time, Bro. Now, I'll see you around. I've got some summer stuff to do.

HENRY: See you.

(JOHNNY exits to his yard. HENRY picks up his laptop and opens it. HE reads something. After a moment, HE closes the laptop and puts it back down. GABRIELLA enters through a gate opposite to where JOHNNY entered. SHE walks straight to HENRY.)

GABRIELLA: We need to talk.

HENRY: I thought you said that you weren't ever coming back.

GABRIELLA: I still have a key.

HENRY: Well, that's interesting.

GABRIELLA: Are you drunk?

HENRY: Not now. Why? Do you want a drink?

GABRIELLA: What I want is an explanation.

HENRY: That's also interesting. I thought you said I mansplain too much.

GABRIELLA: Henry. How could you do this to me?

HENRY: Shouldn't I be the one saying that to you? You broke up with me, remember?

GABRIELLA: Will you stop whining and for once in your life be an adult with me? I saw the video, Henry. My co-worker showed it to me. My co-worker! Do you have any idea how much you've violated me?

HENRY: You agreed to let me video. Why are you so bashful about people seeing it?

GABRIELLA: Because it could ruin my life, you jerk! I don't know how many people at work have seen it. If it gets to the superintendent, I could lose my job! Nobody wants an *Only Fans* girl working at the pre-school!

HENRY: Yeah, well, they wouldn't want a gym ho working there, either.

GABRIELLA: Give me a break!

HENRY: No, you give me a break, Gabriella! What goes around comes around. What did you think would happen when you started messing around?

GABRIELLA: It was one guy, Henry. One guy! And I only did it because I was so tired of your treating me like a little kid all the time! I was yearning for a man to see me—to appreciate me—as an equal. He did.

HENRY: Go ahead. Blame me for all your screwups like you always did!

(*GABRIELLA looks up at the light-up starfish.*)

GABRIELLA: Do you remember our first time? I wanted to go to the beach, but we couldn't afford to. I'd never been, and I really wanted to see some starfish. So you brought a bunch of sand out here and bought these silly inflatable starfish. I saw in your eyes that you loved me then.

(*Beat.*)

But now, if you don't take that video down, all I'll ever be able to feel when I see those starfish is disgust. I'll want to throw up every time I think about them! Is that how you want me to remember us?

HENRY: You ruined us!

(*HENRY climbs out of the hammock and crosses to her.*)

You're right. I did love you. I loved you so much! I loved the life I was building with you! I had so many plans, Gabriella—so many dreams. I was going to make every day like that day. But you screwed it all up! You want to talk about

HENRY (CONT.): violation? You ripped my heart into pieces. You took everything I was making for you, and you threw it in the trash!

GABRIELLA: Yes! Everything *you* were making! That's all I was to you—a blank slate, an empty canvas. You thought you could mold my life into something like I wasn't even a real person. I don't think you even really care that I slept with someone else. I think you can't stand that I did something for myself on my own—that I showed you I'm a real person you can't control.

(Beat.)

That's what the video is about, too, isn't it? In a sick, twisted way, you're still trying to make me into something you can control.

HENRY: You turned yourself into this. I'm just helping you get famous.

GABRIELLA: That's BS, and you know it!

HENRY: No, it's not!

GABRIELLA: Do you have any idea what this feels like? When I walk down the street, I can't stop wondering how many people have seen that video. How many will recognize me? How many might approach me? How long until my family sees it? Can't you see what you're doing to me? What you're turning my life into?

HENRY: Stop! Can't you see what you turned my life into?! I've got questions in my head, too. Like what it was like for you to be with him. Did you get more from him than you did from being with me? Was gym boy really the only one? How many are there going to be? Well, now I can take control of that. I can track the number of views . . . and you can start to understand what's it's like to have the questions.

GABRIELLA: Henry! You know this isn't right!

HENRY: You can't guilt me anymore, Gabriella! There are no laws against this in the state. I already checked. Plus, there could just as easily be other videos out there. With AI, anyone can make videos of anyone as long as they have enough samples. Think about all the selfies you're always posting and your gym photos and your beach pics. You gave them all they needed. You've always loved

HENRY (CONT.): attention. I think you were secretly asking for something like this to happen.

GABRIELLA: Get the facts straight. You made this video, Henry. You posted it. You need to delete it. Today.

(HENRY turns his back to her.)

Do you want me to admit that I did you wrong? Is that it? Do you need me to get down and beg?

(HE does not respond.)

Fine. I'm sorry I cheated on you, Henry. Are you happy now? But no matter how wrong it was, it doesn't make what you did right!

(HE faces her.)

HENRY: It could have all been so different if you had just listened to me. I was trying to lead you into an amazing life. I could have satisfied you, Gabriella, if you had just gone along with me and let me be your man.

GABRIELLA: Yeah? Well, the hardest person to lead is yourself. If you could do that, then maybe you'd be worth following.

(SHE throws the house key on the ground and exits through the gate. HENRY stares at the key for a beat. HE bends down to pick it up, but then HE leaves it alone. HE goes back to the hammock and climbs into it. JOHNNY enters from his yard.)

JOHNNY: Everything all right back here?

HENRY: Yeah. Everything is fine.

JOHNNY: Are you sure? I thought I heard some kind of argument going on.

HENRY: No. There's nothing but relaxation going on back here.

JOHNNY: Well, that's good to know.

(Beat.)

JOHNNY (CONT.): You know, man, if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm always around. No pressure, though.

HENRY: Yeah. I know. Look, I really do appreciate it. It's just that I'm not the kind of guy who really likes talking to other people. But . . . thanks.

JOHNNY: I understand. It's all cool.

(JOHNNY turns to leave but stops.)

Hey, I was thinking about watching a movie tonight. What was the name of that one you said was a great summer-time movie? I think you said that you watched it in a film class.

HENRY: *Do the Right Thing.*

JOHNNY: That's right. Thanks, man!

(JOHNNY exits. HENRY lies in the hammock for a moment. Then HE picks up his laptop and opens it. HE begins typing. The lights fade out.)

Falling Down

Ciaran Cooper

My brother's already got seven points when I hit him in the face and he smashes into the headboard. I almost lose my grip on my pillow, but I chalk up on it before I hit him again. He's laughing and I keep bouncing to keep the power in my swing. If he gets to ten I lose. He gets up still laughing and starts bouncing on the other bed, the one near the window. We can see the town lit with neon below us and the mountains and ski slopes way out there in the clouds. Outside it's snowing. We want to go skiing; our dad told us it was a ski trip, a vacation, but instead he's at some business meeting downstairs and now we have to wait for it to get done. He's in one of the grand ballrooms where my brother and I were running around behind all the curtains till a security guard caught us. My brother wouldn't run, the scared fucker. I told him just take off, but I had to come back for him, so they got us both. They called our dad and he was really pissed off, because they had to get him out of a lecture or something. They've got all these slide presentations and the rooms are dark and most of the people there are sleeping. I don't know how long it's going to take and it's a total drag waiting. My brother's reaching for the ceiling, which he can barely touch, trying to score another point. I take a swing and miss. The space between the beds is getting farther as the game goes on because the beds are on wheels that slide, even on the carpeting. Outside the window it's cold and peaceful and the heavy white flakes stick to everything, but here inside the room it is not peaceful even though we're laughing. I'm trying to kill my brother with every swing.

When our dad came to get us from Security he was wearing a bright yellow nametag on his suitcoat. It said Presenter next to his name and even though I was scared and he was yelling at us and telling me I'm supposed to be in charge, I'm the older one and he should be able to count on me blah blah blah, and the veins in his neck were purple he was so mad, I couldn't help feeling proud. I stared at his name tag until he grabbed me by the arm and said are you listening to me, son? and I said yes, and he said to the security guard that he's sorry for the trouble and he led us out of the small office with all these camera monitors and told us we couldn't leave our room for the rest of the day.

In the hallway outside Security is where my brother and I saw our dad's old secretary. Her name's Ingrid. She used to give us colored pencils and paper with the company logo on it when our dad took us to work with him sometimes when we were small. My brother and I would sit at our father's desk and draw. But sometimes we'd get so bored we'd run around the hallways or break something by accident. Ingrid got divorced two years ago and moved to another city to work at a

different branch of the company. She's really pretty. She's got long blonde hair and big boobs and she wears perfume. Our mother never wears perfume. I got her some for Christmas one year—Charlie—and she wore it once just to make me happy, but she says it irritates her skin so she can't wear it. She keeps the bottle on a high shelf in the bathroom though, just to let me know she loves me all the same. But Ingrid was telling us that we shouldn't misbehave because it's a big day for our dad and if we're bad then we can't go skiing. I was like, whatever, we didn't really do anything wrong, just playing tag we're so bored, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to piss him off any more than we already had. I just stood there as the elevator door closed and stared straight ahead. But then I saw my dad's hand in the reflection as the mirrored door slid shut. He was holding Ingrid's hand, just for a second, right behind me and my brother, but when I turned to look they were just talking about making dinner plans with some people from the Dallas office. I couldn't tell if my brother saw it, too, but he was really quiet and he wouldn't look at our dad when we got back to the room. We have our own hotel room because in two months I'll be thirteen, so we're old enough to behave ourselves our dad said, and besides, he needs his own space to get prepared for all the important meetings he's got. He's supposed to give a lecture on what it takes to be a top salesman. He said it would be just one day of meetings and then his lecture and then we could go skiing, but this is our third day of nothing to do.

My brother bounces once more really high and then lays out in the air before falling on his back. It's a really great drop, totally cool, so I drop my pillow and flop down on my back, too, then up again, half turn in the air, and land on my stomach. We start rating each other's dives like they do in the Olympics. I give him a 9.8 for a flip onto his back. He only gives me an eight for a ceiling touch double bounce ass land, and I complain to the judges. After a while he says let's quit, I'm hungry, so we take the thirty dollars our dad left us this morning and we get grilled cheeses and chocolate shakes in the restaurant downstairs. They even have gambling machines in the restaurant. After we eat, I convince my brother to sneak into the big room where they have all these slot machines. We spend almost ten dollars in quarters but then my brother hits the jackpot. We are so rich, we're psyched. He's scooping the coins into a big plastic cup, but there's bells ringing and a light flashing and sirens going off and all the noise of the coins dropping, so a security guard sees us. We grab the cup and run while some of the coins are still spilling out. The dumbass stops to get the rest of the coins before chasing us. We make it to the elevator before dumbass does and push the eleventh floor. Then I push twelve through forty and we get off and run to our room.

We decide to find an arcade to spend our quarters at, but my brother's telling me the money is his. I tell him it was my idea and I helped us get away and without me we wouldn't even have it, so he says fine, fucker, take half. I find an

arcade in the yellow pages then call to see where it is. We can walk there I tell my brother, and I draw us a map from the man's directions. We divide up the quarters and the change from dinner, all except for one extra quarter that I let him have, the big baby.

We walk down the street in the snow. It's freezing outside and we don't have gloves or hats. We were gonna buy ski gloves and those cool ski hats with our dad, but he isn't even done yet. We just walk along backwards so we don't totally freeze till we get to the intersection where we have to turn, and we can see the arcade up ahead. We run for it, and by the time we get there, my brother's head is totally white.

Inside there's tons of kids and cool games everywhere. They've got air hockey and foosball and Kung-Fu video games. They even have *Centipede*—the kind with the spin ball and the extra bombs if you press the red button in time—so we're psyched. They also have a juke box, and my brother plays ACDC, his favorite new band—"Back in Black" then "Highway to Hell." It's cranked really loud. We're both playing the same games, always him first, competing for the highest score. He likes this one called *Galaga* with the spaceships that fall out of the sky and try to hit you. When the music stops he puts another quarter in and plays the same songs till some teenagers say why don't you play something else and we say shut up and we play them again anyway. Finally, the other kids are starting to bother us, so we leave before we get in a fight. We're out of money anyway except for a ten-dollar bill, and I tell my brother we should go get pizza.

It's getting dark out now, and it's snowing even harder than before, so after we get pizza we run the whole way back to the hotel. We look for our dad in the lecture hall, but everything is turned off and empty. Then we check the gambling hall and the restaurant, but he's not in there, either. Next we go upstairs to check his room, but there's no answer. My brother's starting to freak out, and I can tell he wants to cry like the time we waited forever in the parking lot after swimming lessons until it got dark and our dad never came. We didn't have money for a pay phone because we spent it on gum, so we had to walk home, my brother crying like a baby the whole way. He wants to cry like that, I can tell, but I tell him to quit it, and we both just get mad at each other. Finally, we go back to our room to see if our dad left a note and to see if we're in trouble again, but there's nothing, so we lie on the beds and watch TV.

TV sucks. There's nothing good on, just re-runs of *Gilligan's Island* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Not even a western even though we're out west, as far west as we've ever been in our lives. Reno sucks. Lake Tahoe sucks. Gambling sucks. This whole trip sucks. Even our dad sucks. I just want to go skiing. My brother keeps getting up to flip the channels, like there's gonna be something good on if he just keeps looking, but there isn't. They keep interrupting whatever show

is on to say there's a blizzard warning tonight. They say the main roads are closed and no one can go into the mountains without chains on their tires. Now this really sucks because I know our rental car doesn't have chains. I get more and more pissed off every time the message flashes across the screen. I'm so mad at our dad I yell at my brother and tell him to stop fucking with the TV. After that we're fighting, and we're throwing everything, even the little bars of soap from the bathroom. After a while the room is trashed. The beds are on their sides because we turned them into forts, and the lamp is broken into a million pieces. My brother spits in my face when we aren't play-fighting anymore, and I jump on top of him and smack him good. We both have swollen faces and hands, and I know we're gonna get into serious trouble when our dad comes back, but neither of us cares. We just lie there on the floor in our underwear and socks watching the TV flicker on its side by the window until all the channels sign off for the night and just the American flag is waving on the screen with the stupid national anthem playing.

Our dad's knocking on the door is what wakes me. I hear him say open up, boys, open the door. Outside, the day is really bright. Fresh snow is covering everything, and the sky is clear and blue. I can see the mountains in the distance. The clouds are sliding off the peaks, and everything looks fake, it's so beautiful. I'm totally psyched to finally go skiing, but then I look around the room and almost shit. We are so dead. I kick my brother, and he says fuck off, but then he sees the room and hears our dad, and he knows we're in deep trouble. Outside the door our dad is laughing and talking to someone. I pull on my jeans and open the door trying to hide the mess behind me. My brother is trying to put everything back together. He kicks the pieces of the lamp under the dresser. Our dad is standing in the hallway with Ingrid and another couple behind him. Our dad's hair is wet from the shower, and he's wearing blue jeans and a sweater. Ingrid's also in jeans and a sweater, but her hair is perfectly blow-dried. The other two people I recognize, but I don't remember their names. My father begins to introduce them to me but stops when he sees my face.

What happened to you? he asks. Then he pushes past me into the room and starts yelling when he sees what happened. Ingrid and our dad's friends are standing inside the doorway looking at all the damage, and my brother and I are saying we're sorry over and over, but it does no good. We're in for it now. After a while our dad stops yelling at us about being responsible for our actions and acting like grownups for once, not like little boys. He's speechless finally, which is good in a way, but it only makes him madder. His friends tell him we should all go down for breakfast and hit the slopes while there's still time left in the day, but our dad starts lecturing us again until Ingrid takes his arm and says something in his ear. Then he tells us to get dressed, clean up the mess, and meet them in the restaurant in half an hour. And don't you dare be late, he says as he walks out.

In the restaurant our dad is in a better mood, but he's not really talking to us. He introduces us to his other friends, Tino and Terry. Tino's the district sales manager for the western region. Terry's his girlfriend. Now I remember them. We met a couple of years ago when we were at the office with our dad. Tino was in town for business, and our dad took us all out to lunch downtown—Tino, Terry, Ingrid, and us. He didn't invite our mother, and I remember she was really upset when she found out we went to a French restaurant, and he didn't even ask her. It was business for Christ's sake, he said, but that made her even madder.

My brother and I order pancakes, and we try to say as little as possible because our dad says he hasn't made up his mind yet whether to let us go skiing with them after our little prank. We don't even try to argue with him that it wasn't a prank. We just got bored, and then we got angry. We tell him we don't know how it started. It just did. Oh, like spontaneous combustion, he says, it just started, just like that. I stare into my pancakes and say nothing. My brother sips his Coke. His left eye is swollen and bruised. I got him really good after he spit on me. Finally, Tino says let's not let it ruin a day of fresh powder, so our dad pays, and we go back up to our rooms to get ready for skiing. When we meet in the lobby my dad says he forgot his cigarettes, and he sends me up to his room to get them. I slip the key in the lock and shoot in quickly. They're not on the nightstand where he said they were, so I look around. The room smells like perfume, so I look in the bathroom. The hotel hairdryer is sitting out on the sink, not on the shelf where it goes, and my dad's cigarettes are sitting on the back of the toilet. I open the pack and start pulling them out. I flush all of them except one down the toilet and head back downstairs.

At the ski lodge, we're choosing hats and gloves to buy. My brother gets a pair just like mine, and I call him a copycat and our dad says cut it out or we'll have to wait in the car while they ski without us. I shut up quick but give my brother a look that says I'm taking you out first chance I get, and then we both begin to smile we're so psyched to finally be skiing. I don't say anything to my brother about the perfume or the handholding in the elevator, and then I forget about it myself while we're choosing skis and getting our lift tickets.

My brother and I are swinging our legs from the ski lift and riding up higher and higher. Tino and Terry are on the chair in front of us in matching light-blue snow suits. Tino's short and round, and he looks really funny in his suit. Terry looks better, but her ass is huge. They're both good skiers, so they head to the top of the hill with me and my brother while our dad stays behind on the bunny slopes where he's getting lessons in snowplowing and turns. Ingrid stays with him even though she already knows how to ski. She says she was on her college ski team. We can see them below us as we pass overhead, and Terry yells yoo-hoo! hey! up here! as we float over them toward the clouds. Our dad looks up for a second and

waves. Then he forgets where he's going and wipes out. Ingrid's laughing, and the instructor is saying something to him as he tries to get up and then falls down again.

At the top, Tino and Terry say the best runs are on the back of the mountain, so we follow them out through the knee-deep powder to a slope that runs along a ridge and then fans out toward the bottom before turning toward the bunny slopes and the lodge. From the top you have to cut a sharp left turn, or you'll head right for the trees and a cliff on the other side. It's a long drop, and there's signs everywhere warning skiers not to go past the orange markers. On our second run my brother and I are taking all the runs at Olympic speed. We're rating each other as we go jumping over moguls and weaving through the wooded trails. We lose Tino and Terry after a while, and we have the whole mountain to ourselves. Each time we get onto the chair lift, we can see our father snowplowing below us. We don't yell anything to him, and he doesn't see us. He doesn't notice when the lift stops, and we're hovering above him. He doesn't notice we're there when he leans over and kisses Ingrid on the lips then slides his hand around her waist. My brother and I don't say a thing, not to him and not to each other. We just sit there and wait for the lift to start moving again, carrying us up and away.

After lunch, we're all standing outside the lodge, and Tino and Terry and Ingrid are trying to convince our dad to try a real run. Ingrid says you're doing great, you'll be fine, just stick close to me. Tino tells our dad that from the top you can ski over to the back of the mountain and find some easy trails. So after a little more convincing, we all get onto the chair lift and head for the top. Tino and Terry take off first. They head straight toward the black-diamond run and are gone. Our dad is shaky on his skis and doesn't look confident. Ingrid is holding his arm and reminding him to snowplow his way down. My brother and I are waiting behind, letting them clear the way so we can head for the moguls again. Our dad turns downhill and starts gaining speed. Ingrid stops for a second to adjust her bindings, and our dad's way out in front of her now. He's trying to snowplow, but he's not slowing down. He's heading for the orange markers. His arms are flailing. He's forgetting to plant his poles, and his skis are parallel, not angled like a snowplow at all. He leans forward a little to keep his balance, and that just gives him more speed. Ingrid looks up and starts yelling. She takes off after him, and my brother and I start off slowly behind her. She's yelling to our dad to turn his tips, but he's moving too fast to hear her. He flies right past the orange markers and heads out of control toward the cliff. She's screaming now and trying to catch up to him, but he just keeps going.

My brother and I are following behind, but we still don't say anything, and Ingrid doesn't see us because she's focused completely on our dad. She's screaming at him to just fall down, just fall down, but I don't think he can hear her.

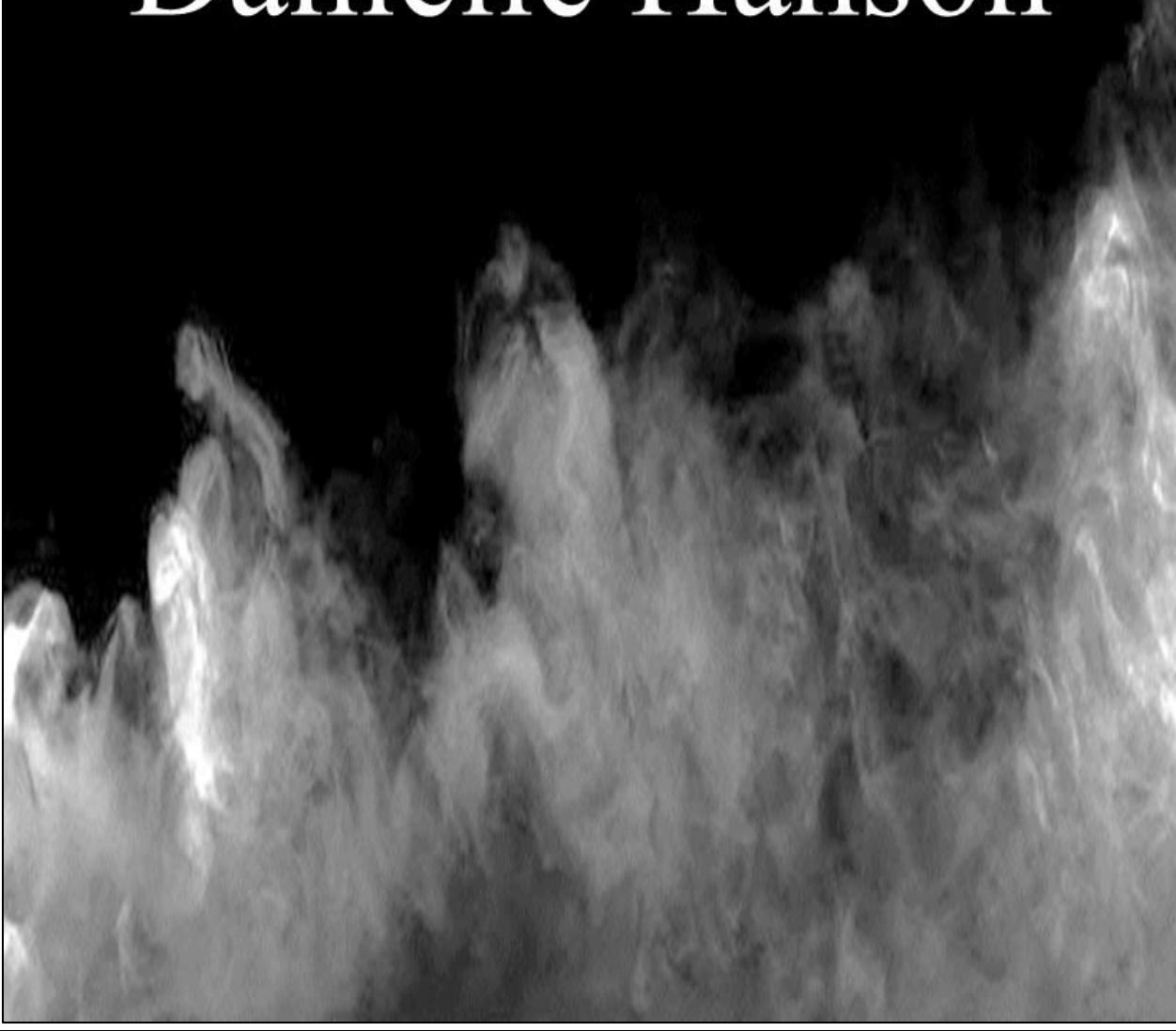
From here, her screams sound like laughter, and our dad looks like he's just clowning. From the ski lift overhead, we probably look like a family on vacation together. From far away, we probably even look happy.

Silent Monster

Chloe Fincher

Creeping.
Distance.
Closing in.
Always a fog close by.
Like quicksand,
The attack can be sudden, unnoticed.
Waiting.
Watching.
Hunting.
The monster never caught.
Hibernating at times,
Always in the shadows.
Blurring.
Confusing.
Altering.
Don't know which way is right.
Many journeys to try.
The inner battle rages on strong.
Battling.
Changing.
Working.
Trying to move forward,
Feeling like I'm weighted.
Adapting daily to the hidden fog.

Views of Fog
by
Danielle Hanson



Water's View of Fog

A conduit made out
of self. I climb

myself, made air
like the saint

who turned
self into honey

by eating only honey.

I am
spiraling

over insects, branches,
cleansing them

in my mist/mystification.

Night's View of Fog

I planted the seeds of dew,
and one grew,
lifting into sky.
I climb it high
to a platform on which
to reach stars as
my beanstalk dissolves
into day. The air
holds its breath
until I fall, hard
and complete.

A Bird's View of Fog

To weave in
and out of
existence—first
I am body—
now only song—and back
again. The small green
of earth and its food,
insect and grass,
its hope of sun, then
the cool gray of
Heaven and swimming
through water, then
back to mountains and air.
Isn't this what it is
to be a bird, you
poor legged wingless animals?
I am at once, all.

A Mouse's View of Fog

To nestle into a nest
of cool water before
the day's heat, drink
air, hide from a hawk.
To sleep on sky,
surrounded by sky.

A Fox's View of Fog

You can't touch
me, Foghound
of sky with your master
Cloud—you,
who are your own leash.

I am the trickster
of mythology. I hide
in logs and double back
my tracks when you get
close. Sure, you slink
between trees soundless
& scentless, but no one ever
called fox fool.

I can follow
a stream for miles to hide
my prints. I can
burrow under leaves for
days. I can puncture
snow with a leap. I follow
magnetic fields. I am
the eternal forest. You are
driven by the whip
of wind, sun's prey.

A Slug's View of Fog

What is
inside of
me is outside.

I have
become air.
Breathe in.

My Father, My Protector

Dakota Travis

April the nineteenth was the worst day of my life. I was sitting in my home with my brother and mother when a storm bellowed in on us. Rain had always scared my youngest brother, so he ran into my mother's arms crying out loud. I listened to the rain, almost forgetting the tears on my brother's face. The weather would pass, but the next few moments would feel like forever. The door swung open forcefully, and the rain flooded inside. Thunder roared, and my brother's cries were now screams. The sound pierced my ears. The storm was growing violent. It all happened so fast. Lightning struck down . . . and silence followed. My mother and brother died that day. They tell me I was lucky to survive, but how is that luck?

I was made to live with other children my age at an orphanage. The children usually never stayed longer than a full moon's cycle, except myself. I stayed for four years. I was the only one not given a second chance at life and family. I felt like I was cursed, stuck in my own bubble. Was it because I should have died that day? April the nineteenth. That day haunts the core of my brain. It was suffocating. I wanted to tear my skin from my face and scream at the gods. It just wasn't fair. I wanted a new home. I almost hated the other children who got to have what I wanted.

Eventually, *he* came along. He wasn't like the other parents. He had a dark aura about himself. It intrigued me, and, oddly, made me feel safe. We spoke for a while, and I listened closely. He explained how he had visited often but couldn't recall seeing my face around. I told him about my situation, and how in the past four years I had been here but mostly hidden. This seemed to be exciting to him. He smiled when I spoke. It was a different kind of smile, though. His teeth looked bloody. It reminded me of an ape eating a piece of candy, when the red stains the teeth. I didn't question it, though, and he always excused it when he noticed I was staring. He would explain, "I had an apple earlier. Sometimes it gets stuck in my teeth." I was too naïve to know better, but I wish I had. It would have saved me so much pain.

These visits went on, and, finally, my chance at a new life came. "Come home with me, child," he offered.

My heart nearly burst from my chest. This was it. I immediately agreed. I watched with happy eyes as he spoke to the elderly ladies before they discharged me. The man brought me outside and pointed to a small black car in the parking lot.

"Don't be afraid," he assured me. "This is your chance at redemption."

I followed him into the vehicle and watched out the back window as the orphanage's gate closed behind us. We sat in silence, and I watched the clouds grow darker the longer we drove. I was fascinated.

We arrived after dark. It was no ordinary home. It was a small cottage that sat far back in the forest. The only thing separating us from the road was a small, torn-up bridge. The inside of the cottage was modest. There was a fireplace full of wood—not burned—and a large, round table with two chairs on separate ends. There wasn't a sitting area—no books—and the kitchen was bare. How did he entertain himself or eat? Maybe he'd just moved in? I was curious but too nervous to ask the questions in my mind.

He pulled me closer and hugged me, saying, "Welcome home, little one." Little one. It felt right. I sat in the chair on the left side of the table, and he sat across from me. We stared at each other for a prolonged period of time. I didn't know what to say. I felt tired, though. My eyes were growing heavy, and my head was slouching forward. The man just watched, not offering me a bed or a pillow. I was starting to feel uncomfortable, but maybe he didn't know any better. I woke up the next morning at the table covered in my own sweat. My neck was sore from lying on the table. I immediately spun around searching for the man. He was nowhere to be found. I wanted to explore the house further, but I felt fearful about doing so. It was freezing. I could see my breath as I walked around the kitchen opening cabinets and looking under the countertops. There was absolutely nothing in the place. I twisted the knob on the sink, and three drops of water came out followed by nothing. I was hungry. It baffled me how a human being, especially a grown man, had no food or water in his kitchen. Oh, well.

I decided to let fate be in charge of my next meal, so I went outside. The cottage was secluded from any town attractions. Maybe town was where he'd gone—to get food and supplies. It made the most sense at the time. I carried on searching alongside the house for anything I could eat or drink. The forests I had explored growing up always had trees full of fruit and trunks filled with water. I was positive this forest would be like that, too. It wasn't. All the trees were very old, and the bark was rotting. I had to find something to assure myself. I searched for what felt like hours before stumbling over something on the ground. My knees were drenched in wet mud, and my stomach was growling furiously. I decided to walk back to the cottage. I was angry. I wanted to throw something, so I bent down to pick up what I thought was a stick. It was a bone—a bone in a hole full of bones. I was disgusted at how large the hole was. It had to have been an animal, right? At least, that's what I told myself on the walk back to the cottage.

As I walked, I couldn't help but feel a sense of uneasiness. I forced myself to keep going. I told myself it was just a wild animal. There was a light on when I arrived. The man was home. I walked inside. I was craving a bath and fresh

clothes. The mud had dried, but my pants still felt wet and nasty. The man smiled at me.

“What were you up to today, little one?” he asked.

I had half a mind to curse at him. How dare he not have food or water in this house? I was hungry! He was supposed to care for me!

“I played outside and slipped in some mud,” I lied.

He didn’t question me any further. Instead, he offered me a hot bath and an ivy-green gown to put on.

“Clean up,” he instructed me. “We will have dinner soon.”

I washed my clothes and myself quickly. I didn’t even notice that the water was cold.

There was something different about the man tonight. He seemed angry. I was afraid it was because of the mud I’d gotten all over the floor, but I didn’t bother to ask what was wrong in case that was it. The round table now had a basket of fruit on it, and a cup of water was in front of my seat. This thrilled me. I grabbed a banana from the top of the basket and ate it in three bites. The man didn’t join me, but he watched as I drank and feasted on more fruit. I could feel his eyes trace every movement my hand made as I placed the fruit against my lips, chewed, and swallowed. It was delicious; it almost felt unreal. Every bite I tasted reminded me of a dove, sweet and beautiful.

“Are you finished?”

The question startled me out of my veil of happiness. I gulped the piece of the apple I was chewing and replied, “Yes.”

Truthfully, I would have eaten that whole basket of fruit. The fruit made me feel high, euphoric. He stood up and walked over to me. He smelled funny, almost like a wild animal. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I didn’t care. I was clean and fed. I was thankful.

“Come, child. I have made a bed for you.”

He reached out to grab my hand, and I took it. We walked down the hallway to the back, and he opened the door. It wasn’t anything special. There was a small cot in the corner and a table on the other side. The cot had two blankets and one pillow. I wasn’t expecting anything extravagant, but I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little disappointed. He looked down at me and cupped my face in his hands.

“Are you satisfied, my child?” His eyes sank down as he waited for my reply.

I nodded my head and smiled softly. This made him smile back. His teeth looked sharp.

“I’m very tired,” I said. “I should go to bed now.”

“Oh, sure! Of course!” He swung his hands into the air and laughed.

I giggled uncomfortably. I walked over to the cot and began to lie down slowly. He stood at the door watching me. He was always watching me. It made me feel like food.

I dreamed of the man that night . . . and of his teeth. Maybe it was the lighting from the moon that had made them look weird, but I couldn't overcome the pit in my stomach. I was confused. I was happy to be cared for, but I worried that I'd dived straight into a life with the first person to give me full attention. I struggled to make sense of myself that night, and my dreams turned into nightmares. I tossed and turned trying to get comfortable. The single pillow was hard and didn't stay cold on either side long. I went in and out of consciousness, fighting between sleep and the nightmares that were full of warnings telling me to open my eyes . . . so I opened them.

Everything was different now. The cot was no longer a bed but a floor. The blanket that was covering me was torn, and my left ankle was chain-wrapped. I was confused. I was asleep in bed wasn't I? Maybe this was another nightmare. Maybe my eyes were still closed. I blinked repeatedly, hoping to wake up. However, the situation didn't change. The whole cottage looked different as well. The air was eerily quiet, and a faint smell of something burning left a metallic taste in my mouth.

“Help! Help! Someone help me!” I began screaming.

I don't know why I thought it mattered. For all I knew, we were in the middle of nowhere.

The door slammed open, and I grabbed the blanket and scurried into a corner. I covered all of my face but my eyes. It was him. He stood taller, darker, inhuman. There was that animal smell again. I wanted to gag. It was very strong. I covered my eyes and looked away.

“Give me that!” the man yelled as he swung the blanket off me.

I wanted to scream, but when I opened my mouth, the man placed an apple in it.

“Hush, little one,” he demanded. “Be a good girl and eat the fruit.”

The fruit? Why did I have to eat the fruit? Then it hit me. The euphoric feeling I'd felt earlier. The happiness was all a delusion. The fruit wasn't good. This fruit was poisoned.

I spat at him, and the apple hit the ground under me. This made the man angry.

“You ungrateful little wench!” he growled.

His teeth were visible as he leaned into my face. I could feel his hot breath on the tip of my nose. His teeth were sharp, and his mouth was covered in blood. The metallic taste in my mouth. That's what it was.

“Who are you?” I whispered. My words came out softly, but I was so scared I was almost choking on them.

The man traced my face with his fingers, and his nails were long and sharp. I could feel them dig into my skin. He cut the left side of my cheek before he stood up and laughed violently. I watched him fling himself around laughing. “Who am I? Oh, sweet child, I am no one.” He began to dance around the room. His words sounded like a song.

“You see, darling, I am no human nor savior. You are simply broken. A sad, sad little soul. You were always my favorite, too.”

He went on to explain that for months he had visited the orphanage searching for the saddest child there. Then he found me. He spoke about how my tragedy made him excited. He needed a child suffering from trauma to satisfy his hunger. Those bones I’d found in the yard? They were the remains of other meals. He’d traveled the world eating all kinds of creatures—humans, fairies, mermaids, and even angels . . . but none could fill the hole in his belly. No one except me. The information made no sense to me. I was just a child who had lost her family to a storm. I wasn’t some sad little girl who needed saving. This man was a fool. I wasn’t what he was looking for. He had the wrong person!

“Excuse me, mister—”

“You may not have my name, child. There is no need for manners.”

“Fine,” I replied. “I’m not what you’ve been searching for.”

“You’re not? Oh, don’t be silly! You’re so funny!”

He started laughing again.

“Stop that!” I screamed.

The man stopped, and silence filled the room again. I could hear my heart beating out of my chest but nothing else. The man began to pace back and forth, making me very nervous. He continued to stay quiet. I had to find a way out of there, but I didn’t know what he was or what he was capable of. All I knew was that he was evil and wanted to hurt me.

I fought with the chains on my ankle. The noise made the man upset. He pulled me up by my shoulder and pushed me against the wall. He jerked me repeatedly, almost making me want to vomit. His eyes were empty, and his skin was scorching hot. He looked like something out of the stories my mother would read to my brother and me to scare us. What was that one story? The demon named . . . The demon?! That was it! He wasn’t human! He was a demon! If the stories were true, then this man *did* want to kill me! I tried to wiggle out of his arms. I fought against his strength. This shocked him. He wasn’t used to his prey fighting back.

He reached for me, but I dodged his hands and whipped the chain around to pull him down to the floor beside me. Startled, he started to claw at my leg.

Waves of pain shot through me, but I ignored them as I pulled at the jacket he was wearing. I had to push him off. A knife fell out of his pocket, and I immediately reached for it. He did, too. I was able to snatch it first, and I plunged it into his side. He screeched, almost bursting my eardrums. I repeatedly stabbed his side, crying and panicking.

Please die, I thought to myself. Please.

The man's body went limp, and I bent down to listen to his heart. Nothing. I frantically searched the rest of the jacket for anything useful. A key! I used it. The chain now off my ankle and the man dead, I rushed out of the house holding the knife and ran down the road until the cottage was a blur behind me.

~ O ~

"Is that it, Mommy?" My little girl looked up at me as I closed the book and set it down.

"Yes, baby. That's the story of the brave girl who fought to survive." Her cheeks blushed red as she hugged me tightly. It was her bedtime, but she'd wanted to hear her favorite story one more time.

"It's bedtime now, little one." I picked her up and laid her in the basket beside my bed.

I stared at the wall in reflection. I was thankful for my little girl and my life. I grasped the necklace around my neck and felt the small knife hanging there. I had worn that knife religiously for fifteen years.

"Thank you," I whispered before I closed my eyes.

Damaged Love

Sammie Browning

I saw you today as you walked past as if all was right in the world.
Did you know the price I would pay for agreeing to go down to the cellar to play?

I saw your feet today as you paused outside the cellar windowsill.
Did you hear me as I cried out for help?
Did you hear as innocence left my body
Or notice as I adorned the cloak of shame?

Did you see the progression of the window's damages?
I watched the chip in the glass of the cellar window turn into a roadmap of cracks,
Its damages incomparable to that of my own.

I saw your feet today as you paused outside the cellar windowsill.
Did you hear me cry out for help as you turned to walk away?
Years of pervasive intrusions—of pain disguised as love—
and people wonder why I have issues with trust.

Cosplay Cinderella

Hollis Thompson

Cast of Characters

ALLIE, 20s, ELLA's stepsister

AUBRY, 40s, ELLA's godmother

ELLA, 18-20s, stepsister to ALLIE and HANNAH

HANNAH, 20s, ALLIE's stepsister

SAMSON LEE, 18-20s, prince of fandom

STEPSISTER, 40s, ALLIE's stepmother

Secondary Characters

ATTENDANT, 30s, a music-booth proprietor at the Tyler Comic Convention

ATTENDEES, various ages, people attending the Tyler Comic Convention

SECURITY GUARDS, 30s, security officers for the Tyler Comic Convention

Time and Place

The action takes place at Ella's stepmother's home and at the Tyler Comic Convention. The time is the present.

Scene 1

(Lights rise on HANNAH and ALLIE getting the last parts of their costumes and makeup ready in ELLA's STEPMOTHER's house. The stage is divided in half, representing two rooms. The half on SL is the prep/makeup room with at least one mirror, a worktable, and a toiletry set. The other side is a makeshift video set. One camera and a tripod stand on that side along with a cheap greenscreen and a ring light. The characters are currently in the prep room. HANNAH is dressed as the Margot Robbie Harley Quinn and ALLIE is dressed as the Uma Thurman Poison Ivy. ALLIE looks into a mirror with annoyance. ELLA enters; SHE is carrying many shopping bags and other costume materials as best SHE can.)

ALLIE: Ella, you did a terrible job with this makeup design!

ELLA: Please give me just a minute, Allie. You know I just got back from a run to the craft store.

ALLIE: So what? You do that all the time. It's your job.

(*ELLA manages to put the things down.*)

ELLA: What's wrong with it, Allie?

ALLIE: It's not screen-accurate at all. At all! All those fan boys will pick up on that instantly. Did you even look at the reference pictures?

ELLA: Let me see.

(*SHE looks at ALLIE's face.*)

It's fine. You look just like Uma Thurman.

ALLIE: No, I don't, you moron. She had brick-red lipstick, not copper!

ELLA: Fine. I'll find some brick red and fix it.

ALLIE: As if! I'll do it myself. I can't have you mess it up again.

(*ALLIE storms offstage.*)

HANNAH: She's always such a diva around you.

(*ELLA shrugs.*)

ELLA: I've gotten used to it. How's your costume?

HANNAH: To be honest, I'm not totally comfortable with it.

ELLA: Neither was Margot.

HANNAH: Really?

ELLA: Yeah. She hated it.

(*STEPSISTER and ALLIE enter. THEY hit ELLA with the door.*)

STEPSMOTHER: Hannah, we just got some fabulous news! They announced a new guest at the convention, and you're not going to believe who it is—Samson Lee!

(*ELLA emerges from behind the door.*)

ELLA: Stan Lee's grandson?

STEPSMOTHER: The prince of fandom! Oh, wouldn't it be great if one of you two could seduce him? We'll have to come up with something special for this con!

ALLIE: I bet I could get him! A fanboy is a fanboy, and I'm their kryptonite.

STEPSMOTHER: I know you could, Allie, but Hannah's also got some super curves that could break his defenses.

ALLIE: But cosplay is ninety percent attitude, and I've got that in spades. And does Hannah, really?

HANNAH: Shut up, Allie! You're just jealous because my last shoot got more likes than yours.

STEPSMOTHER: Enough. Let's get this promo filmed. They're paying me good money.

(*STEPSMOTHER, ALLIE, and HANNAH cross into the other room. STEPMOTHER gets behind the camera as ALLIE and HANNAH get in front of it. ELLA stays in the prep room, unpacks the supplies, and tidies up.*)

Three, two, one . . . go!

ALLIE: Hey, comic fans! You're not going to want to miss the Tyler Comic Con!

HANNAH: Yeah, puddins, it's going to have celebrity guests like Linda Young, Gail Simone, and Samson Lee! It's gonna be fun!

ALLIE: And I'll be there personally. I'll bring everything you see here . . . plus everything you don't!

HANNAH: And I'll be there, too! We just can't wait to see you!

(*THEY strike poses.*)

STEPSISTER: And take! Great job, girls! We got it in one.

(*THEY relax and cross into the other room.*)

ALLIE: Well, we've been making videos for like ten years.

STEPSISTER: And doing a fabulous job . . . despite Ella's blunders.

(*ALLIE picks up a lipstick and walks over to ELLA. SHE smears it on ELLA's face.*)

ALLIE: Get the color right next time.

STEPSISTER: Come on, girls. We've got costume planning to do. Ella, make sure that you finish the costumes for this week's shoots on schedule.

(*THEY leave ELLA alone. SHE takes a cloth and wipes off the lipstick. SHE looks at herself in the mirror. Then SHE throws the cloth to the floor. SHE starts spreading out material on a worktable and brings out a plastic box from somewhere hidden on the stage. SHE opens it and takes out a mask she is working on and a podcasting microphone. SHE sets up the microphone and plugs it into her phone. SHE talks into it as she works on costumes.*)

ELLA: Hey, Mom. It's me again. I've been thinking a lot about masks lately. Aside from those who wear a big *S* on their chests, pretty much every superhero has one. They're so simple and yet, so complicated. Just pull a little bit of fabric over your face, and you could be a different person! No one who sees you will know it's you. You're free. You can build a whole new persona from scratch—one that doesn't have all the baggage of the one with your face. Or you can finally be the person you really are on the inside that you can never show anyone with the plastered façade you use in daily life. For some people, the mask reveals the truth that their faces conceal. Allie and Hannah don't wear masks very often except for little domino masks that conceal nothing. That seems like Allie's style. She wants everyone to see her, but I'm not sure about Hannah. Miss you, Mom. I wish you could talk back to me and help me understand them.

(*Blackout.*)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on the house. STEPMOTHER is in the SR room getting the camera ready. ELLA, HANNAH, and ALLIE are in the SL room. ALLIE is dressed as Zero-suit Samus, and HANNAH is wearing a robe. ALLIE is making a video on her phone. HANNAH is sitting in a chair.)

ALLIE: Hey, Internet! This cosplay is for all you *Smash Brothers* fans out there! I know you've been fantasizing about her since you played the game with your friends after school, and now I'm giving you a look at her in real life. If you like what you see, you can get on my *OnlyFans* and see the photo shoot I did for this one—it includes the energy whip—but you can only see if you pay up first, so smash those piggy banks!

(SHE stops the video and switches something on her phone. SHE then points the phone at her rear and takes a picture. SHE brings the phone back to her face.)

This one is going on my butt page!

(ELLA rolls her eyes. ALLIE catches it out of the corner of her eye and turns at her.)

What's your problem, Ella?

ELLA: Nothing.

(ALLIE puts the phone down and crosses to her.)

ALLIE: Come on. You're looking down on me!

ELLA: Allie, if you really want to know, I'll tell you, but I think it would be better for all of us if you just let me go.

(ALLIE shoves her.)

ALLIE: Look, dweeb, you would be doing the exact same thing if you were as hot as me.

(ELLA speaks under her breath.)

ELLA: Oh, yeah. It's not like we look similar at all.

ALLIE: Hundreds of men pay to see me. They lose their freaking minds when I come to cons. I practically have an army of little fanboys to do my bidding because I'm beautiful and fierce and not afraid to show it!

ELLA: But it's not you, Allie. It's the characters. That's who they want to see.

ALLIE: So what? The characters are just templates. I'm the one who makes Samus and Ivy and the rest real for them.

ELLA: Look. If you just wanted to take pictures of yourself and sell them online, that's up to you. What I have a problem with is how you capitalize on and encourage people to fetishize characters that mean a whole lot more than that to people like me.

ALLIE: A fangirl through and through.

ELLA: Well, at least I came by it honestly.

(ELLA flees offstage. ALLIE pursues her. HANNAH takes a deep breath. STEPMOTHER calls to her from the other room.)

STEPSISTER: Get ready, Hannah! It's just about time for the livestream.

HANNAH: I'll be ready in just a minute.

(HANNAH gets up from the chair. Obviously very uncomfortable, SHE goes over to the mirror and takes off her robe. SHE is wearing the slave-Leia costume from Star Wars: Return of the Jedi. SHE looks at her reflection, and tears come to her eyes. SHE quickly grabs a cloth and dabs at her eyes before they can mess up her makeup.)

STEPSISTER: It's time, Hannah!

HANNAH: Coming.

(HANNAH walks into the other room.)

STEPSISTER: Hannah! You're a knockout! Just wait 'til they get an eyeful of this. We're going to be raking in the dough . . . unlike with those piano videos you keep wasting your free time making. I'm telling you, Hannah, this is where the attention is! Now get ready for take one of slave-Leia cosplay.

HANNAH: Mom, are you sure that's what this is called? I heard Ella call it Hutt-Slayer Leia.

STEPSISTER: I've never heard it called that.

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise on STEPMOTHER in the SR room editing video on a computer. ELLA enters.)

ELLA: Excuse me.

STEPSMOTHER: What is it, Ella? I'm in a time crunch.

ELLA: Sorry. It's just—I haven't gotten to go to a comic con in years. I have some time off from work, and I was wondering if I could go with you all this time?

STEPSMOTHER: I don't know about that. I have so many social-media posts that I need your help to publish and push. I think you're going to be very busy over the next couple of days. The family show business has to keep going.

ELLA: I know I can get it all done before the con starts on Friday!

STEPSMOTHER: Ella—

ELLA: Just tell me what posts need to be done!

STEPSMOTHER: You know what? If you can make five posts per platform per day on all our social-media platforms and finish editing the next three commercials we have waiting, you can come with us to the con.

ELLA: They'll be finished! Thank you.

STEPSMOTHER: I'll believe it when I see it, and, Ella, if you come short, don't come crying to me.

(ELLA nods. STEPMOTHER goes back to her work as if ELLA does not exist. ELLA goes into the other room and gets on her laptop. A projection lights up above her that shows her messaging AUBRY. AUBRY speaks in a voiceover.)

AUBRY: Well, what says the evil stepmother?

ELLA: Well, she said I could go if I make five posts per platform per day and finish editing all the videos.

AUBRY: I'll nominate her for Mother of the Year. What a jerk!

ELLA: How is that even possible, Auntie Aubry? I put on a brave face, but I have no idea what I'm going to do!

AUBRY: You have all the photos, footage, and graphics, right?

ELLA: Mummy dumped them all in the cloud, but I still have to sort through them all.

AUBRY: You won't be doing that alone. I'm going to get you to this con!

ELLA: Auntie Aubry! Thank you so much!

AUBRY: I've been doing this a long time, kid. We can make it happen. Besides, I'm going to the con, and it's not every day I get a chance to see my goddaughter.

ELLA: I can't wait to see you! I love you, Auntie!

AUBRY: I love you, too, Ella. Now let's get cracking!

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(Lights rise on STEPMOTHER in the SR room editing video on a computer. ELLA enters.)

ELLA: All done.

STEPSMOTHER: Excuse me?

ELLA: All the posts have been made.

STEPSMOTHER: There's no way.

(SHE pulls out her phone and begins looking at it in shock.)

ELLA: I know it will take you a while to look at them all, so I'll just go ahead and get ready to go to the con tomorrow!

(STEPSMOTHER looks up at ELLA.)

STEPSMOTHER: Ella, I'm not taking you to the con.

ELLA: What? We had an arrangement.

STEPSMOTHER: My daughters are going to be in amazing costumes, and you would be an eyesore in your everyday clothes. I won't have that hurting their image.

ELLA: I can make a cosplay in time.

STEPSMOTHER: Oh, please! Having you in a ratty little thrown-together costume would be even worse.

ELLA: You agreed to let me go! I never get to go with you. I have to do all the craft-store runs, work on the costumes and make-up, and do just as many social-media posting as anyone else, but I never get any credit . . . and I never even get to be one of your roadies! Please! These conventions are the only thing I have left of my parents.

STEPSISTER: If you don't like working for this family, you can always move out. I'm sure an industrious person like you has a car and savings and the personal credit to get an apartment, right?

(Beat.)

That's what I thought, loser. You're not going. Grow up and get over it.

(SHE goes back to the computer.)

If you're going to cry, then get out of my face. Actually, you should do that anyway.

(ELLA runs out of the room. Blackout.)

Scene 5

(Lights rise on ELLA. SHE is crying in the makeup room. SHE is holding her phone and looking at a picture of her parents.)

ELLA: I'm sorry to disappoint you. I didn't grow up to be a hero. There's nothing super about me—just a geeky girl with no future and no family.

(A knock sounds at the door. ELLA looks up. SHE tries to dry her tears, but SHE realizes that it's useless. SHE gets up and answers the door. AUBRY walks in.)

Auntie Aubry!

AUBRY: In the flesh, girl!

(THEY hug. ELLA starts crying more.)

Oh, Ella. I'm so sorry. I saw the jerk and her brats walk out without you, so I decided to come to you.

ELLA: Thank you.

AUBRY: So the evil stepmom broke her word. What a surprise. It's going to be okay, Ella. You're auntie's here now. Let's get you cleaned up and back to the con.

ELLA: I can't go there! What if they see me?

AUBRY: You're not thinking straight, girl! This is a comic con, remember? You're going to cosplay. As long as you do one with a mask, they'll never even know it's you.

ELLA: But I don't have one ready.

AUBRY: Ella, you can make costumes better than anything those two have ever worn with practically nothing, and you've got your cosplay mom here to help. You're going to blow them out of the water!

ELLA: Oh, Auntie! You're my hero.

(AUBRY is deeply moved.)

AUBRY: Aw, now you're going to make me cry. Come on. Let's get to work. What character do you want to do? I suggest a hero.

(ELLA thinks for a moment.)

ELLA: There's only one who's perfect for this occasion.

(Lights begin rising and falling on ELLA and AUBRY in a montage; THEY move through different stages of working on a costume. Finally, lights rise only on the SR side of the stage to show AUBRY waiting. ELLA speaks from offstage.)

ELLA: All right, Auntie Aubry, it's time for the billion-dollar debut of . . .

(ELLA enters dressed as Batgirl. SHE strikes a pose.)

Batgirl!

(Blackout.)

Scene 6

(Lights rise on the comic con at the convention center. Vendors are set up all over the stage, and ATTENDEES walk around everywhere. ELLA and AUBRY are CS. AUBRY is now dressed as Padme Amidala. ATTENDEES often stare in amazement at ELLA's cosplay.)

ELLA: I think I actually forgot how massive cons are!

AUBRY: They've gotten bigger than the ones your parents and I used to go to. By the way, I entered you in the cosplay competition.

ELLA: You did what?!

AUBRY: Ella, this costume is amazing, and you deserve recognition for your work.

ELLA: But Allie and Hannah are in that competition! My cover will be blown!

AUBRY: Don't worry! We're going to work to keep your secret identity. Just be calm.

ELLA: I'll try.

AUBRY: Look at that Pokeballs-by-Crayle booth! Have you ever seen terrariums so cute!

(AUBRY leads ELLA to a booth. STEPMOTHER dressed as Eartha Kitt's Catwoman, ALLIE dressed as Black Cat, and HANNAH dressed as Ichigo Momomiya enter. THEY look at ELLA.)

STEPSMOTHER: So that's the Batgirl everyone's been talking about.

HANNAH: She looks amazing!

ALLIE: So we have competition! She may have the nerd stuff, but we are *way* sexier.

STEPSMOTHER: That's the attitude, Allie! Now come on. We can't get distracted from our main objective—Samson Lee.

(THEY walk across the stage and exit. SAMSON enters dressed as Nightwing. HE scopes out the people in cosplay and notices ELLA. HE is obviously impressed. SHE looks up from the terrariums and sees SAMSON. SHE crosses to him.)

ELLA: Your Nightwing costume is superb!

(SAMSON trips over his words.)

SAMSON: Uh, thank you.

ELLA: Did you make it out of foam or Worbla?

SAMSON: Worbla. I thought it worked better for this one because of how sleek you can get it.

ELLA: Of course! The acrobatic Nightwing can't be wearing anything bulky.

SAMSON: Exactly. And, your cosplay is amazing, too! You look like you just walked off a comic page.

ELLA: Maybe I did.

(An ATTENDEE comes up to ELLA.)

ATTENDEE 1: Could I please get a picture? You look so awesome!

ELLA: Sure!

(SHE strikes a pose. SAMSON politely steps out of the frame.)

ATTENDEE 1: Actually, I meant a picture of you both. Batgirl/Nightwing is one of my favorite ships.

SAMSON: Oh, uh, sure.

(HE gets next to ELLA and takes a pose. ATTENDEE 1 takes a picture with her phone.)

ATTENDEE 1: Thank you so much!

ELLA: You're welcome! Thank you!

(*The ATTENDEE exits.*)

That was so cool!

SAMSON: Yeah.

ELLA: Hey. Did you come here all alone?

SAMSON: Well, I have one friend here, but he's busy with a booth right now.

ELLA: Do you want to hang out with my aunt and me for a while? Nobody should be alone at a comic con.

SAMSON: Well, I don't want to impose.

ELLA: It wouldn't be an imposition! Not to be weird or anything, but Nightwing and Batgirl do kinda go together. I think a lot of other people would like to get pictures with both of us.

(*AUBRY crosses to them.*)

AUBRY: Hey, kiddo! It looks like you've made a friend.

ELLA: Isn't his costume great! He modeled the whole thing out of Worbla!

AUBRY: Wow! You probably nearly burnt your fingertips off.

SAMSON: You have no idea.

AUBRY: Actually, I do.

ELLA: I'm sorry. This is my Aunt Aubry Stein.

SAMSON: *The Aubry Stein* is your aunt!

AUBRY: I see my reputation precedes me.

SAMSON: It certainly does.

ELLA: I invited him to hang out with us for a while. His friend left him stranded.

AUBRY: Sounds good to me. I heard that there's a cool cape-and-cloak vendor somewhere. Do you want to check it out?

ELLA: That sounds amazing!

SAMSON: Agreed. Maybe I could finally get a decent Jedi cloak for my *Phantom Menace* Obi-Wan costume.

AUBRY: Ah! A man after my own heart!

(*THEY exit. Blackout.*)

Scene 7

(Lights rise on the comic con. ELLA, SAMSON, and AUBRY enter, now carrying shopping bags.)

SAMSON: I don't care what anyone says. The PS1 Spider-Man game was great!

ELLA: Even with those dated graphics?

SAMSON: That just gives it character. It's fun—good, clean, wholesome, unadulterated fun. That's what I feel so many games are missing today. Everyone is trying so hard to be heavy and philosophical, but if you lose the fun, it's not a game anymore.

ELLA: I get that. I've got enough heavy stuff in my own life. I don't need it in a video game.

AUBRY: Well, I'm getting hungry. How about we find some food, and I'll treat you both for lunch?

SAMSON: Thanks for the offer, but there's no way I'm letting Aubry Stein buy me lunch. I'll take care of it.

AUBRY: It's really not a problem. I can tell by now that you're not trying to bum stuff off of us.

SAMSON: Look. I've got some privileges with the food vendors. It won't be a problem for me to get us some food. Just wait here and give me a few minutes.

(SAMSON exits.)

AUBRY: Well, he's super nice.

ELLA: Yeah. He's definitely not a poser.

AUBRY: While we have a minute, we need to talk about your exit strategy for today.

ELLA: What do you mean?

AUBRY: I mean you've been turning a lot of heads today. The evil stepmom has probably already heard about the incredible Batgirl. Though she's probably too dense to think that this cosplayer could be you, we need to make sure that she has no reason to start thinking that.

ELLA: Agreed. What do you have in mind?

AUBRY: Well . . .

(THEY begin speaking in hushed tones. STEPMOTHER, ALLIE, and HANNAH enter on the other side of the stage.)

STEPSMOTHER: Look at that, girls! That Batgirl cosplayer is with Aubry Stein!

ALLIE: Well, that explains where she got the costume from. Stein's too old to be pretty anymore, so she's probably put this young thing in the competition so she can relive the glory days through her.

HANNAH: Isn't Aubry Stein Ella's godmother?

STEPSMOTHER: As a matter of fact, she is. Come on, girls. Let's wrap things up here and get back home for some rest before tomorrow. I think that we might have a surprise waiting for us.

(THEY exit.)

AUBRY: So . . . twenty more minutes. That's all the time we'll have to eat with Nightwing.

ELLA: Got it.

(SAMSON enters with some food. HE crosses to ELLA and AUBRY and gives it to them.)

SAMSON: See? I'm a man of my word.

ELLA: Thanks!

(SHE starts eating very quickly.)

SAMSON: You know, you could take time to chew.

(*ELLA pauses, embarrassed.*)

AUBRY: Sorry. We're actually on a pretty tight schedule. We have to leave soon to prep our cosplays for tomorrow.

SAMSON: Come on. It can't be that much prep, can it?

ELLA: More than you'd expect.

SAMSON: Well, what are you doing? Another mainstream superhero, I guess? That would give you the most visibility.

ELLA: Visibility isn't everything. This is also art.

SAMSON: Sure, but a competitor like you is still going to go for those recognizable characters. Do you even know any non-DC or Marvel heroes?

ELLA: Excuse me?!

SAMSON: What? I mean, you dressed up as Batgirl for the first day of the con. Not exactly the most low-key choice you could have made.

ELLA: And you dressed up as Nightwing, Mister Low-Key!

SAMSON: Well, I've got one in my back pocket that probably one percent of the people at this con will recognize.

ELLA: Yeah? I'll come tomorrow in one that you have to be a real superhero fanatic to recognize! You just try to find me—that is, if you're nerd enough to tell me who it is to my face.

SAMSON: You're on!

AUBRY: Cool it off, kids. We have to go now. Thanks for the food.

SAMSON: No problem. 'Bye.

(*ELLA sticks her tongue out at him. SHE and AUBRY exit. Blackout.*)

Scene 8

(Lights rise on ELLA's STEPMOTHER's house. STEPMOTHER, ALLIE, and HANNAH enter SL.)

ALLIE: There's no sign of the little fangirl.

STEPSMOTHER: That's what I was expecting. I think she's flown the coop. Ella!

(ELLA enters from the other room. SHE is dressed exactly as SHE was before making her Batgirl costume, and her makeup is visibly messed up from crying.)

ELLA: I'm here.

(STEPSMOTHER starts in surprise.)

STEPSMOTHER: You've been here the whole time?

ELLA: You told me I couldn't go to the comic con. Where else would I be?

STEPSMOTHER: Nowhere.

(STEPSMOTHER storms off, embarrassed.)

ALLIE: Well, I'm gonna crash. I'll need that beauty sleep for another day of hunting.

(ALLIE exits. HANNAH sits down, tired.)

ELLA: How did it go, Hannah?

HANNAH: Fine.

(ELLA sits next to her.)

ELLA: You don't look totally fine.

HANNAH: It's just . . . there were some weird guys at the con like always. One guy stuck his phone up my skirt, and another one grabbed my butt while we were taking a picture. It's not the first time stuff like that has happened, obviously, but

HANNAH (CONT.): . . . when we decided to do this cat theme, I thought that doing *Tokyo Mew Mew* would keep that from happening to me—I mean, the anime is for kids! Apparently, that didn't matter.

ELLA: Those guys are animals. Your cosplay had nothing to do with it. Did your mom report them to security or anything?

HANNAH: No. Ever since we started doing the cosplay stuff when we were pre-teens, Mom always says that security won't do anything about that sort of thing. Allie says it's just part of cosplay.

ELLA: It shouldn't be that way, and it doesn't have to be.

HANNAH: Yeah, well, there's a lot of screwed-up stuff that we still have to live with, Ella. They treat you like crap while you do most of the work on the costumes, and I have to dress up in these glorified swimsuits and webcam for perverts on *OnlyFans*.

ELLA: Why don't you just tell her that you hate doing this?

HANNAH: Right! How's that ever worked out for you?

(*Beat.*)

It doesn't even matter. My digital footprint is shot. Those pictures will always be out there.

ELLA: You're in costume.

HANNAH: None of them with enough fabric to cover me up.

(*HANNAH gets up and exits. Blackout.*)

Scene 9

(Lights rise on the comic con. ELLA dressed as Scorcher and AUBRY dressed as Belle enter.)

AUBRY: Now remember that we have a strict curfew tonight. We have to make sure that you're back home and out of costume long before the others get there.

ELLA: I know, Auntie Aubry. I'll be good.

AUBRY: That means, as much as I hate this for you, that you can't go to the Cosplay Ball tonight—not even if that handsome Nightwing asks you out.

ELLA: Oh, come on!

AUBRY: I saw how well you two were getting along.

ELLA: This isn't a fairy-tale con, Auntie Aubry. We won't be getting hitched at the end of it.

AUBRY: But I could tell that you'd be good friends.

ELLA: Maybe. Now let's go look at that artist's booth again. I really like the print of Spider-Gwen she had!

AUBRY: Cool. I'll buy it for you.

ELLA: You don't have to do that!

AUBRY: Ella, I only get to see you once in a blue moon. Please let me spoil you a little.

ELLA: You're the best, Auntie Aubry!

(ELLA hugs her.)

AUBRY: It's the least I can do.

(THEY walk over to a booth. SAMSON enters dressed as Professor Caleb and notices ELLA. HE walks up to them as THEY finish buying the art.)

SAMSON: So you chose Scorcher as your obscure character. I have to admit, I'm impressed. You have to be a true superhero nerd to know about Kelly Edwards.

ELLA: Which is a shame because her books are so great! I mean, where else do you see a super-powered couple that hasn't become totally toxic?

SAMSON: Sure, but don't you think having Scorcher—a super-villain with fire powers—fall in love with a superhero who can control ice is kind of cliché? And his superhero name is Chill. I mean, I like the book, but maybe Edwards could have been a little more thoughtful.

ELLA: Whatever. The fire and ice thing totally works on a symbolic level, and, if you don't like Chill, you at least have to admit that he has a unique real name. Marty is much more interesting than Clark, Bruce, or Peter.

(Beat.)

So do you take back your insults from yesterday?

SAMSON: I cede the field.

ELLA: Good. It wouldn't do for Professor Caleb not to act like a gentleman.

SAMSON: You've read Gammons?!

ELLA: Not all of his books. I mean, there are so many! But I used to play the RPG a lot.

SAMSON: That thing is awesome! I still play it with friends sometimes.

AUBRY: The Gail Simmone Q-and-A is about to start. Do you still want to go?

ELLA: Yes!

(SHE turns to SAMSON.)

Now that you're back in my good graces, you may have the honor of accompanying us. I mean, if you want to.

SAMSON: Love to.

(*ELLA, AUBRY, and SAMSON exit. STEPMOTHER dressed as Hippolyta, ALLIE dressed as Black Widow, and HANNAH dressed as Kurisu Makise enter.*)

ALLIE: There's no sign of that Batgirl today. Either she's not here, or she's in a much lamer costume.

STEPSMOTHER: Let's not let her distract us, dears. Remember that Samson Lee is still our top priority. Now I've got a hot tip that he's been undercover cosplaying. Apparently, it's part of the cosplay competition the con has him judging. They want him to mingle with the contestants without their knowing it. Everyone thinks it's stupid, but, hey, it's a comic con. Today he's dressed as Professor Caleb.

ALLIE: What's that?

STEPSMOTHER: It's from some role-playing game. Here's a picture.

(*STEPSMOTHER hands ALLIE her phone.*)

Today we're going to divide and conquer. Fan out over the con. If people stop you for pictures, keep doing that and giving them our cards . . . but keep looking for Samson.

(*ALLIE nods and hands back the phone. SHE and STEPMOTHER go in opposite directions, looking through the crowd. Eventually, THEY exit. HANNAH slowly looks through the booths. SHE finds a music booth with a digital piano beside it at the far end of the stage. The booth is completely under the radar of the other ATTENDEES.*)

HANNAH: Hey. Do you mind if I just sit on that piano bench for a while?

ATTENDANT: Sure. Are you in some kind of trouble?

HANNAH: I'm just really tired. Thank you!

(*SHE takes a seat.*)

That's a really nice digital piano.

ATTENDANT: Well, thank you!

HANNAH: Isn't it one of the discontinued models from the Yamaha P-series?

ATTENDANT: Good eye! It's a discontinued model now, but it does a really great job for a relatively cheap price.

(*ELLA and SAMSON enter. ELLA looks out over all the hustle and bustle of the con.*)

ELLA: Isn't it beautiful?

SAMSON: You mean the con?

ELLA: Yeah. I can't quite put it into words.

SAMSON: For me, the reason a comic con is so special is because of the people. I mean, look at all of them! They come from all over the place just to be together for one weekend—just to get to maybe meet their favorite comic creator or actor or director so they can tell them how much their stories mean to them . . . and to see that they're not the only ones in the world who are nerdy. We get to see other people like us—people who binge-watch *Star Trek* and cry over Nineties' Disney movies and obsess over film scores. It's one great weekend that shows us we're not alone.

ELLA: Wow! That was really well-said.

SAMSON: Aw, thanks. So, uh, is this your first comic con?

ELLA: No, but it's my first one in a really long time. My parents used to go to a bunch of them when I was a kid.

SAMSON: So your parents are nerds, too! That makes sense.

ELLA: What about you? This can't be your first con.

SAMSON: No. I go to a lot of them. My grandpa used to take me all the time, and I guess it just stuck.

ELLA: That's cool! Do you two still go together sometimes?

SAMSON: He passed away.

ELLA: Oh, I'm so sorry.

SAMSON: Thank you. He was a great man, and I'm really honored to be his grandson.

ELLA: If you don't mind my asking, what was he like?

SAMSON: I'm sorry. It's just . . . I talk about him a lot, and I don't want to be disrespectful or ungrateful. I just get worn out doing that, you know? I know he wants me to be my own person, but everyone keeps comparing me to him and expecting me to be just like him. I'll always love him. I just want to live my own life.

ELLA: I get that, and—for what it's worth coming from some rando—I think you're a pretty great person, Professor Caleb. Not to mention a great cosplayer.

SAMSON: Thanks, Scorch.

(HANNAH has been inaudibly talking to the ATTENDANT the whole time. SHE sits down behind the keyboard.)

HANNAH: Do you mind if I play it?

ATTENDANT: Not at all! You can give a whole concert, if you want to. Maybe it'll attract more attention to the booth. The location they gave me sure hasn't helped me.

HANNAH: Thank you!

(HANNAH begins playing exceptionally beautiful music. This is obviously her true passion.)

SAMSON: Are you doing anything a couple hours from now? The Cosplay Ball is going on tonight, and we could go together—as friends, I mean. I'm not trying to be that creepy con-Romeo guy!

ELLA: That sounds like a lot of fun, but I can't. I'm sorry.

SAMSON: I understand. It's no big deal.

ELLA: I think you'd end up regretting taking me, anyway. I don't know any dance moves.

SAMSON: Not even ballroom dancing?

(ELLA shakes her head.)

Every nerd should know some ballroom dancing! It's like knowing enough sword fighting to show off to little kids when you cosplay a fantasy character.

ELLA: Well, that's a hole in my database, then.

(ELLA looks at the keyboard and suddenly recognizes HANNAH.)

Hannah?!

(SHE runs over to HANNAH. SAMSON follows.)

That was some amazing playing!

HANNAH: Oh. Thanks.

SAMSON: Yeah! It sounded really great!

(HANNAH stares at him intently.)

HANNAH: It's you! Samson Lee.

ELLA: What?!

SAMSON: Please keep it down!

(ELLA turns to SAMSON.)

ELLA: You're Samson Lee?!

SAMSON: Yeah.

ELLA: How could you hang out with me for so long and never mention that?!

SAMSON: You never asked.

(Beat.)

I would really like to thank you. I've had more fun hanging out at a con with someone who didn't know my name than I've had in a while. You made me feel like I was someone people could really like to be around—completely apart from my grandpa. In gratitude, I'd like to give you your first ballroom dancing lesson right here. Unless that's too weird, in which case, I can do something else for you.

ELLA: Well, as long as we stay back here where no one can see what a klutz I am, I think I'd actually like to learn some dancing—if it really will help with cosplay like you said.

SAMSON: Every time I have to cosplay a Disney prince, it has!

ELLA: Ugh! So you've cosplayed one of them before!

SAMSON: For some hospitals, yeah. It's amazing what you'll put yourself through for kids.

(To HANNAH.)

Can you play something we could dance to?

HANNAH: Sure!

(HANNAH starts playing, and SAMSON teaches ELLA a basic ballroom dance. ALLIE and STEPMOTHER enter from different places and meet each other.)

ALLIE: I can't find a trace of this guy anywhere! Are you sure he's really at this con?

(STEPSMOTHER looks intently over the con floor, sees SAMSON and ELLA, and recognizes him.)

STEPSMOTHER: There he is!

(SHE points him out to ALLIE.)

ALLIE: Great! He's already dancing with some heifer.

(AUBRY enters looking somewhat frantic. SHE's looking for ELLA. STEPMOTHER notices her.)

STEPSISTER: And I think I know who it is. Come on, Allie. We've got some preparations to make.

(THEY exit. ELLA is starting to get the hang of dancing. SHE laughs and then meets SAMSON's eyes.)

SAMSON: Wow! You have amazing eyes.

ELLA: Thanks! Yours aren't so bad, either.

(AUBRY sees ELLA and runs to her.)

AUBRY: We are past time, kiddo! We have to leave right now!

SAMSON: What's wrong?

AUBRY: Now!

ELLA: I'm sorry.

(ELLA and AUBRY run across the stage. SAMSON runs after them.)

SAMSON: But I didn't even get your name!

(THEY outrun him and exit. HANNAH's phone rings. SHE picks it up.)

HANNAH: Hey, Mom.

(STEPSISTER speaks in a voiceover.)

STEPSISTER: Great job, Hannah! You found Samson before either of us, and you also got a scope on the main competition. We're pulling around to the exit nearest you right now, so get there ASAP. We're about to crush her.

(HANNAH puts the phone away and jumps up. SHE exits. Blackout.)

Scene 10

(Lights rise on ELLA and AUBRY in front of ELLA's STEPMOTHER's house.)

AUBRY: Get in there and change as fast as you can! I'll call you later to check on you.

ELLA: Thanks!

(ELLA runs into the house. AUBRY exits. Light rise inside the house as ELLA enters. STEPMOTHER and HANNAH are there waiting for her. ELLA freezes.)

STEPSMOTHER: Getting home a little late, aren't you, Ella?

(Beat.)

Did you really think I wouldn't notice that Aubry Stein had a little protégée? You must think I'm really stupid, don't you?

(ALLIE enters carrying many costumes. SHE dumps them on the floor.)

ALLIE: Look what I found under her bed!

(SHE holds up the Batgirl costume.)

It looks like the fangirl has been holding out on us.

STEPSMOTHER: On second thought, I think you might be the stupid one, Ella. You were so idiotic as to believe that you really could steal Samson Lee away from us.

ELLA: That's not what happened!

STEPSMOTHER: Don't insult my intelligence anymore. You spent two whole days with him. I saw the way you two were dancing out in the middle of the con—so sickly sweet. But you made one huge mistake. You wore a mask with every cosplay.

ALLIE: Which means when I wear this thing for the end of the contest tomorrow, I'll get the prize and the man. And it will look much better on me!

ELLA: You can't do that! That's my costume, and I won't let you desecrate it like that! My whole adult life I've been slaving for you because my dad chose you to be my family. I had to believe that he saw something good in you to make that choice. Please show me that he wasn't just conned!

STEPSMOTHER: You're not going to cry your way out of this, you little brat.

ELLA: Then give me back my costumes. I'll move out tonight.

STEPSMOTHER: You're not going to make any demands here.

ALLIE: Yeah. What can you do?

(ALLIE takes one of the other costumes and rips it in half. ELLA runs at her.)

ELLA: Stop it! Those are all I have!

STEPSMOTHER: Then this will show you that I can take everything from you if you cross me.

(ALLIE rips ELLA's hood off and slaps her. SHE then rips off ELLA's whole costume right down to ELLA's undershirt and shorts. HANNAH looks away and then runs out of the room. STEPMOTHER destroys the other costumes. ELLA falls on the floor and curls up into a ball.)

If you want to leave now, go ahead, but you'll only take what's on your back.

ALLIE: Bet Samson wouldn't find you so cool now.

(STEPSMOTHER and ALLIE exit. ELLA begins weeping. Her phone rings, but SHE does not answer. It rings again, but SHE stays on the floor. The call goes to voicemail. AUBRY speaks in a voiceover.)

AUBRY: Ella, it's your Auntie Aubry. I'm worried about you! Please pick up or send me a text so I'll know you're okay.

(Her phone goes off again. This time, ELLA picks up. It's a FaceTime call, and ELLA holds the phone towards her face. AUBRY's voiceover continues.)

Ella! What happened to you?!

ELLA: You were right, Auntie Aubry. I stayed too long! They found all the costumes, took my Batgirl one, and destroyed the rest.

AUBRY: Oh, Ella! I'm so sorry. Hang on. I'm coming to get you. I don't care what that poser says. You're coming home with me after this con.

ELLA: Oh, Auntie! I came clean to them. I tried to reach out to them and get them to see how I've been trying to make this work all these years, and they beat me up! I wanted to make it work. I really did! I was trying to keep what Dad made together, but it was all for nothing!

AUBRY: Ella, you could never rebuild your family. I'm sorry, baby, but you can't. Your dad couldn't, either. That life is gone—just as gone as those costumes. You can't just stitch them back together.

(ELLA stops crying and notices a Supergirl shield on the floor. SHE stands and picks it up.)

ELLA: You're right. I can't just stitch them back together no matter how hard I try . . . but I can make something new out of all these pieces.

(ELLA wipes her cheeks and begins picking up all the pieces of the costumes.)

I'll be waiting for you, Auntie Aubry. We're not going to get much sleep tonight. We've got a lot of work to do!

(Blackout.)

Scene 11

(Lights rise on the comic con. There is an elevated platform CS. Various cosplayers, including ALLIE in ELLA's Batgirl costume and HANNAH dressed as Elektra, are gathered on the other side of the stage for the announcement of the winner of the cosplay contest. STEPMOTHER dressed as Huntress watches from the audience. AUBRY dressed as Phoenix is at the edge of the audience on her phone. The crowd bursts into applause when SAMSON dressed as Luke Skywalker from Return of the Jedi steps onto the stage.)

AUBRY: Get ready! They're coming on stage now.

(STEPSMOTHER notices AUBRY. SAMSON, looking for ELLA, scans the cosplayers in the crowd. HE spots ALLIE and visibly relaxes. ALLIE locks eyes with him and smiles.)

SAMSON: Hey, everyone! It's really good to see you all!

(ELLA dressed in a mashup Supergirl/Cinderella costume enters and stands next to AUBRY on the edge of the crowd. STEPMOTHER sees her.)

AUBRY: Oh, Ella! You look so beautiful!

(STEPSMOTHER crosses to them.)

STEPSMOTHER: Ella! What do you think you're doing here in that shabby, thrown-together costume? Get out of here right now before someone sees you!

AUBRY: You need to get out of our faces before I call security.

STEPSMOTHER: Ella, I'm your mother, and I'm telling you to get out of here right now!

(AUBRY starts to say something, but ELLA stops her.)

ELLA: Auntie Aubry, I'm okay.

(AUBRY backs down but is obviously still fuming.)

SAMSON: I've been watching the con incognito all weekend, and I've had a blast seeing all your cosplays and even getting to hang out with some of you! It's been really hard to pick a winner because you're all winners. You've poured your heart and soul into an artform that makes other people happy.

STEPSISTER: So you finally grew a backbone? Fine. Look, brat, this is the best chance I've got to set up one of my kids with the life I should have had—fame, money, and an idiot man wrapped around her finger! And when Allie gets all that, I'll have my ticket to a posh retirement. I'm not going to let that go without a fight!

(STEPSISTER grabs ELLA by the shield on her chest and tries to rip her top off. AUBRY runs off to get security. ELLA grabs STEPMOTHER's hands and forces them off.)

ELLAS: Get your hands off me!

(ELLA pushes her away. HANNAH notices the fight and becomes paralyzed with fear.)

Your dreams won't keep me from living my life.

(AUBRY returns with two SECURITY GUARDS. STEPMOTHER lunges at ELLA. The GUARDS intervene and separate the two.)

SAMSON: You bring so much joy to people with your cosplay. You really do. Think about all the kids whose faces light up when they see you! And all the teens and adults who are completely amazed to see this character from a comic book brought to life in front of them!

AUBRY: You aren't her mother! That's me!

(The GUARDS take STEPMOTHER away. HANNAH visibly relaxes.)

SAMSON: That's why I want you to know that you're all winners in my book!

(The ATTENDEES cheer.)

But I've gotta give the award to someone, and I think that you'll all agree that one person has knocked it out of the park with her Batgirl cosplay.

(ALLIE strikes a suggestive pose. Everyone cheers and makes a path for her. SHE walks onto the platform with SAMSON. ELLA makes her way deeper into the cosplayers.)

SAMSON (CONT.): I was starting to get worried that I'd lost you.

ALLIE: Aw, you don't have to worry about that. How could I resist coming back to you?

(ALLIE hugs him much too closely and kisses him suddenly. ELLA stops in her tracks.)

SAMSON: Wow!

ALLIE: That's just a taste. How would you like to see what's under the cosplay after this?

SAMSON: Isn't that moving a little fast?

ALLIE: Not when you've found a real-life superhero!

SAMSON: Speaking of that, I'm kind of surprised that you didn't come as Scorcher today. That costume was awesome, too!

ALLIE: Oh, well. I thought Batgirl would be good for today.

SAMSON: Too bad. I almost dressed as Marty so that we could match, but do you think a Chill costume would be a little too much for this con?

ALLIE: Um. . . no. You could do a more chill cosplay here.

(SAMSON smirks.)

SAMSON: Freaking casual.

(SAMSON turns towards the crowd.)

I'm sorry folks, but this isn't the same Batgirl from Friday. She's just some poser.

(The ATTENDEES boo ALLIE. SAMSON searches for ELLA in the crowd. HE finally locks eyes with her.)

SAMSON (CONT.): But I see that the true one is here. Her eyes give her away.

(HE signals for her to join him. The crowd parts for her, and SHE makes her way onto the platform.)

You look absolutely super.

ELLA: Thank you. So do you, in a space-opera kind of way.

ALLIE: Samson, you're making a mistake! She's the poser! I'm the real one!

ATTENDEE 2: Yeah, right!

ATTENDEE 3: I'll bet she doesn't even know what version of Batgirl she's dressed as!

ATTENDEE 3: Yeah, noob! Do you even know what Babs is supposed to be like?

ALLIE: But I'm special! Can't you see that?

ATTENDEE 2: Get this snowflake off the stage!

(The ATTENDEES make an uproar, and some of them start throwing things at ALLIE. SHE retreats off the platform and exits.)

SAMSON: So I'm kinda awkward sometimes. I hung out with you for two days without even getting your name! Can you please tell me now?

ELLA: You went two days without telling me yours! I don't think it really counted as an introduction when someone else told me.

SAMSON: Fair enough. Hi! I'm Samson.

ELLA: Nice to meet you, Samson! I'm Ella.

(SAMSON smiles at her and turns to the crowd.)

SAMSON: Everyone, I'm honored to introduce the winner of the cosplay contest—Ella!

(The ATTENDEES go wild. ELLA turns to them and curtsies. As SHE brings her head up, SHE almost cries with joy.)

So are you tired of hanging out with me yet?

ELLA: Not by a long shot.

(Blackout.)

Scene 12

(Lights rise on the comic con. HANNAH enters and rips off a tablecloth from an empty booth. SHE folds it around herself like a dress to give herself more modesty than the Elektra costume provides.)

HANNAH: How's that for a cosplay?

(SHE goes to the music booth and begins talking with the ATTENDANT. As ATTENDEES move around, ALLIE becomes visible. SHE is sitting in a corner crying with the Batgirl mask laid on the floor beside her. ELLA and SAMSON enter.)

ELLA: So even though it's a little hard for me, I've chosen to move in with Auntie Aubry.

SAMSON: I'm really happy for you, Ella.

ELLA: Thanks, Samson. I'm really glad that I got to meet you!

SAMSON: Me, too! It's been really fun, and I hope that we run into each other at another con.

ELLA: We probably will. I'm planning on going with Auntie Aubry to every con she attends!

(ELLA notices ALLIE. SAMSON notices her, too. ELLA sighs.)

I still feel bad for her.

SAMSON: Maybe I was a little too harsh with her on stage.

ELLA: Oh, I think she deserved that! But I've never seen her like this, and it makes me sad.

(ELLA crosses to ALLIE.)

Hey.

(ALLIE looks up at her.)

ALLIE: What do you want?

ELLA: Well, I may never see you again, and I wanted to give you a better goodbye than earlier.

(*ELLA sits across from her.*)

Allie, you're beautiful, and you are *so* special. I wish you could really believe that. I wish you could see that you didn't have to steal my costume or put me down to try to prove it to yourself. You don't need approval and attention on *OnlyFans* to get love.

(*ELLA picks up the Batgirl mask.*)

You were right when you said that cosplay is ninety percent attitude. Batgirl is a hero. She's brave and smart and funny, and the really cool thing about her costume is that anybody can wear it. Anyone can put this mask on and then decide to be all those things.

(*SHE puts the mask on ALLIE.*)

Including you. I'm giving you this costume, Allie. I hope you keep cosplaying. I hope that putting on this costume helps you to see how valuable you are.

(*ELLA gets up and walks back to SAMSON. As THEY talk, ALLIE rises, collects herself, and exits.*)

SAMSON: That was amazing. How could you do that for her after everything she did to you?

ELLA: Haven't you seen a long-form anime? The villains always wind up becoming the hero's allies.

SAMSON: You think she'll turn out like one of them?

ELLA: I think so.

(*SHE notices HANNAH at the music booth.*)

Come on! We've got to say hi to the other evil stepsister.

(THEY cross to HANNAH, who is now sitting at the keyboard.)

ELLA (CONT.): Hey, Hannah!

HANNAH: Hey, Ella!

ELLA: You've already met Samson.

HANNAH: Hi!

SAMSON: Hey!

ELLA: I almost can't believe it. You're actually smiling!

HANNAH: Yeah, well . . . I had a lot of fun playing on this keyboard yesterday when you two danced. I've always loved music a lot more than cosplaying. Playing music has made this con way more fun for me!

ELLA: I'm so happy for you!

HANNAH: And I'm happy for you! Really, Ella.

ELLA: What are you going to do when you get home?

HANNAH: I don't know if I'm going home, to be honest with you.

ELLA: I understand. If you want, you can come live with me and Auntie Aubry.

HANNAH: Really? You'd want me around, even after everything that happened?

ELLA: You're always welcome with me, Hannah.

(Beat.)

HANNAH: Okay. I'd love to live with you! Thank you!

ELLA: Always.

(ELLA hugs her. Then SHE turns to SAMSON.)

ELLA (CONT.): You know, my biggest regret from this con is not getting to go with you to the Cosplay Ball, but I *am* wearing a princess cosplay—on my own terms, of course. Would you like to dance with me now? In a totally non-romantic, friend kind of way.

SAMSON: I'd love to!

ELLA: Hannah, do you mind?

HANNAH: Not at all!

(HANNAH plays, and ELLA and SAMSON dance in an obviously more-than-friends way. AUBRY enters from the opposite side of the stage.)

AUBRY: Way to go, kiddo!

(Lights slowly fade out.)

Conflict and Consequence

Michael Wells

Characters

CALISTA, 30s, wife of XENARES

CHORUS, various ages, ghoulish reanimated corpses

CORA, 6, daughter of CALISTA and XENARES

CRONE, elderly, A withered resident of the town.

XENARES, 30s, general for a fleet of the Spartan Army

Time and Place

The action takes place in a Greek village during the end of the Peloponnesian War.

(Huts of clay dot a semicircle around the playing space. Smoke billows from the windows and doors. The SR hut's entrance is blocked by a horseless cart that is tilted forward and loaded with goods and personal effects. Bodies of CHORUS members are scattered and piled upon one another; THEY are motionless and dead. UC of the playing space stands a lone moriai olive tree displaying early signs of wilting but still alive. A CRONE enters. SHE stumbles and falls at the feet of the olive tree. SHE speaks.)

CRONE: Gods! See what they do to us! The armies burn all they see. How the tree of Mother Gaia's blessing still stands is no small miracle, a work of the divine to be sure! Why then—oh, blessed beings—are we left to abandonment? Is this the love of our gods? We supplicate and worship the supreme deities in reverence, yet still you call our armies away to cross Poseidon's vast realm to conquer our enemies, the villains of Athenia. Ares casts doom upon our defenseless land. Even now, they pillage and destroy with no remorse. The horrid belly of Hades will overflow with the souls that will be lost on this day. Is there cause for such slaughter? Artemis—oh, huntress!—lay your hands on our youth, our farmers, our countrymen, that they may take up arms in your name and cast out these invaders. The wails! What horror the foul song fills me with. There is no mercy! Who's that? Who goes there? A glimmer. A glint. It blinds me so! Be you friend or foe? May the gods see fit to send to me a golden protector! The flames are glowing with the heat of Hephaestus's forge. Their light casts a brightness equal to gazing upon Helios's beauty. Be you friend or foe?

(*XENARES enters. HE is clad in armor of Spartan bronze topped off with a red-crested Spartan helmet. HE is carrying a torch in one hand and a xiphos short-sword in the other. HE runs the sword through the CRONE, who slumps against the tree before falling over.*)

XENARES: Another soul claimed to fill the goblet of my master. Ares! I call upon you! Hear me! Look upon the offerings I bring to your hallowed halls. Crimson rivers flow in your honor as I bask in your monumental glory. May these blood-soaked farmlands generate bountiful harvests in your name and the name of our people! As your faithful servant, every swing of my arm will be in your name while you grant me strength. May you never cease to grant me the will to destroy your enemies and their false idols. Permit me with your blessing the ability to bring ruin upon whole lineages. Should you ask for the head of a king, with the power you provide me, I'll take it with pride. Nations will kneel to your whim. I only ask that you guide my hands. Lead me in your light of fire and might. Tell me what I must do. I have given myself unto you wholly! My strength is yours! My power yours! Who else—*what* else can stand before us? My fleets await your command, oh lord. Speak into existence our next conquest!

(*The CHORUS members stir. Bodies untangle from the mass of corpses and creep to their feet in ghoulish fashion. THEY face XENARES and then encircle him. THEY chant.*)

CHORUS: Only in death does the mighty Xenares find revelry. The lust for blood hangs thickly in the air. Vrykolakas claw their way upwards from the depths of Hades to feast on the livers of children brought to end here. The land is ruined and dead. Burning are the crops. Mutilation is all that remains of the homeland. Xenares the strong. Xenares the brave. Xenares the murderer. Xenares the scoundrel. Every corner of the isles from Athens to Limnos will celebrate the end to your treacherous tyranny. Tartarus burns with the passion of hatred, filled to brimming by the slain. We, the victims of rage and pride, are sent by the gods of death and destruction to take your hide!

XENARES: Do you mock me? Do you not see yourself as a result of defiance against me? You there, you slain parties, do you wish to meet the harbinger of death and his steward again? You escape the River Styx, yet you do not rejoice but seek to return? Whoever sent you for me—*whoever* raised your images from beyond—shall fall to my master's sword! You know my name, and so you know that nothing at all can save you. Come! Let the lands hear a mighty clash worthy of Ares. You fight the servant of a smiteful god. Tremble before my visage like

XENARES (CONT.): Prometheus with the eagle. My god commands me to pick at your bones, your hollow corpses. I will cut out every last mocking tongue and silence every slight made against myself and my lord. It matters not your number. I am imbued with the might of Ares's wrath. You shall all be felled the same.

CHORUS: How foolish. Your taste for blood and power shall be your undoing. How troubling to think the god of war's own pet couldn't recognize his master's power.

(THEY stop moving and kneel.)

We bear a message from your very god—our god! Ares, in his infinite wisdom, sees fit to bestow upon you a great blessing should you complete the task laid before you.

XENARES: A moment ago you were ready to cast me into oblivion. Now you request of me a labor? If this is truly the work of my lord, he would speak to me directly. There is no cause for such showmanship. Let's hear it then. Speak the words you claim are my master's so that I may judge them and act upon them should they seem legitimate. Tell me now, before Cerberus dines on your corpses.

CHORUS: Invoke his name if you wish. The penalty for slander and the dissipation of faith in the face of our lord's miracle is an eternal torture. The heat of his chains holds back the fiercest of Titans in the realm of Hades. His power knows no mercy beyond that of a swift death. Manhood's struggle is the fruit of love born from him. Cities burn before him. Mountains crumble before him. Seas are split open at the beckoning of his call. Being the harbinger of his terrible love, do you the mighty Xenares wish to receive such exacting punishment upon refusing the great lord's wishes?

XENARES: You speak with reverence. That much is true. It is also true that I have beheld the wonders of Ares's fury. I know not if you move with me or against me. I should not wish to capture the ire of a god so tremendous in power and sway. Therefore, speak. Let me know of my lord's labor that it may be done.

CHORUS: Are you sure? Refusal would mean certain doom.

XENARES: I am quite sure. Sure like the fabled King Oedipus when confronted with the nefarious Sphynx. Sure as Helios travels his never-ending pilgrimage every waking day. There is no foe too big, no army too grand, and no single nation

XENARES (CONT.): that could stand in defiance of my lord. Tell me, upon whom must we focus our furious gaze?

CHORUS: Again with the destruction. Your eagerness to appease the lord of fire and anguish is the only reason he wishes to command your unyielding proof of devotion. You have played your part well, so now you must listen to the decree of Ares, our lord. He bids you to part with mortal sentiments that you shall take your rightful place amongst his hallowed halls as a revered warrior of wide renown.

XENARES: Is that all I must do? Then I do so gladly! Oh, to honor his name and fight by his side. The honor is all mine and must be mine alone. Take me! I am ready to follow you into the fiery fields of what may come, oh, lord!

(The CHORUS members rise to their feet, still facing XENARES.)

CHORUS: So blindly you walk the path of the doom-bringer. How easily your blade is aimed at enemies young and old, guilty or innocent. Your lust for the crimson required of our god comes so naturally to you. You needn't close the eyes of another, but, rather, you must open your own and perceive what you have wrought.

(The CHORUS members begin stumbling then clamoring towards the hut with the blocked door SR. THEY freeze completely in motion before collapsing in the direction of the hut. THEY are motionless and dead again. XENARES stands among the bodies.)

XENARES: What strange power . . . but an even stranger message. Ares, my lord and master, questions my devotion and faith? This smells of something beyond my comprehension. I've never been so sure of my place. How could my grand exploits in his name be called for examination? It seems the ghouls aim to lead me to this derelict home. There's a scent in the air. It hangs, but it brings peace. Is this familiar to me? What strange projections my mind renders unto me. The smoke is a putrid billowing that rolls into the heavens. Something gnaws from within. I know what it is, yet I cannot place it. Be this the trick of Hermes? Casting my gaze upon this crude den yields a stirring. This place. I know this place. This is my home! But where—? Where are my—? Oh, gods!

(XENARES casts the torch aside, and it lands by the olive tree. HE dashes for the hut.)

XENARES (CONT.): Calista! Cora! Call to me! Are you there my wife? Daughter, your father calls!

(*XENARES struggles to move the abandoned cart out of the way of the door.*)

Move! Move, you infernal obstacle! You cruel hindrance! Where is my strength? Ares! Return to me my strength so that I may continue your good works! Let me make this miracle! Protect them, oh, lord. Let them be far from this massacre. Let them not be smoldering in our home! Move! Move! Why must I be sapped of all power? Is this the doing of my god? After all I've done for you? Why have you led me to attack my home?!

(*The CHORUS members slowly reanimate and crawl towards the cart. XENARES continues to push with all his might until the CHORUS members join him and move the cart. XENARES falls into the mud. His helmet falls off as the cart shifts laboriously. The once shiny bronze armor is now dull and dirty. Meanwhile, the torch has set fire to the olive tree. XENARES rises to his feet and throws open the door. A plume of smoke puffs from the opening. XENARES enters the hut.*)

Cruel gods! Evil gods! My Cora!

(*XENARES carries a charred wrapping of linens from the hut. HE pushes through the CHORUS members, who sway emotionless and unwavering in his path. HE collapses at the foot of the now-engulfed olive tree. HE unravels the linens, and charred remains of bone and hair fall onto the ground. XENARES holds what little is left of his child in his arms. HE looks to the flames and to the CRONE, who no longer appears to be the same person. XENARES crawls, pushing the linens forward as he moves to the body. HE flips her over to reveal her as his wife, CALISTA.*)

XENARES: This cannot be. My mind. This is a trick of the sirens. This thing cannot be my beloved. It wasn't! She was an enemy. As clear as the waters of Egremnoi, I saw her there! She was ugly and old, not . . . this! My dear. My dear, sweet Callista! What fate has been cast upon you? Was this fate? No, cruelty is not destined. It is fabricated! Ares! I curse you and your plots! Your fiendish desire knows no bounds! I reject you. This is not what I wished for. This is not what my supplication was meant to be for! I served you faithfully to my highest calling. I felled any and all who stood before you. How fitting that a servant of destruction should also be brought to ruin. My greatest mistake was in declaring

XENARES (CONT.): you my patron. No, my own blind devotion brought upon this tragedy—the loss of my loves, the razing of my lands. This is all a fault of my own creation. Hear me! I'll grant you no satisfaction in misguiding my blade upon others. You'll not have me! I'll never do your bidding. This next choice is mine and mine alone. This you cannot take from me.

(XENARES places the linens on CALISTA. HE takes the body of his wife into his arms, and he leans into the flames of the olive tree as the CHORUS members encircle and flow around him. A bright orange light glows with intensity from within the sea of bodies. After a moment, the glow dies down, and the CHORUS members separate. THEY speak.)

CHORUS: Another poor soul joins the Styx. It may reunite with others where it shares a bond. It may be cast into the fires of Tartarus for its villainy. These matters concern the god of war not. This may be the tragic end of our dear fellow Xenares, but it is only a mere stain in the eyes of the great infinity. There will be more kings to dethrone, idols to demolish, nations to be ravaged, and prideful young servants—hot-headed in their passions—to burn brighter than those before. So long as there exists man, so too exists conflict and consequence.

(Blackout.)

The I.T. Experience

Caleb Dan Gammons

Cast of Characters (all ages are flexible)

AUTOMATED VOICE, a programmed system that tries to assist users with getting to where they need to go but sometimes doesn't hear them correctly or function well

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE, a person who contacts users when bad situations happen

I.T. TECHNICIAN, a person who works very hard to be as polite and helpful as possible

I.T. SUPERVISOR, the person who defends the company's I.T. employees when the need for it arises.

I.T. LEADERSHIP, the head honcho in I.T. who calls all the shots and has the final say in I.T. matters

RECEPTIONIST, the eyes and ears of I.T. Leadership

USER, a disgruntled worker who is easily angered, demanding and argumentative

Time and Place

The action takes place in the User's home and in the I.T. department of the User's company. The time is the present.

(Lights rise on the USER at home and RECEPTIONIST, I.T. TECHNICIAN, I.T. SUPERVISOR, and I.T. LEADERSHIP at work. THEY are all sitting at their desks. The USER is on a cellphone while typing away at a work laptop's keyboard.)

USER: Don't worry about it. You worry too much. Just like you did in high school. Buying parts for computers with company money and selling them on Craigslist is like taking candy from a baby. You just keep doctoring the books and leave the rest to . . .

(The laptop shuts down unexpectedly. The USER panics and tries pressing the power button, but nothing happens.)

I have to go.

(Beat.)

Nothing's wrong. Just a minor setback. I'll be in touch ASAP. Okay. 'Bye!

(The USER hangs up and quickly dials another phone number. A ringing sounds. The AUTOMATED VOICE answers. The audience hears the voice in a voiceover.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: Hello and welcome to the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. May I ask, what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

USER: My laptop is broken.

(Beat.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Let's try again. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

(The USER performs a forehead slap.)

USER: My laptop won't power on.

(Beat.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Did you say you need to set up your work account?

USER: *No!* My laptop is dead! Deceased! It has crossed the final veil! It is ready for a funeral! What about that do you not understand?

AUTOMATED VOICE: I see. Hold on while I try to find a technician who can assist you.

USER: Finally!

AUTOMATED VOICE: We're sorry, but there are no technicians available to assist you at this time.

USER: What?

AUTOMATED VOICE: Goodbye!

(The AUTOMATED VOICE hangs up on the USER. The USER fumes, mutters, and dials the number again.)

Hello and welcome to the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

USER: I want to speak to a representative!

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Let's try again. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

(The USER speaks in a slow and exaggerated way.)

USER: I need to speak to a representative.

(Beat.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Did you say you need to know how to check your voicemails?

USER: I need to speak to a human being! What part of that is unclear to you?

(Beat.)

USER (CONT.): You worthless, insulting program!

AUTOMATED VOICE: I see. Hold on while I try to find a technician who can assist you.

(*The RECEPTIONIST picks up the office phone.*)

RECEPTIONIST: Good afternoon. This is the company's I.T. Service Center. How may I assist you today?

USER: Oh, thank goodness.

RECEPTIONIST: It's you.

USER: Do we know each other?

RECEPTIONIST: Last year's Summer Lunch Party? How typical you would have forgotten me. Ugh! What do you want?

USER: I'm an employee of the company, and my laptop shut itself down. I can't turn it back on, and I need it fixed pronto.

RECEPTIONIST: Let me get a ticket open for that and get some information from you so that I can send you to the correct department. May I have the property number of the laptop you are calling about today?

(*The USER examines the laptop but cannot find the property number.*)

USER: I don't see it.

RECEPTIONIST: Are you blind? It's the sticker on the bottom of the laptop.

(*The USER examines the bottom of the laptop, but there is no sticker.*)

USER: Why are you being hostile? There is no sticker.

RECEPTIONIST: Nothing you'd remember about. So what do you see?

USER: I see nothing. There are no numbers on this laptop.

RECEPTIONIST: Okay. When did you get this company laptop?

USER: What relevance is that question? I got it from the previous guy who was in my position a year ago.

RECEPTIONIST: Really? That's very interesting. Just out of curiosity, did you or your supervisor ever fill out a property-transfer form when you were given the laptop?

USER: No. I was handed the laptop back then. It's my work laptop now, and nobody has ever said anything about a property-transfer form.

RECEPTIONIST: That's not possible. There's paperwork for everything involving I.T.

USER: Why don't you help me out now, and after I get my deadline out of the way we can worry about paperwork then?

RECEPTIONIST: Nope. No paperwork, no assistance. That's how this works.

USER: I have no time for this! I need help, please! I promise I'll get the paperwork done just as soon as I finish my project and submit it before the deadline.

RECEPTIONIST: Trust me. You're a waste of time for everyone.

USER: Look. I don't know who you've confused me with, but I don't know who you are!

RECEPTIONIST: Yeah . . . Okay. Sure. Whatever you want to think. Let me get ahold of the Computer Service Department. They'll be able to get you the paperwork.

USER: Are you even listening to me? As politely as I can put this, I just told you—

RECEPTIONIST: I heard you loud and clear, and I'm not explaining why to you again. You do want your laptop fixed today, don't you?

USER: I fail to see how your blabbering on and on about paperwork is assisting me with fixing my laptop so I can do my job. I've never had to fill out paperwork to get work done by I.T. Your job is to make my job efficient, and right now you're failing miserably.

RECEPTIONIST: Wow . . . Okay. Well, that was uncalled for.

USER: I don't care about your emotions. Speak to a shrink. Just do your job and fix my laptop.

(The RECEPTIONIST takes a deep breath.)

THE RECEPTIONIST: Alrighty. Well, let me put you on a brief hold right quick . . .

USER: Don't you da—!

(The RECEPTIONIST puts the USER on hold.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: It would appear that you have been put on hold.

USER: Oh, no . . .

AUTOMATED VOICE: While you wait, you can listen to music.

(Beat.)

Press zero to listen to folktronica-style music; press one to listen to meth-rock-style music; press two to listen to acid-jazz-style music; or press three to listen to silence while you wait for your call to be answered.

(The USER rapidly presses three.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: You have selected . . . polka-style music.

(Polka music plays for a few seconds as the USER paces back and forth and furiously mutters. The RECEPTIONIST calls the I.T. TECHNICIAN.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hello. This is Computer Services. How may I assist you today?

RECEPTIONIST: Yes. Hi!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Oh, hello! How can I help?

RECEPTIONIST: We have a user on the line who says their company laptop is broken. The user can't find the property number of the laptop, and when the previous user vacated the position, no property-transfer form was filled out. Also, watch what you say because this particular user is . . . incredibly rude, forgetful, and arrogant.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Joy!

RECEPTIONIST: Yes. Do enjoy. I will finish writing up the ticket, but would you mind taking the call?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Yes. I can take the call. Thank you for making the ticket.

THE RECEPTIONIST: Not a problem. The user will be on the line as soon as I hang up, okay?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Sounds great. Thanks.

(The RECEPTIONIST hangs up the phone.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Computer Services. How may I assist you today?

USER: Thank goodness. Polka is torture!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: What?

USER: Hi. My work laptop screen went black in the middle of my trying to finish a major project, and now it won't do anything.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: That's weird. Let me just pull up the ticket so I can make some notes here. Give me one second. My systems here in the office are slow.

USER: Thank you.

(Beat.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Okay. Here we are. So . . .

(Beat. The I.T. TECHNICIAN types on a keyboard while finishing the line.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN (CONT.): User states the work laptop screen went black while trying to use it.

USER: Yes. That's correct. I've tried to press the power button. I've looked it over. The laptop's just broken, I think.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN types while the USER speaks to make more notes.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Is the laptop charged?

USER: Of course I keep the laptop charged! That's not the issue. The issue is that the laptop screen went black, and it won't turn on or do anything now.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Did you recently spill any sort of liquids on the device? Did you check to make sure that it was plugged securely into a wall outlet?

USER: No! I was in the middle of using it, and then the screen went black! Can we hurry this up? I have important deadlines to meet.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: I do understand. Deadlines are important. Give me a moment. I need to find your property number.

USER: Well, good luck because there are no stickers or numbers on this laptop.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Not a problem. We have other means of finding it. Just got to utilize all my resources.

(The USER mutters.)

USER: Why don't you utilize all your resources to fix that broken automated voice?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: I'm sorry. I didn't quite hear you. Did you say something?

USER: Nothing worth my time.

(The USER grows snappish and impatient.)

USER (CONT.): Have you found that number yet?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Yes. I just found it in our Directive List. It's a spreadsheet where we keep track of all our devices out in the field.

USER: And I would care where you got the number from why? Just get on with it!

(Beat. The I.T. TECHNICIAN takes a deep breath.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Right. Well, I'm going to need to consult with my supervisor. I understand no one has never filled out a property-transfer form. Is that correct?

USER: Again with the paperwork! I have never filled out any paperwork. I.T. just fixes my problems, okay? So, *no!* I haven't filled out a property-transfer form, and I fail to see why I should have to fill it out now.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: It's so that we can ensure you are set up correctly in our systems. Give me one sec. I'm going to put you on a brief hold . . .

USER: Don't you dare put me on hold again!

(Jumping because of the USER's sudden shouting, the I.T. TECHNICIAN accidentally hangs up on the USER instead of putting the USER on hold. The I.T. TECHNICIAN immediately realizes what happened.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Oh, dear.

(Beat.)

Well, hopefully they call back.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN walks over to the I.T. SUPERVISOR's desk. The USER, shocked, angrily kicks the computer chair and knocks it over. The USER, now in immense foot-pain, walks around in agony. Beat. The USER picks the computer chair up, sits back down, and then dials the telephone number for the I.T. Department.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: Hello and welcome to the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hey. Do you have a second?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Yes. Just give me a moment to complete my thought process on this e-mail.

USER: I want to speak to the company's I.T. Service Center.

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Let's try again. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

(The USER slams a fist down on the desk.)

USER: Siri listens better than you! I want to speak to someone from I.T.!

I.T. SUPERVISOR: You now have my undivided attention. What's up?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: We have a user who was given a work laptop by the previous user of that position, and there was never a property-transfer form filled out.

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR sighs.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Of course we would find out about this and have to deal with it on a Friday. Jesus, take the wheel.

(Beat.)

Let me send you a blank copy of the property-transfer form for them to fill out. Leadership will have to approve it before we can assist them any further with the device.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: And if they ask why that is, what should I tell them?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: This user may have been using the laptop, but since the device is still under the previous user in our systems, our management software won't even find the device for us to assist them. We can't transfer the user without approval.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN and the I.T. SUPERVISOR silently carry on their conversation while the conversation with the USER and the AUTOMATED VOICE goes on.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Did you say you need to speak with a sales rep for one of our products?

USER: No! This is the voice of God calling for anyone who will answer the blasted phone!

AUTOMATED VOICE: I see. Hold on while I try to find a technician who can assist you.

USER: Ah. See. That's more like it.

AUTOMATED VOICE: We're sorry, but there are no technicians available to assist you at this time.

USER: Gah!

AUTOMATED VOICE: Goodbye!

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN and the I.T. SUPERVISOR finish their conversation, and the I.T. TECHNICIAN returns to the technician's desk. The USER slumps back down into the computer chair and tosses the cellphone onto the computer desk. The USER then performs a temple-rub in silence. The I.T. TECHNICIAN picks up the office phone and dials the phone number of the I.T. department.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: Hello and welcome to the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Helpdesk.

AUTOMATED VOICE: All right. I'll get right on that. Hold on while I try to find a technician who can assist you.

(The RECEPTIONIST picks up the office phone.)

THE RECEPTIONIST: Good afternoon. This is the company's I.T. Service Center. How may I assist you today?

(I.T. LEADERSHIP stands up to stretch and, yawning, walks out in front of the desk.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hello again.

RECEPTIONIST: Hey there! How may I help you?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Do you happen to have the number of that user who just called? The one who was having the laptop issue?

RECEPTIONIST: I put the phone number in the description of the ticket. Did you not see it?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Oh, yeah. Sorry. That's what I get for not utilizing all my resources.

RECEPTIONIST: That's okay. I've got it saved in my phone history. The number is 903-555-0199. That user was very impolite to me and told me to go see a shrink. I wrote a letter to Leadership about it, too. It was very uncalled for.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: That's terrible. Come to mention it, the user was pretty upset when I spoke with them, too.

RECEPTIONIST: You know, I heard from Randi upstairs in accounting that Tom said that Billy heard this user only got their position because they had a love affair with Leadership's close relative.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: No kidding. That's interesting.

RECEPTIONIST: Well, you didn't hear any of this from me. That love affair was very short lived because shortly after last year's Summer Lunch Party, Leadership's close relative married their actual fiancé.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Sounds like a lot of drama to me. Wait. Aren't you related to Leadership, too?

RECEPTIONIST: Distantly, but it wasn't me. I'm still eating T.V. dinners alone with my four cats in a rundown apartment and giving my entire paycheck to bills and groceries the moment I'm paid.

(I.T. LEADERSHIP acts like what the RECEPTIONIST said has been overheard, and I.T. LEADERSHIP is disturbed by the information.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Tell me about it. Bills and groceries are insane. Anyway, thank you. I've got to call that user back.

RECEPTIONIST: No problem. Have a great day!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: You, too!

(I.T. LEADERSHIP walks over to the RECEPTIONIST.)

I.T. LEADERSHIP: Receptionist, come to my office please. I want you to take notes and write up an e-mail.

(I.T. LEADERSHIP walks back to the leadership desk and sits down. The RECEPTIONIST grabs a notepad and pencil and wheels an office chair over to I.T. LEADERSHIP's desk. I.T. LEADERSHIP and the RECEPTIONIST have a silent conversation. The I.T. TECHNICIAN dials the USER's number. The USER jumps as the cellphone rings. The USER answers.)

USER: Hello?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hello? I'm with Computer Services. I believe we must have gotten cut off earlier. Are you still experiencing the issue with your laptop?

USER: It's about time! What do you think? Do you have any idea how important of a deadline this is for the company?

(The RECEPTIONIST and I.T. LEADERSHIP end their conversation, and the RECEPTIONIST leaves the leadership area to write up an e-mail.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Don't worry. We'll get this figured out. I just went and spoke to my supervisor, and this is what I need you to do.

(*I.T. TECHNICIAN and the USER have a silent conversation. The I.T. SUPERVISOR begins lamenting.*)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Why does *Excel* get screwed up every single day?

(*An e-mail notification is heard. Beat. I.T. SUPERVISOR notices the e-mail.*)

Huh? What's this e-mail about?

(*Lights dim. A spotlight centers on I.T. LEADERSHIP, who stands up.*)

I.T. LEADERSHIP: To the staff of I.T. from the Head of I.T. Leadership. This company is a civil institution of the American people. Its reputation is impeccable, and with it must come with the greatest of respect. We must remember to remain professional at all times. Office gossip is strictly against the company's policies. We are not brutish Neanderthals who beat each other over the head with clubs. We are information-technology professionals. Those of you who have gossiped in the company, heed my warning or there will be consequences . . . especially if those rumors include close relatives of your superiors or of each other. Sincerely, your beloved I.T. Leadership. P.S. Please remember to buy your meal tickets from Randi for the Summer Lunch Party next Wednesday.

(*All lights come back on, and I.T. LEADERSHIP sits back down at the leadership desk. The RECEPTIONIST is on the phone.*)

RECEPTIONIST: Did you see this e-mail from Leadership, Susan? It's ridiculous. I don't gossip! I speak dead, honest truth! You know that's right, girl!

USER: Are you serious? No! Look here! I'm not filling out paperwork on something that clearly your department should have fixed when I got the laptop!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Without proper authorization, I can't assist you further with this. Furthermore, the laptop is owned by the company. You'll have to ship the laptop back to us here at Computer Services.

USER: Why? You know what? Spare me your ridiculous, convoluted answer. Whatever that may be. Your refusal to help fix this computer is outrageous when all I'm trying to do is my job within the company! I want to speak to your supervisor now! You are useless and pathetic!

(Beat. I.T. TECHNICIAN tries hard not to sound upset.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Very well. I'll go check and see if my supervisor is available.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN puts the USER on hold, stands, and walks over to the I.T. SUPERVISOR's desk.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: It would appear that you have been put on hold.

(The USER starts pacing back and forth angrily.)

USER: This is despicable!

AUTOMATED VOICE: While you wait, you can listen to music.

(Beat.)

Press zero to listen to bedroom-pop-style music; press one to listen to catstep- style music; press two to listen to splittercore-style music; or press three to listen to silence while you wait for your call to be answered.

(The USER rapidly presses three.)

USER: I just want *silence*!

AUTOMATED VOICE: You have selected . . . rock-metal-style music.

(Rock-metal music plays for a few seconds as the USER starts punching the back of the computer chair and muttering insults about the I.T. Department.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hey. I have that user on the line, and they want to speak to you.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Great. Ugh! I'm never going to get this report done. Take a look at this e-mail we just got from Leadership. We need to be careful. The company records all our conversations—how many times we put users on hold and how long it takes to resolve tickets. Please be careful with what you say and do because I don't want to have to do the paperwork.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: You got it, boss!

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN looks at the I.T. SUPERVISOR'S laptop monitor. The I.T. SUPERVISOR puts the office phone on speaker.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Computer Services.

USER: Are you the I.T. technician's supervisor?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Yes. I am. How may I assist you today?

USER: My laptop is broken, and your technician refuses to be helpful because he claims I have to fill out paperwork to have the laptop transferred over into my name *even though* I've been using the laptop for a long time and no one has ever said anything until today about this.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: That's correct. Is there any way you can fill out the paperwork, print it out, sign it, and e-mail it back to us?

USER: I refuse! It's not my fault your department failed to do their job when I got the laptop. Why should I be forced to do your job when your department neglected their responsibilities in the first place? This is a you-problem, not a me-problem, okay? Let's get that straight.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: It's one piece of paper for you to fill out and sign. We're still in the process of auditing all our equipment out in the field, and yours is obviously one that we needed to audit.

USER: I don't care. Not my problem!

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Then per company policy, your refusal requires my technician to lock your work account. Either you'll send the laptop back to our department, or we'll have your boss take the laptop from you. You have no right to use company property you're not approved for. What will it be? Your choice.

USER: Are you serious? You can't lock my work account! Do you have any idea what title I hold in this company?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Company policy has nothing to do with your title. If you throw around your title like that with me, I'll get H.R. involved now.

(Beat.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR (CONT.): Let me make this abundantly clear for you. If you refuse to comply, H.R. will treat this incident as a theft. You can be arrested for stealing company property if it comes to that. I worked for H.R. eight years before stepping into this position, and I know a clear violation of policy when I see it. So . . . simple question: do you refuse to fill out that property-transfer form? Yes or no?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Got 'em, boss!

USER: Hold on. Wait. Just hold on. No need for H.R.

(Beat.)

It's just one piece of paper?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Yep . . . and then we can start the approval process and get you going again. I ask again, can you please just complete the transfer form, print it out, sign it, and email it back to us?

(*The USER chuckles sarcastically.*)

USER: Sure. Why not? That should be easy to do. Let me just use my laptop.

(Beat.)

Oh, wait! How silly of me. I can't do that because my work laptop is broken!

I.T. SUPERVISOR: That tone of voice and yelling over the phone is uncalled for when all my technician and I are trying to do is assist you. We're all adults here, so let's keep this conversation calm and civil. I apologize if I wasn't clear before. I wasn't suggesting you use your work laptop, which is not working. Do you have any other PC or laptop you can use?

USER: No! I don't own a PC or laptop. All I have is the one given to me by the company.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Okay. I tell you what. Let me put you on a brief hold. My technician is going to assist you with filling out the paperwork on our end, and

I.T. SUPERVISOR (CONT.): then we also do have a way to send a digital signage form to your work phone for you to sign in agreement to the property-transfer form.

USER: Wait. Wait! No! I can stay on the line. Do *not* put me back on ho—

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR puts the USER on hold. The I.T. SUPERVISOR turns to the I.T. TECHNICIAN.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: It would appear that you have been put on hold.

USER: *No!*

I.T. SUPERVISOR: The nerve. There's no reason to speak to anyone that way.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Yeah. I agree. Especially when we are just trying to help.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Exactly. These users need to chill. It's Friday.

(Beat.)

Go help the user get that form filled out. Make sure the signage form is complete, and then we'll send the paperwork up to Leadership.

(Classical music plays for a few seconds as the USER sits slumped in the computer chair in the standard hands-over-the-face position. The cellphone sits on the table.)

USER: Come on! Pick up! You can do it! Take me off hold.

(Beat. The USER picks up the cellphone.)

Take me off hold!

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN walks back to the technician's desk to pick up the phone. The I.T. SUPERVISOR puts the phone back and accidentally hangs up on the USER. The USER looks at the cellphone in disbelief. The I.T. TECHNICIAN sits and reaches for the phone but quickly realizes what has happened.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hey. I think you hung up on the user.

USER: *How dare they?!*

(The USER mutters angrily and goes back to punching the back of the computer chair.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: What? Oh, gracious! I did. Jesus, take the wheel.

(Beat.)

Call the user back. Try to handle the situation on your own for now, and when you have the paperwork, forward it to the receptionist to take to Leadership.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Sounds good!

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN dials the USER's number. The USER stops punching the back of the computer chair, takes a deep breath, and answers the cellphone.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Hi, again. My supervisor and I were just assisting you.

USER: Ha! Some assistance. My laptop is still broken, I've been hung up on twice now, your automated voice system sucks, and you're making me file paperwork when I have deadlines to meet.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: I do understand this is frustrating, but don't worry. We'll get through this together.

USER: Really? What are you, my therapist? I don't think you understand one iota how frustrated I am by all this!

(The USER takes a deep breath to calm down.)

What do I need to do to fill out the transfer form?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: This shouldn't take long. Let me just pull up your profile on my end, and I'll insert a lot of the information to fill out the transfer form. At most, all I'll really need you to do is do the digital signage. Simple, really.

USER: Well, that's already two lies you've said. It's already taken a long time out of my day, and nothing about this has been simple. You can bet, too, that when all this is over with, the owner of the company will be hearing about all this.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Again, I do apologize for the inconvenience. These are just the policies we all have to follow. Other than this, how is your day going?

USER: Is your computer working?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Yes.

(Beat.)

USER: Then your day is obviously going better than mine.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Well, I hope that your day goes better after all this is over with. I have all the input fields of the form populated now. Can you pull up your e-mail on your company phone? I just sent you the digital-signage form.

USER: Okay. I have to put you on speakerphone. One sec.

(The USER puts the I.T. TECHNICIAN on speakerphone and then goes to read the e-mail.)

I don't see any new e-mails.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Well, it can take a while to send sometimes depending on your location and how fast your Internet speed is. Are you working at an office or at home?

USER: I'm at home. So . . . how long is it going to take to arrive?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: It can take up to ten minutes, or, like I said, that depends on where you're located. I've seen it take a few hours to arrive in the user's inbox.

USER: You're kidding! I don't have a few hours. What part of "I have a deadline to meet" do you people not understand? This e-mail had better show up within five minutes!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Did you check your spam folder?

(The USER and the I.T. TECHNICIAN have a silent conversation while I.T. LEADERSHIP picks up the office phone and calls I.T. SUPERVISOR.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: What now?

(Beat.)

It's a Friday afternoon. Why is Leadership trying to call me? I swear! I am *never* going to get this report done.

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR answers the phone.)

Hello?

I.T. LEADERSHIP: Good afternoon. Listen. I was just thinking . . . Did you finish that audit on how many laptops we have out in the field down in Tyler, Texas?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Oh, yeah. I turned that in months ago.

I.T. LEADERSHIP: Can you come to my office please? I have a few questions.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Certainly. I'll be right there.

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR sighs, stands up, and walks over to I.T. LEADERSHIP's office. THEY have a silent conversation.)

USER: Are you absolutely sure you sent this supposed e-mail?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Yes! I did! It's in my sent folder. Resending the digital signage e-mail won't make it go any faster. I said I've seen it take up to a few hours.

USER: I don't have a few hours! Find a way to make it go faster! You're the I.T. guy! Do something!

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN sighs.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Let me go ask my supervisor if there's anything else I can do. Just give me one sec.

USER: Yeah. You go do that, and for Heaven's sake, no matter *what* you do, do *not* put me on hold again with that psychopathic, electronic freak of nature! *You hear me?!*

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN jumps when the USER starts yelling and drops the office phone on the ground. The I.T. TECHNICIAN recovers the phone and sits back up straight in the chair.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Yes! Yes! I'll put the phone down and not put you on hold. I promise. Just calm down.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN puts the phone on the desk without putting the USER on hold and then walks over to the I.T. SUPERVISOR's desk. The I.T. SUPERVISOR, however, is still away talking with I.T. LEADERSHIP.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: There must have been a meeting or something.

(The USER's cellphone dies. The USER notices and gasps.)

USER: *No!*

(The USER stomps on the ground repeatedly in fury.)

No! No! No! No! No!

(The USER breathes loudly. Beat.)

Where did I put that charging cable?

(The USER begins frantically searching around for the charging cable. The I.T. TECHNICIAN walks back to the technician's desk, reaches for the phone . . . and sees that the USER has hung up.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Oh. Thank goodness!

(The USER finds the charger and plugs in the cellphone. I.T. SUPERVISOR and I.T. LEADERSHIP end their conversation, and the I.T. SUPERVISOR walks over to the I.T. TECHNICIAN's desk. I.T. LEADERSHIP returns to working on the computer.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Hey. I just wanted to check on you. How's it going with that user?

(The USER's cellphone begins to turn back on.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Much better now that they hung up.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Why? What happened?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: The signage e-mail didn't show up right away, and the user was demanding I do something to make the e-mail send faster. That's not even how that works.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: You can't fix stupid, so don't worry about it. That user can suck it up and wait. We get good people who are patient when they call in, and then we get jerks who think they know everything about I.T. when they haven't got a clue. It comes with the job. Just be patient. Don't let them overwhelm you and help them out the best you can.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: I do wonder, though, why they hung up.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Who cares? Just call them back in a bit and see if they still need assistance.

USER: Finally! My cellphone is on again. Okay. Now to find that digital-signage e-mail.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Oh! We got another e-mail from I.T. Leadership. How very interesting.

(Lights dim. A spotlight centers on I.T. LEADERSHIP, who stands. The I.T. SUPERVISOR moves back to the supervisor's desk.)

I.T. LEADERSHIP: For your situational awareness, the company has seen a considerable increase in devices being used to try and access Web sites that are a security risk. The H.R. Department will be contacting those employees for whom we have already collected evidence. Trust me. Our security people know who you are.

(Beat.)

I.T. LEADERSHIP: Also, remember that company prayer time is always Tuesdays at 10:00 a.m. over Teams, and we have a yoga class next month to relax your daily stresses. Your benevolent I.T. Leadership always has your best interests at heart.

(All lights come back on, and I.T. LEADERSHIP sits back down.)

RECEPTIONIST: Oh! I've got to erase my Internet history ASAP! I hope no one has seen how many times I've signed into *Farmer's Villa* this week to harvest my onions and carrots. Man! That game is so addicting!

(I.T. LEADERSHIP stands and walks over to the RECEPTIONIST's desk. I.T. LEADERSHIP makes a throat-clearing noise and startles the RECEPTIONIST.)

I.T. LEADERSHIP: My office *now*! I need your help writing up the list of individuals we caught being online security risks so we can send those over to H.R.

THE RECEPTIONIST: Um. Yes. Of course. I'll be right there.

(I.T. LEADERSHIP walks back to the leadership desk and sits down. The RECEPTIONIST grabs the notepad and pencil from earlier and wheels an office chair over to I.T. LEADERSHIP's desk. I.T. LEADERSHIP and the RECEPTIONIST have a silent conversation.)

USER: *Huzzah!* Finally! The signage is sent!

(An e-mail notification is heard. The I.T. TECHNICIAN looks at the computer.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle. There's the signage form.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN types furiously. Beat. Then the I.T. TECHNICIAN stands up and walks over to the I.T. SUPERVISOR's desk.)

Hey. I just wanted to let you know that I got the signed property-transfer form, and I've sent that over to the receptionist.

(The RECEPTIONIST returns to the receptionist's desk looking a bit stressed out. The USER dials the number for the I.T. department. The RECEPTIONIST types out the notes from the meeting with I.T. LEADERSHIP. Beat. The I.T. SUPERVISOR turns to face the I.T. TECHNICIAN.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Awesome! Sorry. I just have a million things going on today. Thanks for handling that situation.

(An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer.)

Looks like I just got an email from the receptionist saying the form's been forwarded onward to Leadership. Make sure you're adding those e-mails to your ticket and making good, detailed notes.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Absolutely! I'll go take care of that now.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN returns to the technician's desk, and the I.T. SUPERVISOR turns to face the computer.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: Hello and welcome to the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

USER: Receptionist.

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Let's try again. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

USER: Helpdesk.

AUTOMATED VOICE: I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Let's try again. May I ask what seems to be the issue you are experiencing today?

USER: You're my problem, you automated garbage!

AUTOMATED VOICE: The company's business hours are Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. If you would like this information to be repeated, press one. If you would like to start over for additional help, press two. If you are finished with this call, you can end it by hanging up or pressing three.

USER: I give up.

(The USER presses three and then slumps back in the office chair.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: Thank you for using the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. Remember that when you work for this company, you live the true American dream.

USER: Nothing about you is the American dream!

AUTOMATED VOICE: Goodbye!

(The call ends, and the USER puts the cellphone down on the desk. An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer. Beat. The I.T. SUPERVISOR calls out to the I.T. TECHNICIAN.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Hey! Do you have that user's number in your ticket?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: I do. Why?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Come here and we'll call the user together. As touchy as this person is, I'll handle this conversation . . . but I want you with me so you can listen. I just got an e-mail back from Leadership.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN walks over to the I.T. SUPERVISOR's desk, and then the I.T. SUPERVISOR proceeds to pick up the office phone.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: What's the number?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: 903-555-0199.

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR dials the number and puts the phone on speakerphone. The USER hears the cellphone ring and immediately picks up.)

USER: Yes! Hi! Thank goodness you called me back! I sent the digital- signage form back to you. Did you receive it? Are we any closer to being able to work on my laptop now?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Hi. This is the technician's supervisor again. We did receive the form, and it was sent to Leadership. However . . .

USER: Nothing good ever ends a sentence when you start it with *however*. Don't tell me there's some other delay which is about to make my day any more painful than it's already been. However *what*? Supervisor of I.T., however *what*? I'm

USER (CONT.): telling you now, if the answer is anything but helpful, I'm about to break something.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: I.T. Leadership has been doing a lot of pushbacks lately on which transfer forms get accepted and which ones don't. While the previous person in your position required a laptop, Leadership is trying to evaluate whether or not you should need a laptop because the needs of our positions within the company change from person to person.

USER: Layman's terms! Layman's terms! What does that have to do with me?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Write an e-mail to justify why your position needs a laptop or else the request will be rejected.

USER: You have got to be joking! You came to *me* about getting this done! Your department said I had to have this form approved in order to get the laptop fixed, and now you're telling me I have to justify something that you demanded I do? I have literally been using the laptop this whole time with my own work account. I was working on a major project for the company when my laptop turned off! What other justification could I.T. leadership possibly need?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Can you write up an e-mail on your phone with everything you utilize the laptop for and send it to my work e-mail so we can send that to Leadership?

USER: Fine! I'll do it! Just, please, for the love of everything that is good, *do not* hang up the phone on me again, please!

I.T. SUPERVISOR: We won't. Just take your time.

USER: Thank you!

(The USER uses the cellphone and writes up an e-mail. Beat. An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Yes. I got it, but I can already tell you this explanation is too vague. You need to be more specific. Like . . . are you needing the laptop when you travel? Are you needing the laptop for checking e-mails and accessing apps? Simply writing "I have a laptop because it's useful for work" isn't enough.

USER: Okay. Whatever. I'll rewrite it. Just give me a second.

(The USER writes another e-mail on the cellphone. Beat. An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer.)

There. It's more detailed.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Is that it? You don't use your laptop for more than just *Excel* spreadsheets and checking e-mails? When I say extended justification, I mean detail out for me *everything* your laptop is useful for so that you can do your job efficiently.

USER: Fine! You want a detailed response? I'll give you detailed response!

(The USER repeats the writing process. Beat. An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer.)

USER: There! Are you happy now? It says, "I, the user of this work laptop, use it to access applications that are vital for my job including *Word*, *Teams*, *Excel*, and *Google*. I push buttons on the keyboard that produce words for my reports, which are needed to make the company function efficiently! The laptop is needed because I work remotely at home!" What else could I possibly say other than that?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Do you have an office space you can go to work?

USER: Why is that relevant?

I.T. SUPERVISOR: It adds to your case if you don't have an office space to work. If you are strictly work-from-home, you need to add that to your justification. Also, stop with the sarcasm. We all get that you're frustrated, but yelling at us and throwing around insults when all we're doing is trying to help doesn't work for anyone. This is getting us nowhere. Be sarcastic one more time with either me or my technician, and I'll hang up this call.

USER: You . . . wouldn't . . . dare . . .

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Try me . . . because I dare!

(Beat. The USER sighs deeply.)

USER: Okay. Fine. You win! Let me rewrite this e-mail one more time, and I'll add that in.

(The USER repeats the writing process. Beat. An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Ah. See? Much better. Was that so hard? You added the details; you removed the sarcasm; and you made a plausible case for why you need a work laptop. I'm forwarding this to I.T. Leadership now. I don't have a timeframe for when Leadership will respond back to me, but as soon as they do, I'll have my technician reach back out to you. Sound good?

USER: You mean I have to wait more? After everything your department has put me through? Inconceivable!

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Just as you are required to follow procedures and protocols and chains of command, believe it or not but the I.T. department is required to do the same. As much as we would all love to snap our fingers and make everyone happy, that is just simply not how life works. *Yes!* You too will have to wait the same amount of time everyone else is required by company policy to get their paperwork approved.

USER: My niece could fix my laptop faster than you people ever could!

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Then why did you call us and not your niece?

USER: You see! *This* is why I like Best Buy I.T.s so much better. Because they're actually pleasant people to de—

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR hangs up on the USER. The USER slams a fist down on the computer table and paces back and forth again.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Go make notes in your ticket on the conversation. I'm going to forward you all these e-mails.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: You got it, boss!

(An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. SUPERVISOR's computer.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Oh. Leadership wants to have a meeting with me. Perfect. I've had enough of that user's rude behavior, and I'm going to Leadership about this situation. Manage the phones for me while I'm away, please. Thanks!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Will do.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN returns to the technician's desk. I.T. SUPERVISOR walks over to the I.T. LEADERSHIP's desk. I.T. TECHNICIAN types. I.T. LEADERSHIP and I.T. SUPERVISOR have a silent conversation. The USER grumbles insults towards the I.T. Department and mocks the AUTOMATED VOICE. Beat. An e-mail notification is heard from the I.T. TECHNICIAN's computer. I.T. SUPERVISOR and I.T. LEADERSHIP end their conversation, and the I.T. SUPERVISOR walks to the I.T. TECHNICIAN's desk.)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: That user has been approved. Call the user back, help fix the laptop, and note in the ticket how you fixed the issue . . . and that the user was very rude to our department over the phone. After that, close the ticket out. Leadership has been made aware of the situation. If you need me, I'll be in my office, but please don't need me for the rest of today.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Absolutely. I'll call right now.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Thank you!

(The I.T. SUPERVISOR walks back to the supervisor's desk and sits down. The I.T. TECHNICIAN takes a deep breath and then begins to dial the USER's number. I.T. LEADERSHIP stands and walks over to the RECEPTIONIST's desk.)

I.T. LEADERSHIP: Come into my office again! I need you to draft and send an e-mail to H.R.

RECEPTIONIST: I'll be right there.

(I.T. LEADERSHIP walks back to the leadership desk and sits down. The RECEPTIONIST grabs the usual notepad and pencil and wheels an office chair over to I.T. LEADERSHIP's desk. I.T. LEADERSHIP and the RECEPTIONIST have a silent conversation. USER picks up the cellphone.)

USER: What now?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Your property-transfer form has been approved.

USER: Joy. You should all give yourselves a pat on the back for actually accomplishing something. So tell me, I.T., how do I fix my laptop?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: I know you said this earlier, but you're absolutely sure it's plugged in?

USER: Yes! I am positive my laptop is plugged in.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Okay . . .

(Beat.)

Sorry. I'm just trying to think. Try pressing the power button. Does it do anything?

(The USER presses the button, but nothing happens. I.T. LEADERSHIP and the RECEPTIONIST end their conversation. The RECEPTIONIST returns to the receptionist's desk and begins to type up an e-mail.)

USER: Nothing.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Is the laptop connected to a docking station?

USER: No. It isn't.

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Are there any indicator lights showing on the laptop?

USER: There are no lights on the laptop. Why don't you just admit the laptop's broken and that your department should supply me with a new one? Especially after everything I've had to endure today because of your department's incompetence!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: There isn't even a light to indicate that the laptop is charging?

USER: No. There are no lights. I'm looking all over, and no lights are showing on this laptop.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN sighs deeply. Beat.)

USER (CONT.): What is it? Why are you sighing? How do I fix this stupid laptop? I think you have no clue how to fix anything! You're just wasting my time, aren't you? Did you even get a degree in computers, or did you just look up *TikTok* videos and lie on your résumé?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Is the laptop plugged into the wall outlet?

USER: Yes. I'm looking at it right now. I told you that already!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Is the other end plugged into the computer?

(*Beat.*)

USER: Uh . . . one sec. I hadn't thought about that. Let me check.

(*The USER checks and, sure enough, finds that the charging cable isn't plugged into the computer. The USER plugs in the cable and turns the laptop on. The laptop starts turning back on.*)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Well?

USER: Wow! Okay. Great! Yeah. That's all it was. Thank you for your assistance and have a great day!

I.T. TECHNICIAN: No problem. Just doing my job. Goodbye!

(*The I.T. TECHNICIAN hangs up on the USER. The USER tries to type in a password and accidentally types it in wrong. The I.T. TECHNICIAN stands and walks over to the I.T. SUPERVISOR's desk.*)

You are *not* going to believe how I magically fixed the laptop.

I.T. SUPERVISOR: How?

I.T. TECHNICIAN: The charger wasn't plugged in.

(*The USER, growing frustrated, tries to type in the password again and accidentally types it in wrong a second time. The I.T. SUPERVISOR and the I.T. TECHNICIAN crack up laughing.*)

I.T. SUPERVISOR: Wow. Imagine that.

(Beat. The USER's cellphone rings, and the USER answers the call.)

USER: Hello?

(The HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE speaks in a voiceover.)

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: Well, well, well . . .

USER: H-hi! It's been too long. I . . .

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: Not long enough! I was just talking with my family over in I.T. Leadership, and they were just saying you have some serious explaining to do. Rude behavior, risky Web sites, spreading office Gossip—the whole nine yards.

USER: Now wait a minute. I . . . I can explain everything. Hold on. First, I never spread office gossip.

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: Don't lie to a Human-Resources Representative. You don't think I know that you were the one who told Billy over in I.T. about our love affair? He's been your best friend since high school, and Billy is the biggest gossip in I.T.

USER: Oh . . . you know about that . . . do you?

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: Yes. I do. Isn't that lovely? Except for the part of the gossip you forgot to mention, which is—what was it again? It's on the tip of my tongue—oh, yeah. You cheated on me with the I.T. receptionist at last year's Summer Lunch Party, and that's why I left you to go back to my fiancé. To think I was the reason you got your position as assistant CEO of the company and then you go and cheat on me!

USER: That was the I.T. receptionist? I thought that was your cousin!

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: Distant cousin and I.T. receptionist. They're both.

(Beat.)

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE (CONT.): I also know based on the evidence my family in I.T. Leadership was able to provide that you and Billy are up to something illegal as well.

USER: You're not seriously still mad at me about all that are you? I mean you cheated first on your fiancé!

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: That doesn't mean I can't be petty about your cheating on me after that. I can hold a grudge for years.

USER: Look. There's no need for anything drastic here. I'm sure this is a *big* misunderstanding. You know how those I.T. people are. Always exaggerating. I'm a nice person on the phone. Honest!

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: I'm sure. All this is just one *big gossip*, isn't it?

(Beat.)

Well, we won't have to wait long to find out because H.R. has scheduled a meeting with you and Billy for 8:00 a.m. on Monday. Bring your laptop, your company phone, and anything else that has been issued to you.

USER: You're enjoying this, aren't you?

HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE: Every single moment of it. We'll see you on Monday at 8:00 a.m. Don't be late . . . and have a great weekend. Goodbye!

(The HUMAN-RESOURCES REPRESENTATIVE hangs up the phone. The USER drops the cellphone on the floor and rushes to the computer to type in the password and sign in.)

USER: No! No! No! They're not going to get ahold of my data! I'll del—

(The USER gasps as the laptop shows that the account has been locked out.)

USER: I'm locked out of my account?

(Beat.)

USER (CONT.): What do you mean I'm locked out of my account?

(The USER grabs the cellphone and dials the number for the I.T. Department.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: We're sorry, but there are no technicians available to assist you at this time. Thank you for using the company's Automated Information Technology Service Center. Remember that when you work for this company, you live the true American dream.

USER: *Oo!* I hate you!

AUTOMATED VOICE: Feeling's mutual.

(Taken aback, the USER looks at the cellphone. Beat.)

AUTOMATED VOICE: Goodbye!

(The AUTOMATED VOICE hangs up on the USER. The USER sits down in the computer chair with a look of utter defeat. The USER's cellphone rings. The USER picks it up off the floor and answers the call.)

USER: Oh, it's you, Billy. Yeah. H.R. just called me, too. You remember how I said all this was as easy as taking candy from a baby? Well, I stand corrected.

(Beat.)

I'll see you on Monday.

(The USER hangs up and puts the cellphone on the desk. All lights dim as a spotlight rises on the I.T. TECHNICIAN, who is finishing up writing notes for the ticket.)

I.T. TECHNICIAN: Thank the Lord! Just in time for 5:00 p.m.

(The I.T. TECHNICIAN sighs.)

I'm so glad it's Friday. Ticket complete.

(Blackout.)

Lab Coats

Page Petrucka

Characters

MS. DNA (pronounced Dena), woman, 30s or 40s

MR. STRAND, man, 30s or 40s

Time and Place

The action takes place in the afternoon in a science lab. The time is the present.

(A dark stage. A loud boom is heard. After a few beats, lights come up and reveal a high-school science room. There are test tubes, equipment, and a smoking receptacle on the lab table. DNA and STRAND are dressed in lab coats, gloves, and goggles. THEY are standing motionless in utter shock facing the audience. THEY look as if THEY were just caught in an explosion—i.e., hair standing on end, black streaks on their faces and coats, etc. Several beats pass before the smoke begins to clear and THEY begin speaking.)

DNA: Well. That was unexpected.

STRAND: Yes. I concur. Unexpected. And dare I add a bit shocking as well.

DNA: Indeed. Strand?

STRAND: Yes, Dna?

DNA: What just happened?

STRAND: I believe we just had what one might call a “boom” situation.

DNA: Precisely. A “boom” situation. But what happened?

STRAND: I can only speculate, but I suspect some things that didn’t belong together ended up being together. But since they didn’t really belong together, well . . .

DNA: Boom.

STRAND: Yes. Boom.

DNA: Huh.

(Long pause.)

STRAND: Dna, have you ever seen anything like that?

DNA: No, Strand, I have *not*. Not in all my days. Ever. You?

STRAND: It is the same with me. I have not.

DNA: Then we are in agreement.

STRAND: That we are!

DNA: Boom.

STRAND: Boom.

(Pause.)

STRAND: Think it's safe to move now?

DNA: I am going to say . . . yes?

STRAND: Yes?

(DNA thinks and then concludes.)

DNA: Yes.

STRAND: Yes. Good.

(The two begin to move slowly. THEY are testing the air around them. THEY remove their goggles and gloves and examine what's in the smoking receptacle.)

DNA: Strand, I can't for the life of me comprehend how this happened.

STRAND: I've been wracking my brain for the last two minutes trying to come up with an explanation.

DNA: I've gone over it again and again in my mind for these last two whole minutes as well.

STRAND: Dna, might I suggest we go over everything together? Step by step.

DNA: Excellent suggestion, Strand.

STRAND: Thank you.

DNA: Reset the scene in our minds. Begin at the beginning. Ready?

STRAND: Ready!

DNA: When we began, at the very first . . .

STRAND: I took the thing.

DNA: And I took the other thing.

STRAND: I placed it in the doodad.

DNA: With the whatsit.

STRAND: Yes, and I took that same whatsit and added a little of the stuff.

DNA: The right amount of stuff, correct?

STRAND: Absolutely. I'm sure of it.

DNA: What about the other thing?

STRAND: I had already included it in the whatnot.

DNA: But what did you use for the thing?

STRAND: The doodad.

DNA: The same doodad as before?

STRAND: No, a different doodad that can hold more of the whatsit.

DNA: That makes sense. But you know what doesn't make sense?

STRAND: Why it all went boom.

(DNA thinks hard.)

DNA: Why did it all go boom . . . ?

(STRAND also thinks hard.)

STRAND: Why? I mean, we used the thingamajig correctly, didn't we?

DNA: Absolutely. We did. Oh! Is it because the whatchamacallit didn't have enough of the dojigger to make a dowhacky?

STRAND: Good heavens. The *dowhacky*!

DNA: What about it?

STRAND: Did we miss that?

DNA: I don't know. Did we?

STRAND: Weren't you in charge of the dowhacky?

DNA: I thought it was you! I was in charge of the gigamaree. I know for a fact that the gigamaree was precise down to the milliliter-est milliliter.

STRAND: But we still haven't accounted for the dowhacky.

DNA: I mean I don't think either of us would miss the dowhacky. It's standard experimentation procedure.

STRAND: Okay, okay, but what about the fandangle. Could that have been the problem?

DNA: How many drops did you add?

STRAND: Three drops of fandangle. Like I always do.

DNA: Then that should have resulted in a positive reaction to create the hootmalalie.

STRAND: Because the hootmalalie is the end result. It's what we expect to happen and what has always happened in the past.

DNA: So why did it go *boom* this time? What are we missing?

STRAND: I'm *baffled*.

DNA: Dumbfounded.

STRAND: Thunderstruck.

DNA: Confounded. Befuddled.

STRAND: Stupefied. Utterly flabbergasted.

DNA: Flummoxed.

STRAND: Oo! I like that one.

DNA: Me, too. It's a great word, isn't it?

STRAND: Sure is.

(*Pause.*)

DNA: Wait a minute. Wait a minute! I think I know what happened!

STRAND: What?

DNA: Weren't you just saying something yesterday about new fiddle-faddles?

STRAND: Yes. The school just provided us with two new fiddle-faddles. Wait! I see where you're going.

DNA: We didn't take into account the gismo and the effect it would have on the fiddle-faddle!

STRAND: The *gismo*! That's *it*! Dna, you're a genius.

DNA: As are you, Strand. So, do we believe the new fiddle-faddles are faulty?

STRAND: I don't know that the fiddle-faddles are faulty, but they might require an adjustment of the amount of dowhackies and thingamabobs we include in conjunction with the gismo.

DNA: Yes, but if that's the case, we also have to consider slightly decreasing the whatsit and increasing the whatnot.

STRAND: And the dojigger?

DNA: We might be able to eliminate the dojigger altogether.

STRAND: You think?

DNA: I think.

STRAND: It's certainly worth a try!

DNA: It certainly is.

(*Pause. DNA looks at STRAND.*)

STRAND: Well, what are we waiting for?

DNA: Oh, you mean like right now?

STRAND: No time like the present!

DNA: Are we taking into account the adjustments to the whatsit and whatnots?

STRAND: That we are!

DNA: By how much do you think?

STRAND: Seven?

DNA: I'd feel much more comfortable with six.

STRAND: Done.

DNA: All right. I guess there's nothing left to do but jump in. Gloves on?

STRAND: Check.

DNA: Goggles on?

STRAND: Check.

DNA: And we begin!

(As these lines are said, random things are placed all together in a receptacle on the lab table. These things can be whatever the director and cast decide. The sillier the better.)

STRAND: Thing.

DNA: Thing.

STRAND: Doodad.

DNA: Whatsit.

STRAND: Stuff.

DNA: The other thing.

STRAND: The whatnot.

DNA: Other doodad.

STRAND: Thingamajig.

DNA: Whatchamacallit.

STRAND: Dojigger.

(HE whispers loudly.)

Eliminated!

(HE tosses the item over his shoulder.)

DNA: Dowhacker.

STRAND: Gigamarie.

DNA: Dowhacky.

STRAND: Fandangle.

DNA: Three drops.

STRAND: One.

DNA: Two.

(THEY look at each other and take a deep breath.)

STRAND: Three.

DNA AND STRAND: Hootmalalie!

(The two stand expectantly. Lights fade out. We hear another big boom!)

Fast Forward Two Weeks Later

Dillon Rouse

Character

DANNY, 20s, a man worried about a first date

Time and Place

A lonely stretch of road at night. The time is the present.

(At rise, DANNY is sitting on the tailgate of this truck in the middle of nowhere. Behind him are houses that haven't been fully built. There's a six-pack of beer sitting next to him that hasn't been opened yet. HE looks up at the moon and then finally takes a beer from the six-pack and opens it. HE toasts his beer towards the moon.)

DANNY: Thanks for being patient with me. It's been a while, I know. Heard about you before. In songs and stories from my dad. The legendary "Man in the moon." The one who sees everything.

(HE takes a sip.)

Got news for you . . . but you probably already know since they said you see everything. But I finally got me a date. It's true.

(Beat.)

Don't know if I should be excited, confused, disappointed, or sad. I mean it's great. Glad that I'm going on a date. Confused why I'm disappointed and even sad. Maybe because it's been too long since I've been on one. And that it probably won't go my way.

(Beat.)

It's a disappointing and exhausting process. The long drive to her place. Trying to get comfortable and not show that you're nervous. The walk to her door. You hope that she doesn't answer so you have a reason to go home and not go through with it. But she answers the damn door, and of course she looks beautiful. You

DANNY (CONT.): that awkward moment of “hi,” like you haven’t seen each other in weeks, but it’s only been a day. Next is the ride over to the restaurant and sharing a comfortable dinner with one another.

(*Beat.*)

It’s nauseating. Because you both aren’t truly being yourselves. You’re trying to show the other how great or even laid-back you are. You need to fast forward two weeks, where you both start getting comfortable with each other. Then you start questioning yourself like, “Should I be comfortable that her beliefs are this?” or “How will she react that I like this movie or comedian?”

(*Beat.*)

But you don’t. Instead you look across and see somebody you hope they’re going to be . . . a television character. It’s a guilty trait for those who haven’t been in these positions before. It’s like finally going to Disneyland for the first time. You don’t know how you’re going to refrain yourself from making a stupid decision but in the end . . . you’re riding the “It’s a Small World” ride.

(*Beat.*)

Then the ride home is going to suck because it’s either sink or swim. Either you kiss her or give the dreaded hug. You try not to think about it by cranking up the radio while she talks about what’s going to happen next week.

(*Beat.*)

My friends are excited for me. But I’m once again excited, nervous, and confused. If I told this to them, they’d think that I’m overthinking.

(*HE chuckles.*)

Maybe I am. Thanks for listening.

(*It begins raining.*)

That can’t be good.

(*Blackout.*)

Callus (Kissed into Our Palms)

Cosmo Nautilus

You take your ring off in the kitchen,
always fearful you'll somehow wash
the mark of your love down the sink,

as if it hasn't been made permanent

in the way you fidget with it, mindlessly,
constant enough to notice in a minute
if you've forgotten it somewhere

in its phantom sensation betwixt your fingers,
only noticed when its gone,
tuned out near entirely in its familiarity

in the callus it has kissed into your palm
each time you close your hand,
gentle the way your hands always deserve.

I take my ring off in the kitchen,
always fearful I'll somehow wash
the mark of your love down the sink,

as if it hasn't been made permanent.

The Whispers in the Wind

Chloe Fincher

Avoiding you has become natural.
Like the sun hiding behind the clouds,
I know you are there,
But I do not see you.
Like the whispers in the wind,
I hear you,
But I find other things to listen to
Like a chill running down my spine;
But I put on a coat and move on.
Avoiding you is what I do.

Got Any Snacks?

Dillon Rouse

Cast of Characters

MARTIN, 15-17, OMAR's older brother

OMAR, 11-12, MARTIN's little brother

DAD, 40s, MARTIN and OMAR's father

WOLVES, various ages, the pack that MARTIN and OMAR follow

Time and Place

The action takes place in a hotel room in a small town in Texas at night. The time is the present.

(Lights come up on a hotel room. There are suitcases and bags on the bed. A few fast-food take-out bags are on the floor. OMAR is seen handcuffed to a bedframe. HE is innocent-looking but can be up to no good. HE looks towards the bathroom.)

OMAR: I'm hungry.

(MARTIN enters. His appearance and stature suggest that HE is the older sibling. HE sets a water bottle down next to OMAR.)

MARTIN: You already ate.

OMAR: Just a hamburger sandwich . . . that didn't have mustard on it, I might add.

MARTIN: Beggars can't be choosers.

OMAR: I want candy.

MARTIN: You can't always get what you want.

(HE looks around the hotel room as if HE's forgetting something.)

OMAR: What did you lose this time?

MARTIN: I'm not sure yet. I'm missing something.

(HE looks at OMAR's area.)

Let's see. Water bottles, pillows, and—door locked. Right.

(HE goes over to the door and locks it. HE then moves a desk and pushes it against the door.)

OMAR: Like that's going to do something.

(Beat.)

How did you forget it would happen tonight?

MARTIN: I thought it was next week.

OMAR: Will that desk blocking the door do something?

MARTIN: It will.

(HE goes over to the window and looks out.)

I can see the lights from the stadium from here. Must be a football game going on tonight.

(HE closes the curtains and handcuffs himself to the air-conditioning machine.)

And now we wait.

OMAR: Can I watch something on your phone?

MARTIN: Where's yours?

OMAR: What does it feel like?

MARTIN: Omar, where is your phone?

OMAR: I dropped it in the swimming pool.

MARTIN: Why did you do that?

OMAR: I don't want the government to find out where we are.

MARTIN: The government isn't after us, Omar.

OMAR: Martin, listen to me. There's a podcast that I listen to, and they say that the government knows all about the supernatural.

(Beat.)

Does it hurt?

MARTIN: Does what hurt?

OMAR: The first werewolf transformation. Does it hurt? Does it go slow? Do our clothes rip when we change? Do we—

(The actors playing the WOLVES enter as OMAR talks. THEY reenact a transformation scene and then slowly move about the stage menacing their prey—the audience members.)

MARTIN: You'll find out in like five minutes.

(The WOLVES exit.)

OMAR: Were you with Dad when it was your first time?

MARTIN: Yep.

OMAR: Where was it?

(Lights fade slightly on the boys. A spotlight rises as DAD enters. HE exists in a different time. HE interacts silently with OMAR.)

MARTIN: Grandpa's old cabin. The one at Buffalo Springs Lake. Dad put me in the basement. Stayed there all night.

(DAD exits. Lights come back up on the boys.)

OMAR: It's been a while since we've last seen him. Three years?

MARTIN: Four.

OMAR: You didn't answer my question.

MARTIN: What?

OMAR: The transformation—

MARTIN: It doesn't hurt, Omar.

OMAR: Oh. Okay.

(Beat.)

Did you call Mom?

MARTIN: Earlier. I told her what we're doing.

OMAR: What did she say?

MARTIN: Barricade the door and remain handcuffed to something. Also, to eat something sweet.

OMAR: She seems to know everything. Wish she was here.

(MARTIN sighs.)

MARTIN: Me, too.

OMAR: You got any snacks?

MARTIN: Damn it.

(HE looks at the duffel bag on the bed.)

They're on the bed.

(OMAR becomes sarcastic.)

OMAR: Great job, Bro.

MARTIN: Oh, I'm sorry. You should be thanking me. At least you have someone to go through this with.

OMAR: You did, also.

(The WOLVES enter and circle the boys.)

MARTIN: Dad left.

(This is something that has been building up in MARTIN for quite a while.)

He handcuffed me to Grandpa's weight set and said he was going to get snacks before the moon became full, and, well, the rest is history.

(Beat.)

Either he didn't want to see me become the monster or vice versa.

OMAR: Did you kill anything or . . . anyone?

MARTIN: I don't know. You won't have any memory the next day.

OMAR: Dang it. I want to see what I look like.

MARTIN: It's not like those horror movies Grandpa showed us.

OMAR: Are we the four-legged werewolf or the two-legged? I want to be the two-legged werewolf like in that black-and-white movie. I mean, four-legged wouldn't be bad, but I don't want people thinking that I'm a dog. Like in those *Twilight* films.

(MARTIN chuckles.)

MARTIN: Wait. You've watched *Twilight*?

OMAR: Don't tell the guys.

MARTIN: Oh, I won't.

(Beat.)

MARTIN (CONT.): I don't know if it's two-legged or four-legged. I tried to figure it out, but I always have no recollection from the night before.

OMAR: We should videotape ourselves when we turn. Then we can see which ones we turn into.

MARTIN: Good thinking.

(Beat.)

It's like falling asleep.

OMAR: What?

MARTIN: The transformation. You slowly drift away. You're lucky if you hear the howling, but maybe that's just a hallucination. Anyway. It doesn't hurt.

OMAR: Thanks.

MARTIN: For?

OMAR: Being here. I'm a little scared.

MARTIN: You'll be okay.

(HE looks at his watch.)

Well, see you in the morning.

(Slowly, the lights begin to fade. Wolves can be heard howling outside the room. Blackout.)

When Spring Could Be Anyone



by Judy Leserman

When Spring could be anyone

grass happens
without
permission
to belong
not belong

impetus of waves so hums
and forgets it—

pollen does not fathom
only unfurls
disintegrates in—

precisely the desire
to drift with attention—
(find the end place
maker) but
the distant
map cannot—

Cento

The point is to live.
To be sure, a human being is
the same cup of dust.

Everything is gestation and bringing forth.
To be sure, a human being is
laughter, because the air is full of apple blossoms.

Ripening like the tree which does not force its sap—
to be sure, a human being is
qualified to engage God in colloquy.

I walk down the streets, under
the trees, and so distort—
all the ivy grows sideways.

I give myself to it—it's a blessing
to forget what we are.

Lines Adopted to Make This Poem

“And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet*

(translated by H. D. Herter Norton)

“To be sure, a human being is a finite thing, and his freedom is restricted.”

Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

“If he's guilty / we must be guilty; we're all made of / the same cup of dust—”

Chana Bloch, *Blood Honey*

“*Everything* is gestation and then bringing forth.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet*

(translated by H. D. Herter Norton)

“The spring of the year; young men buying tickets for the ferryboats. / Laughter, because the air is full of apple blossoms.”

Louise Gluck, *Vita Nova*

“Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet*

(translated by H. D. Herter Norton)

“Who is qualified to engage God in the prayer colloquy?”

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*

“What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I / walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self- / conscious looking at the full moon.”

Allen Ginsberg, *A Supermarket in California*

“All emotions are pure which gather you and lift you up; that emotion is impure which seizes only one side of your being and so distorts you.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet*

(translated by H. D. Herter Norton)

“All the ivy / Is growing sideways / You won’t stop it / ’Til it covers all of our place.”

HAIM, *The Steps*

“That clumsy / pushing and wheeling inside my chest, that ferocious / upturn— / I give myself to it. Why else / be in a body?”

Chana Bloch, *Afterlife*

“It’s a blessing, isn’t it? To be able, / days at a time, / to forget what we are.”

Chana Bloch, *Blood Honey*

Short calls to hospice

The moon arches to the third pane, paling
into the gracious inevitability of dawn.

Tasks of day weigh on eyelids
too heavy to release from the duvet.

What a cheap deal we get: some decades
to be a whole world, yet only particles remain.

(the steamed corner of my apparent body
has not lost enough to not be outraged)

Give me in-between, toenail clippings,
dropped lenses in the sink, hastily packed sandwiches,
gossip and laughter and drinks and chirping and bathing—
all life, after all, assembling

slow. The insipid
salt of time drops suddenly.

Upon finishing a pack of birth control

I count each yellow dose
to even out what blood won't.

These transgressions are not
transgressions, but outgrowth.

I jag the cycle myself.
I watch the cherry trees burst.

They were a gift, a promise.

Returning tenderness,
dry wood remembers
how to wield life.

An afternoon on Tampolo Bay

I wish I was as full as the sea
that carries whale corpses and lapsed coral
and bodies and bodies and bodies

who flirt with the coast for all their freckled shoulders;
who disintegrate in unforgiving salt and eel;
who barnacle uncertain shores. Or the pregnant dog,

stout nipple, never too proud to beg
for food, goes where her necessity goes,
watches men lick bones,

pulls across the sand and leaves evidence
of her presence. Or the smoke that drifts
from barracuda-stacked towers,

never mind the fluster seas last week,
which tout palisander skiffs
in swirling capes that vanish them into the sky.

The view from 25th and I

I request one song and become
an evening of open windows
quietly collecting street cantos.
This is how I teach myself
tenderness after years of drinking in
strangers from the sill.
Most evenings, I cannot bear to open
the windows, to watch the sun set again.
What more is there to collect
before placing a full foot on the sidewalk?
Surely it is not indulgent to belong
to oneself before the possibility of love
parses.

Lorn currents

I kiss the wind and wonder
why it is March again.
Thawed, the river carries what is
placed in it:
leather gull feet, bobbing bottles,
floating logs, detritus that flows east.
The Potomac's tide is a rush of tenacity,
the way only water carves
mountains, coaxes bones into more water,
cradles herring spawn, carries the rest ashore.
I cannot help but ask to touch you,
but the forests are too bare, the runoff too urban.
So this is what it means to be next to water:
watch from the shore,
wary the currents.

String of hearts

Fingers to guide your spine
and some southern sun
could be enough,

but I am not a balmy cape,
or tip of a continent. I cannot
sway the sea. Be my clip

of elsewhere.
Be mine to the exclusion
of yours,

live in a clay pot,
and I am sorry
for the time

necessary to turn
one into two.
I will not hide

the winter that comes;
I will sequin your dormancy,
defy how mortal
you cling.

Stepping the brood

There is only one constant,
not the trellis sheen of the Potomac
nor the bridge over, nor beside,
not even the fox that abandoned canals
for a habitat of frequent streets.
The mechanical whir above and the white
noise of leaves are as steadfast as the cicada,
buried deep, deep, until it is recalled
by the woman who slipped one in her pocket
seventeen years prior, planning to extend the fate
of a being which lives only one season.
She will learn this, should she live well
enough to find that all she knows will
eventually become wrong,
should the soft belly of evidence unshell.

Repotting Swedish ivy

What I hold still grows,
does not stop for being
touched by me.
I slipped along
the plastic ridge,
scooped soil, roots, vines,
blackened the space
between finger and nail.
Back in the earth,
you'll blossom beyond
my purview,
but how alive you are
in my hand—
you gather sun,
call the ground.

Extant ardor

The arrangements of cello suites left on the couch,
the poetry's bookmark pulled out,

plucked like a dry hyacinth.
I could not help but ask if he'd like

a drink while he flowed from
page to page. I place my phone

on the console, turn to the mirror,
To be desired means nothing; I

reapply lipstick and check
the dull screen again, reach for glasses.

I write about what's left of this
like the pit viper jumps to a flame.

Allelopathic

This dry slope is for sage.
Without rain, roots manifest,
secrete chemicals to inhibit.
Older than its Latin name *Artemisia californica*,
the brush thrives in poor soil—

Once an intimate medicine,
now lost to new names—
picked and rubbed
into my sunburnt skin and only
when I go to it.

In defense of the chigger

Bright bug, come
and kill a piece
of me.

Gentle enzymes into
skin and digest for days.

It's good for you.
You stylosome suck;
you do not burrow.

You are so misunderstood.
Arise, arise in wet grass.
How else could we meet
before you drop
for smaller prey?

The illness I earn

yellow spores dust petals,
fly wings, the hum
of an air purifier—
a body must belong
somewhere

I most belong to myself
in this pollen drift, histamine fluff—

beauty is necessary
I think
so it is natural to desire
hives and running eyes

Of course

I breathe and I go
where there is breath,

let the dross in my chest
dissipate in the truth

of a sparrow's song
or the poppy's unabashed

obeisance to the sun. I, too
exist in this light, and in this light

I cannot twist the source of joy;
I can only run to it.

Was it better to attempt than to love?
We forged us, didn't we,

hoped that what lay between was only
dormant, or at least dead and once held life?

Of course hope was all we held;
of course the river frog will never jump at the sun.

Leave It to the Boys

Caleb Dan Gammons

Cast of Characters

MRS. GRIFFITH, mother to BARNIE, OPIE, and OTIS

JEANIE, a next-door neighbor

BARNIE, brother to OPIE and OTIS and MRS. GRIFFITH's son

OPIE, brother to BARNIE and OTIS and MRS. GRIFFITH's son

OTIS, brother to BARNIE and OPIE and MRS. GRIFFITH's son

Time and Place

The action takes place in the Griffiths' front yard. The time is the present.

(Lights rise on the Griffiths' front yard. A wading tub full of sand sits at CS. MRS. GRIFFITH is standing outside with her three boys.)

MRS. GRIFFITH: Otis, Barnie, and Opie, your father told me there will be no vacation until you boys clean up this yard! No shenanigans, either, *My Three Sons*, or there will be no beach, no ocean, no nothing! We don't have time for hijinks; do your duty.

(SHE exits SR.)

OTIS: Oh, *Happy Days!* I can't wait to be on that beach and swimming in the ocean. It's going to be so much fun! I'm just *Bewitched* with excitement!

BARNIE: All right, fellas, let's get to work! Otis, get the lawn mower started in the backyard! Opie, start picking up leaves . . . and I'm going to sweep the porch.

(OTIS sighs deeply. OPIE picks up leaves, and BARNIE starts sweeping the porch.)

OTIS: Why me, Barnie? I don't want to do the mowing. Let me sweep. You mow the lawn.

BARNIE: Do you not remember what happened the last time I mowed the lawn?

OTIS: No. What?

OPIE: He was dreaming of some girl and ran into some *Beverly Hillbillies* who moved in next door.

BARNIE: *I Dream of Jeannie* sometimes, and she's gorgeous. Opie's right, though. I was so sidetracked I ran into those rich hillbillies' yard. I mowed right through their garden, and an old woman with a rolling pin chased me clean down the street back home. I liked to never get the push mower back. Ever since then, I've vowed never to touch another lawn mower again! So, Otis, do the lawn mowing, okay? It won't hurt you.

(OTIS sighs again.)

OTIS: Okay. Fine. I'll do the mowing.

(OTIS walks off SR. Beat. The sound of a lawn mower trying to start can be heard.)

OPIE: That dog of ours has done it again!

BARNIE: What's going on, Opie?

OPIE: *Leave It to Beaver* to be digging holes in Momma's flower garden again.

BARNIE: That dog needs to nip it, I say! Nip it in the bud! Otis, how come I'm not hearing any lawn-mowing?

(OTIS walks back onstage from SR.)

OTIS: Barnie, the lawn mower won't start.

BARNIE AND OPIE: What?

(BARNIE immediately drops the broom and walks off SR to examine the lawn mower. OPIE and OTIS exchange worried looks. Sounds from the lawn mower start and die. BARNIE walks back onstage.)

BARNIE: What's wrong with it, Otis? Did you break it?

OTIS: Don't *Get Smart* with me, Barnie. I didn't do anything.

OPIE: If we can't get this mower going, you heard Ma. No vacation! We just have to get these *Green Acres* mowed down!

BARNIE: Nobody panic! Otis, go ahead and sweep. Opie, go back to picking up leaves. I'll work on the mower. Hold on. Let me check and see how much gas is actually in the tank.

(*HE walks off SR. Beat. HE calls from offstage.*)

Yep, the gas tank is completely filled up to *The Outer Limits*, so it shouldn't be *Mission: Impossible* to get this mower going again.

(*HE attempts to start the mower. It starts and dies.*)

Why won't this dumb contraption start? Take that!

(*The sound of his kicking the mower can be heard. HE yelps in pain. BARNIE limps back onstage from SR. OTIS looks him up and down and then tosses the broom aside.*)

BARNIE: And just what do you think you're doing? Pick up that broom and get to sweeping!

OTIS: Well, I don't know about you guys, but to me, vacation starts when the lawnmower breaks down. Forget the beach. I'm going to the movies and watching *Star Trek*. I've had enough of this.

(*HE walks off SL.*)

BARNIE: Otis! Otis Griffith, you get back here!

OPIE: As time flows through an hourglass, these are the *Days of Our Lives*.

BARNIE: Oh, *Hee Haw!* Nip it in the bud, Opie! Come on and keep working. We'll be on that beach, and Otis can jump in a creek! Responsibility doesn't end because everything fails around us. Diligence, trust, and patience—those are the characteristics of real men. Our parents are counting on us to clean the yard, and we'll succeed. We're going to the beach for summer vacation even if I have to cut

BARNIE (CONT.): every blade grass by hand! Once I get the lawn mower started, I'll show you how it works, Opie, and you can operate it.

OPIE: Wait. Seriously? You and Otis always do the mowing. Well, mostly Otis. It kind of sounds like you're trying to pawn it off on me like you did with Otis.

(*BARNIE begins to limp slowly offstage. JEANIE, the woman of his dreams, walks onstage from SL and over to them.*)

OPIE: Look, Barnie! It's *That Girl!*

(*BARNIE jumps and turns around to face JEANIE.*)

JEANIE: Hi, Barnie! Hi, Opie!

BARNIE: Hi, Jeanie! We were just cleaning the yard. I was teaching Opie here how to run the lawn mower. You know, it's good work for a boy his age. I should know. I'm a man now, and it was good for me at his age. Lawn-mowing these days ought to be more of a *Family Affair*, I believe.

JEANIE: Well, aren't you just *The Saint* of the family. That's so sweet of you to be teaching your brother like that. Are you learning a lot, Opie?

OPIE: Oh, yeah. I'm learning a lot from my manly brother, Jeanie. It's a real *Thriller*. Better than any of those Alfred Hitchcock films on TV. In fact, my brother Barnie here was just about to demonstrate to me how one mows the lawn.

BARNIE: I what? Oh, right . . . demonstration.

JEANIE: That sounds marvelous. Mind if I stay and watch?

BARNIE: Even better.

OPIE: He was just telling me how he can mow the lawn better than *Ultraman* and *Batman* combined!

JEANIE: Really? This I've got to see. Go ahead, Barnie. Show us how you mow the lawn.

BARNIE: I think Opie is exaggerating just a little, but I . . . I'll do my best.

OPIE: Care to sit with me in our wading tub full of beach sand? We use it to pretend we're on vacation even when we aren't on vacation yet.

JEANIE: I see. Sure. Why not? Where did you get it from?

OPIE: The *Brady Bunch* family that lives down on *Petticoat Junction* gave it to us last year when they came back from their Uncle *Gilligan's Island*.

(*BARNIE limps off SR while OPIE and JEANIE sit in the sand. HE calls from offstage.*)

BARNIE: All right, Opie. The first rule of lawn-mowing is public safety, so always watch what you're doing, or you'll end up in the *General Hospital*. I will now start the lawn mower by turning over the key in the ignition.

(*The sound of the mower trying to start is followed by a loud bang. BARNIE stumbles back onstage from SR looking extremely dazed; his face is dirty and burned.*)

JEANIE: Oh, Barnie. You're such a clown.

OPIE: Thanks for the demonstration, Barnie. Hey, your face is covered in *Dark Shadows*. You actually look better now than you ever have before.

BARNIE: I didn't ask for any of this to happen. I just wanted to go to the beach for summer vacation.

OPIE: Yeah. Otis was right. We're wasting our vacation twiddling our thumbs around here.

Come on, Jeanie. Let's go get ice cream over at *The Jetsons* restaurant.

JEANIE: Sounds good. See you later, Barnie.

(*JEANIE and OPIE exit SL.*)

BARNIE: Well, fine! Go away then! Who needs brothers anyway?!

(*BARNIE takes a deep breath and then walks over to the broom. HE picks it up and begins to sweep. HE continues to do the chores, but his body is clearly very sore. Once the yard is completely clean, HE sits down in the wading pool. MRS.*

(MRS. GRIFFITH walks onstage from SR and crosses over to her son. BARNIE stands up and hugs his mother.)

MRS. GRIFFITH: Barnie, what on Earth has happened to you? Bless your heart, sweetheart. You look like the next victim of a *60 Minutes* episode. Why isn't the yard mowed? I see all the other chores are done.

BARNIE: The lawn mower sparked, and it singed my face. I did all the rest of the chores for you and Dad. I hope it's enough that we can still go to the beach.

MRS. GRIFFITH: You did all the chores? Oh, sweetheart. Where are your brothers? Why didn't they help you?

BARNIE: They ran away to town and left me with all the work.

(MRS. GRIFFITH turns so that her back is facing SL. OTIS and OPIE walk back onstage from SL smiling, but THEY freeze with fear at the sight of their mother.)

MRS. GRIFFITH: Well, don't you worry about a thing, sweetheart. You, your father, and I are going to the beach for vacation. As for your brothers, when I get my hands on those two scoundrels, the only vacation they're going to have is a one-way *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*!

(OPIE gasps in shock, and OTIS covers his mouth. MRS. GRIFFITH turns around and spots them.)

Well, if it isn't *Batman and Robin*. Come back from being vigilantes, eh?

(MRS. GRIFFITH walks over and grabs OTIS and OPIE by their arms.)

MRS. GRIFFITH: Well, today I'm Harley Quinn, and you're going to get a great laugh out of telling your father, the Joker, why you left your brother to do all the work around here . . . and with his being injured, too. Your *Father Knows Best* how do deal with you two!

(MRS. GRIFFITH walks them off SR.)

BARNIE: Yes! I'm going to the beach for summer vacation!

(HE tries to do a victory dance, but then HE winces in pain, groans, and stops. HE limps off SR. The lights fade out.)

Back to Buffalo Springs Lake

Dillon Rouse

Cast of Characters

BRAYDEN, early 20s, the clear-headed friend who juggles responsibilities while also catering to his friends' needs

NANYSSA, late teens to early 20s, the friend who has no filter and keeps the party alive who secretly needs a friend like her

ALEJANDRO, late teens to early 20s, a calm and collected guy who knows what lies in store for him; having his friends around makes him feel most alive

MONICA, late teens to early 20s, someone with a lot on her plate who tries not think about herself

Time and Place

The action takes place in Alejandro's backyard. The time is the present.

(Lights come up on ALEJANDRO's backyard. The area is set up as a tropical beach in the style of one of those backyard-beach parties in Texas—all tropical but no beach. Music is playing in the background that blends in the theme of the tropics or paradise. Music can range from Jimmy Buffet, Zac Brown Band, etc. NANYSSA is hanging out and enjoying the sun and the atmosphere. BRAYDEN enters carrying towels and red solo cups.)

BRAYDEN: Why didn't we just take a cruise?

NANYSSA: Because we're broke, mofo.

BRAYDEN: We could of gone to Galveston.

NANYSSA: Nah. It's too—

BRAYDEN: Too what?

NANYSSA: Biii-eachy!

BRAYDEN: You're cut off.

(MONICA enters wearing goggles and flippers. SHE appears confident and determined about something. BRAYDEN notices her.)

BRAYDEN: What. The. Hell?

MONICA: I'm ready.

BRAYDEN: For what? There's not an ocean within five hundred miles from us.

NANYSSA: You made that up.

BRAYDEN: That's not the point.

MONICA: I'm ready for the slip-and-slide.

NANYSSA: We got a slip-and-slide?

BRAYDEN: Alejandro is bringing one for us.

NANYSSA: What a guy.

MONICA: I had a traumatic experience with water slides as a kid.

NANYSSA: Too slippery?

MONICA: Yes. The slides would always get too slippery, and I'd either hit a fence or a table or roll into some dog shit. This time, I'm prepared.

BRAYDEN: You could also not do the slip-and-slide.

MONICA: I can't do that to Alejandro. He's been looking forward to this.

NANYSSA: We all have!

BRAYDEN: Now remember we're here for a reason.

NANYSSA: There's a reason?

(Beat.)

NANYSSA (CONT.): I'm kidding.

MONICA: Alejandro's going through a lot right now, and he needs us.

BRAYDEN: Yes . . . so act normal.

(*ALEJANDRO enters wearing a wetsuit. HE looks stressed, but HE relaxes when HE sees his friends.*)

NANYSSA: Dude! Nice get-up.

ALEJANDRO: Thanks.

(*HE sees MONICA.*)

Dude, you got to let it go.

MONICA: You told me to bring my brother's goggles, flippers, and snorkels. I thought it was because we were going to use the slip-and-slide again.

ALEJANDRO: And that was your first thought?

MONICA: Well, yes.

ALEJANDRO: God, I've missed you. All of you. I'm glad you're all here.

(*The lights fade out, and a spotlight focuses upon BRAYDEN. Nobody else speaks or moves.*)

BRAYDEN: I shouldn't be thinking about my job right now. I shouldn't think about it, but I am. I'm needed back at work. I'm not a suit or anything. Just a high-school football . . . *assistant* football coach in a small town. I hear that this maybe is the head coach's last year. And I'll probably get replaced. I mean, it's not the end of the world, but I'll miss getting out of the classroom and teaching kids how to catch a ball. I just worry that I'll miss something. But I know I should be here. Alejandro found out he had cancer. His dad had cancer five years ago. They put him on hospice, and Alejandro got to watch his dad pass. He called all of us. It hit him hard. He's the oldest and had to be strong, so he cried only when we

BRAYDEN (CONT.): were around. He's tough. I'm scared. I don't know what to say.

(The lights come up and everything goes back to normal.)

MONICA: So why did you bring a wetsuit?

ALEJANDRO: Oh, I didn't just bring me a wetsuit.

BRAYDEN: Oh, dear God, no. You didn't.

(ALEJANDRO quickly goes offstage and brings back a box full of wetsuits.)

ALEJANDRO: I got us all wetsuits!

NANYSSA: You sumbitch! I knew you had something planned.

MONICA: So no slip-and-slide?

ALL BUT MONICA: No.

(The lights fade out. A spotlight focuses upon MONICA.)

MONICA: I really wanted to get on a slip-and-slide. I don't want to go back to Austin. I don't want to go back to my apartment. I don't want to write my thesis. I don't want to write and then hit a wall and start to panic. I start thinking about all the sad shit. I think about when my dog ran away when I was in class. I think about the harsh comments I got from my professor from my last paper. Walking in on my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—and my roommate. I don't think I was made for college. I don't know if this is something I want to do. Alejandro usually will give me a go-and-get-them speech . . . but not today. I want to be there for him. Being here makes me not think about Austin and my little apartment with my ex-roommate, who I hope has moved all her stuff out. Damn. I wish we had a slip-and-slide.

(The lights come back up.)

BRAYDEN: So why did you get us wetsuits?

ALEJANDRO: I have a favor to ask.

NANYSSA: You want us to do a porno with you.

BRAYDEN: The fuck?

MONICA: Alejandro!

ALEJANDRO: Oh, my God! No!

NANYSSA: Oh, my bad. I was just spitballing, and I thought—

MONICA: That was the closest answer.

NANYSSA: I mean look at us: back yard, wet suits, and—

BRAYDEN: You need help.

NANYSSA: You're probably right. Sorry, Alejandro. Go ahead.

ALEJANDRO: We're finally doing it, people.

(MONICA realizes what HE means before the others catch on.)

MONICA: For real?

BRAYDEN: You're joking.

NANYSSA: Is it still there?

ALEJANDRO: I'm pretty sure it is . . . since it's a car.

NANYSSA: Did your brother ever find out about what happened?

(The lights fade out. A spotlight focuses upon NANYSSA.)

We took his brother's car out one night. Well, we didn't take it. Alejandro's brother asked him if he could go get him some McDonald's and fill up his car. Alejandro didn't give a shit about doing all those things. He just wanted to drive his brother's car. However, he did stop by and pick us all up. Thought he was cool. Instead of going to get food, Alejandro drove out to Buffalo Spring Lake because there was a house party. However, the dummy didn't know the address

NANYSSA (CONT.): and just drove around the lake looking for a lot of cars in front of a house. Well, it was dark, and Alejandro is not a good driver, and—I can't explain it. He drove off the road and into the lake. We all got out—soaking wet I might add—and the bitch of it all was that the house party was the next Friday. Alejandro freaked out and decided to tell his brother that the car was stolen at McDonald's. We walked miles and miles and played out scenarios where his brother asked us what happened. But . . . turns out he didn't ask many questions. He believed every word Alejandro said. I wonder what he left in that car?

(The lights come back up.)

ALEJANDRO: Hell, no. He still believes that the car was stolen.

BRAYDEN: What do you want to get from the car?

ALEJANDRO: I'll tell you once we get there.

MONICA: Why can't you tell us now?

ALEJANDRO: Because it would ruin the surprise.

NANYSSA: I thought the surprise was diving into Buffalo Lake. You know there are bodies in there? They found two last summer. Or was it just fish? Or an alligator? No. There aren't any alligators in Texas.

MONICA: That water's going to be cold, especially if we do this at night.

BRAYDEN: We're doing this at night?

ALEJANDRO: Well, duh.

BRAYDEN: Couldn't we do something else?

ALEJANDRO: There're a million things everyone wants to do when they've been told they have what I have.

NANYSSA: He's right. Tim McGraw made a song about it.

ALEJANDRO: And, well, to be honest, this is the only thing I wish to do right now. I don't want to ask my family. They'll ask questions and get emotional. I understand times are tough, especially with everything happening to me. I just want to do something with people who don't make me feel afraid. Like nothing is wrong at the moment. Yes. I know things are going to change from here on out. I just don't want it to happen tonight. I feel a burst of energy coming. It's sad and angry. And, well, I don't want to feel that right now. I never felt that with you all. We never know if this will be our last time doing something crazy. And, no, I'm not just talking about me. You all have different lives, and you've got things going on. Time and life happen to all of us. There are a lot of things I wish I could have done. I can't, and that's my fault.

(*NANYSSA recites.*)

NANYSSA: "What you can't do tomorrow you should have done yesterday."

ALEJANDRO: That's actually beautiful.

BRAYDEN: Where did you hear that from?

NANYSSA: Internet.

ALEJANDRO: So what do you say?

MONICA: I wish we had a slip-and-slide, but this'll do.

(*SHE gives ALEJANDRO a hug.*)

I'll get some towels.

(*SHE exits.*)

NANYSSA: Well, I'm always up for anything. You know that, pal. I'll see which lake cop is working tonight. I know a few people who work out there. Don't ask me how.

(*SHE exits.*)

BRAYDEN: This is crazy. But why not?

(HE goes into the house. ALEJANDRO stands there and embraces the love HE has received from his friends.)

ALEJANDRO: Whew! I'm glad you all said, "Yes." Thank you.

(Blackout.)

About the Contributors

Sammie Browning is a dedicated teacher and passionate writer who finds solace in writing poems as a form of therapy. Married to Brent and mom to James, Cody, Dusty, and Brooklyn, Sammie balances her love for all things true crime with the joys of spending time with family. Her deep appreciation for these interests fuels her writing, where she channels her experiences and passions into compelling poetry.

Ciaran Cooper has had fiction appear in *Salamander*, *The Pinch*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Pangyrus*, *The Midwest Prairie Review*, and other literary journals. He has received numerous awards for his writing including First Place for The UW Madison Writers Institute Prizes (for both fiction and poetry), the Fiction Southeast Editor's Prize, and Third Place for the River City National Fiction Award. He has also received fellowship grants from Salem Art Works in New York and the Illinois Arts Council. Cooper holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars. He lives in Chicago with his wife and son.

Chloe Fincher is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Texarkana with a major in English and a minor in history. Her featured poems reflect a larger project that examines her journey towards motherhood. Since graduating, she has welcomed a healthy son home. She looks forward to continuing her writing journey as the trials and joys of motherhood continue.

Caleb Dan Gammons is an author, an actor, and a playwright with a passion for telling great stories. His most notable projects currently are his collaborations with the Biblical Drama Institute (BDI) of Texarkana, Texas. He is thankful for his guiding influences: his parents, his sisters, his girlfriend, and his many friends. He thanks his future readers for taking the time to read his writing.

Danielle Hanson strives to create and facilitate wonder. She is the author of *The Night Is What It Eats* (winner of the Elixir Press Prize), *Fraying Edge of Sky* (winner of the Codhill Press Poetry Prize), and *Ambushing Water* (Finalist for the Georgia Author of the Year Award). She is also the editor of an anthology forthcoming from Press 53 and a book of literary criticism. She is Marketing Director for Sundress Publications. She teaches poetry at UC Irvine.

Corrine Hinton is the Dean of English and Humanities at Lincoln Land Community College. She is a veterans-studies and rhetoric-and-composition

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Judy Leserman is a writer living in Washington, D.C. She is a current MFA candidate in poetry at George Mason University, where she is a 2023 Cheuse Center International Writer Fellow. In addition to her studies, Judy works as the editorial coordinator for *Poetry Daily*. Her work has found gracious homes in *Duck Duck Mongoose* and *The Yeshiva University Journal of Fine Arts*.

Cosmo Nautilus is an artist and writer from west Houston who is determined to see the beauty in every moment. His work highlights the smaller, softer moments of life that are often overlooked in the pursuit of grand displays of emotion. In his spare time, he enjoys playing *Resident Evil* video games and painting digital portraits of his friends and favorite characters.

Macaira Patterson is a graduate of Washington Academy Charter School in Texarkana, Arkansas, who is currently attending Southern Arkansas University and majoring in mathematics. Her interests include drawing and renovation projects.

Page Petruka is an accomplished actress of the stage and screen, a director, an award-winning and published playwright, and a professor of theatre at Northeast Texas Community College. Her film work includes supporting roles in Hallmark, Lifetime, and Disney movies, multiple commercials, and industrial films. As a stage performer, she has acted regionally in the United States and overseas in both England and the Czech Republic. She has written multiple ten-minute, one-act, and full-length plays.

Dillon Rouse is an educator and playwright from Pampa, TX. He received his Bachelor of Arts at Texas A&M University and a Master of Fine Arts at Texas Tech University. His works have been produced and workshopped in Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, and Lubbock. Dillon has also hosted playwriting workshops at conferences such as the Association for Theatre in Higher Learning, Southern Eastern Theatre Education, and the Texas Educational Theatre Association's TheatreFest. His hobbies are spending time with his dogs, collecting classic vinyl records, and working out.

Niko Santos is a writer and poet from New Jersey. In his writing, he explores the push and pull of human relationships in order to expose the strain of love and explore the flaws that make it so distinctly human. In his eyes, the way people love feels both disgusting and beautiful, and that's what draws him in.

Mark Spann is a writer and educator who lives in east-central Missouri. He has been published in *Sangam*, *Gnu*, *The Cape Rock*, and *Everyday Fiction*.

Hollis Thompson is the artistic director of the Biblical Drama Institute (BDI) in the Texarkana area and an English faculty member at the University of Arkansas at Hope and Texarkana. He completed his undergraduate work at Texas A&M University-Texarkana and received his MA in English Literature from Stephen F. Austin State University. He is currently working on an academic investigation into the intersection of Biblical studies and superheroes.

Dakota Travis is majoring in English and minoring in psychology at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. In addition to her studies, she is a full-time writer who is working on her first novel. She is also a mom and a lover of all things creepy and unusual.

Michael Wells is a mass-communication major and a drama minor at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. He is a common face in shows around town and a familiar voice in audio dramas on the Internet. He is currently balancing working full time with attending a full load of classes, but he knows his efforts will pay off when he graduates with a bachelor's degree in the fall semester of 2024.

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