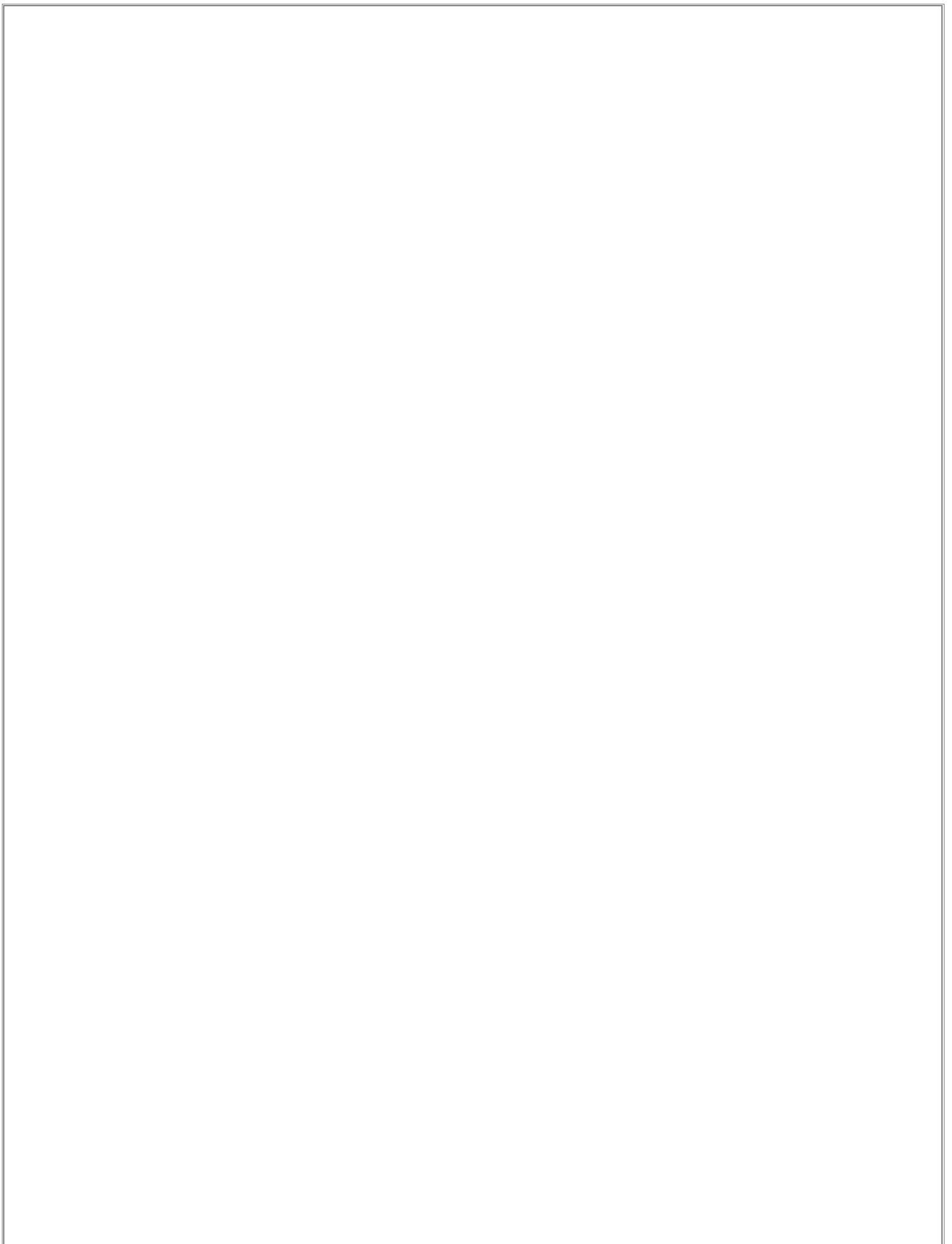


IMAGE BY ELLIE TUTTLE

THE QUEEN CITY REVIEW

MANCHESTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE
LITERARY MAGAZINE

ISSUE #04, NOVEMBER 2024



THE QUEEN CITY REVIEW

The Queen City Review is Manchester Community College's literary magazine, featuring student writing and art. This edition includes poetry, fiction, art, and photography. The vision for *The Queen City Review* is to showcase the talent, drive, and expression of students as they grow and evolve. We envision a magazine that is representative of the collective and individual voices of this vibrant and diverse community. We hope the content of this edition is thought provoking, evocative, and memorable. Each student has a story to tell – here, they are provided a platform.

This publication is made possible by funding from the Student Senate and the vision and hard work of the magazine's editors, the Fall 2024 semester Creative Writing Club. We are grateful for all student contributors. We also thank Professors Diane Hebert and Colleen Jennings of English & Humanities Department for their support. Special thanks to the professionals at Keystone Press for their outstanding work publishing this journal.

SHIVA PAINTING BY JENN MADSEN



FEATURED PIECES

POETRY

Two Poems	Anish Bhasin
A Poem in Spanish and English	Esperanza Sanchez-Gomez
“New Beginnings”	Yajaira Sanchez
“Love, Guts, and Eat”	Dakhila Ali
“Before Him”	Jezelle Josef
“The Wooden Bear”	Tucker Yuksel
“Waiting for the Number 8”	Haydyn Atwood
“Generational Trauma”	Aaliyah Dorsett
“City of Love”	Donna Luong
“Deserted”	Sam Flynn

FICTION

“Bazookles”	Nolan Wilder
“Bar”	Selina Nwikina
“Saturday Nights”	Haydyn Atwood
“Night Owls”	Sam Flynn
“No Degrees Nor Merits”	Chocorua (Lilith) Trask

“The Fate Diary”	Katlynn Caron
“Little Lizard” (excerpt)	Devon Kerr
“Late Lunch”	Matthew Cortes

ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Cover art	Ellie Tuttle
“Shiva Painting”	Jenn Madsen
“Four Floors”	Haydyn Atwood
“Half Alive”	George Millios
“Image 1”	Desiree Laverdiere
“Image 2”	Desiree Laverdiere
“Time and Structure”	George Millios
“Illustration”	Ryan Morrill
“Tomatoes”	Jenn Madsen
“Image”	Ellie Tuttle
“Muted Gaze”	George Millios
“The News”	Haydyn Atwood

FOUR FLOORS BY HAYDYN ATWOOD



POETRY

TWO POEMS

Anish Bhasin

Stained Stride

Shuffling through busy Oxford Street
To the rhythm of a woodpecker's jab,
One misstep dips her oversized coat,
As grey as the factory air,
Into the soot-stained puddle.
To the real thing, it more than compares.

Through the Bloom

Throughout the plains, the open field
Towering grass rises to cover.
Yet unsheathed from its clippings,
The scythe treks forward with disregard.
Among saccharine blooms and butterflies,
A silent samurai held in contempt
The bee he banished while brandishing about.
What a buzzkill.

A POEM IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH

Esperanza Sanchez-Gomez

A Can of Death

Go get me another beer
No, it's late, tomorrow
Go get me another beer
It's not a question
It's a demand
I don't want to get you another beer
It's not because I'm disobedient
It's because I love you too much
Every time I get you a beer
I feel like I'm killing you
I'm not getting you a can of beer
I'm getting you a can of death
Each one leading to your death
Did you get me that beer

Botella de Muerte

Ve tráemeotra cerveza
No, ya es oche mañana
Ve tráem otra cerveza
No es una pregunta
Es una orden
No quiero ir por otra cerveza
No, porque sea desobediente
Es porque te quiero mucho
Cada vez que te traigo una cerveza
Siento que te estoy matando
No te estoy trayendo otra cerveza
Te estoy trayendo una botella de muerte
Cada botella guiándote a tu muerte
Me trajiste otra cerveza

NEW BEGINNINGS

Yajaira Sanchez

Moments of joy are like broken records in her mind during times where she's not fine. A Father is confined, and his daughter is wondering why. For merely walking home or for daring to even call this country home. She sees and hears of what's left of him at times, she focuses on the smudges smeared on the window to avoid his empty smile. she focuses on desperately gripping the phone when he strains himself to say, "all is well". The most anticipated day finally arrives, he's no longer confined, and she won't question how or why. He's on his way back and he can finally call this place home without fearing that one day it won't.

LOVE, GUTS, AND EAT

Dakhila Ali

Place your gentle fingers on my chest and push down as hard as you can. Tattoo your fingerprints onto my skin, push deeper and deeper until blood starts to bubble and pour out onto your now sticky fingers. Push even deeper *please*, crack through my ribcage and pull out all of the tissue, feel the way the blood vessels spiderweb and scramble underneath your nimble fingers. Pull me apart like cotton candy and eat. Love and eat. Scrape your teeth against my chest, feel the beating of my heart against your warm mouth. Sink your teeth into my flesh, deeper and deeper. So deep until your tastebuds are full of nothing but me. Until your tongue is stained the deepest shade of red, the deepest shade of *me*. Pull me apart by the fistfuls and feast until you are sick of me. Until the taste has made you so nauseous you're dizzy, would you still *please* love and eat me? Crack open my skull and peel away all of the layers as if I'm a pomegranate to be prepped and devoured. Sink your fingers into my brain sputtering, drenching you in the saccharine scent of my thoughts and eat away at me. Feel the way it'll squish and mold in between your fingers and your palms, thoughts full of you. Love me and eat.

BEFORE HIM

Jezelle Josef

I was beautiful before he told me I was,

I had a voice before I heard his,

I laughed before he made me laugh,

I had eyes before I saw him,

I was worthy before I had no worth to him.

I loved before him,

And I existed before him, and I will continue to exist after him,

he did not create me,

I am not his.

THE WOODEN BEAR

Tucker Yuksel

Handmade toys are a dying art.
Simple, handcrafted wooden toys
Are entertaining to generations,
Of only the past.

Why am I a toymaker?
All it brings me is silence.
An empty shop
Once bustling with life

Is now silent, nonetheless.
Although one toy still stands apart
In this tiny hut.
A wooden bear,

A bear that sits on its own pedestal,
Unseen by many, in a dim corner.
It was the last toy my father made.
A small reminder of what was.
There the bear sits, in that dim corner
Handcrafted, upright, and a fishing pole in the left hand

Still waiting for a fish

That may never bite.

Am I the bear?

Will there be a fish that swims to my hut?

Maybe. Maybe not.

The thought leaves my mind,

Only for a fish to swim into my pond.

Finally, after insurmountable hours,

A child takes interest in my hut.

A boy no older than 8, clinging to his mother,

Traveling through a vast sea of wooden creatures

Only to come upon my bear.

It seems to have caught his eye.

Not a bite in 20 years.

No one person took interest in the bear.

Not even I.

So, with no charge, or fee,

I decided it's time to set the bear free.

WAITING FOR THE NUMBER 8

Haydyn Atwood

Leaning against the warm bricks in wait,

Once again going through another

short-lived moment

of a dreadful feeling.

The harsh and heavy hit of another

unbearable heatwave stings

that much more

As someone's literal shit

Barely covered by thin discarded briefs

bakes and hardens in the sun's rays.

The perpetrator graciously having

done the crime in the street corner

Away from busy steps.

Flexing my damped finger joints

against the plastic bag weighted by fabric,

At last, the bus is within distant sight.

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Aaliyah Dorsett

100 years of torture has come for me
It has a tight hold on my mother, just like her mother
“Old ways are reliable,” it says to me
It whispers, “It’ll make them stronger; you will gain from it.”
I don’t listen; I won’t indulge in its twisted logic
I soothe myself. “I’ll be better.”
I won’t shout or hit them, this will teach them to control their emotions
I will tell them where I’m going; this will teach them about trust
I won’t make them engage with family members they don’t like; they will learn boundaries
I won’t yell and get frustrated during homework time, this will teach them patience
I’ll be different from them; I’m not giving in
I’ll be better
I promise you I will be better

CITY OF LOVE

Donna Luong

A flap of wings would be heard.

Though nothing could be seen.

Lights below as the city roamed on.

The disturbance of water would be seen.

For those with watchful eyes.

Those watching could hear the flopping of a salmon.

Pink as it can be with its coloration.

Once the pelican had flew away with its meal.

The pair of lovebirds continue their snuggling in the city of love.

DESERTED

Sam Flynn

Arid lands with Arid air

The only thing that he could feel was

Arid Air.

He searched for a drop from the infinite
ocean

Just one, to quench his thirst

But invisible dams held the flow.

He spun the sand out of his boot

Rubbed the dust out of his eyes

Hoping to see water. Nothing.

Coyotes with buzzards chewed and
pecked

At his mind taking what was left

Have at it! Not much there!

Mirages, ideas of water arrived

To his dust covered eyes

Quickly spilled, dried.

He chewed on cacti bleeding with their
spines

Looking for water of any which kind

No blood will be wrung. No find.

This drier desert mind cooled

Until eyes closed,

slowing on resolute.

HALF ALIVE

BY GEORGE MILLIOS



FICTION

BAZOOKLES

Nolan Wilder

Somewhere in Florida resides a 300 pound orangutan named Bazookles. Bazookles wore the same outfit everyday - a blue shirt stained with pizza grease that reads "Italy" on the front and red shorts. He used to live in a house with his 2 brothers Tape, and Big Babooney, as well as his mother Riley - a chubby 30 year old redheaded-human. However, when Bazookles did not end up getting into Harvard University like his smart brother Tape, Riley kicked Bazookles out of the house, and now he is on his own. One thing that Bazookles took with him when he was kicked out of his house was his phone, as he uses social media and posts about his day. How he gets Wi-Fi is a different story since Bazookles is unemployed. Some say they've seen him in the back of McDonald's, so perhaps he uses the free Wi-Fi of McDonald's. Perhaps if Bazookles was employed, he'd just end up eating his paycheck since he loves eating money. Another thing Bazookles loves to eat is rocks, as he posts on social media his status; "Eating rocks." And of course, Bazookles has posted about eating money, as in another post, he simply stated, "Eating money."

Bazookles loves enjoying nice walks in the street in the middle of the night. It's something he and his family used to do before he was kicked out. He once posted a short video of himself walking in the street in the middle of the night, where he was narrating what he was doing, and while he was talking, you could tell he was on the verge of tears. This activity made him think of his family and how much he misses them - except for Riley, as she was the one who kicked him out in the first place.

Legends say that Bazookles is living his best life. He is living off of rocks, fallen money on the ground, and spoiled bananas found through dumpster diving. He is still active on social

media where he posts very important things, such as, “Candy Kong from Donkey Kong is so hot man, it’s unreal.” and another important post stating; “I didn't mean to post that.” Maybe if you live in Florida and you’re lucky, you will get to see Bazookles walking in the street in the middle of the night, weeping to himself of how he misses his family. All except for Riley - that jerk.

IMAGE BY DESIREE LAVERDIERE



BAR

Selina Nwikina

I somehow find myself sitting in the direct center of everything. Sloppy strums on an old guitar follow half a beat behind the sonorous voice of the grayed man sitting in the corner farthest from me. His heavily wrinkled face framed with an unkempt-yellowing beard spoke to a life likely spent alternating between cigarettes and his liquor of choice. He held the last note a bit too long coughing before he could decrescendo properly, but whether anyone else noticed is unlikely as a few whistles and sparse applause fills the room. A wave of relief flows through me when I see the entertainer place his guitar into its case and retreat to the bathroom.

Directly across from me are three oversized flatscreen televisions positioned neatly on the wall. If they were any closer, they'd be overlapping with one another. It's not surprising that they're all tuned to the same channel following some sports' commentary on the football playoff games that graced the same screens all day. Below the seemingly excited, but silent broadcasters, sit three shelves crowded with oversized bottles of almost every alcohol carried at my local liquor store. My gaze leisurely drifts over each bottle until it locks onto one; its intense stare silently urges me into the soul-sapping temptation I try to avoid.

There are probably one or two sips left in my now sweating bottle of Michelob Ultra sitting on the coaster in front of me. Without thinking further, I press my lips to bottle and let the cool malty liquid race its way between my lips and down my throat. I lock my eyes again with the bottle of Bombay Sapphire Gin, liquid platinum if you ask me, and I earnestly push my now empty bottle towards the bartender and request a gin and tonic.

Switching to the hard stuff was always a recipe for needing a ride home from this bar. At the bottom of every glass a silent siren serenaded the poor fool with an empty promise of finding happiness in the next glass. Without a clock, an empty glass is how most people keep track of time or rather lose time. Almost everyone walks in with the sun and leaves with the moon. Even on the sunniest of days the sun seldom reaches

inside the doors, instead poorly placed yellow lighting and blue light from Keno machines lazily filled the visible and invisible darkness. This bar was like a black hole that sucked the life out of anyone who dared to walk through its doors. But this was the place that all my problems were stranded on the other side of that door, and it was me and my favorite bottle of gin.

TIME AND STRUCTURE BY GEORGE MILLIOS



ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN MORRILL



SATURDAY NIGHTS

Haydyn Atwood

Saturday nights at 7:30 are something I wait the whole damn week for. The warehouse is closed on Sundays. It's funny how just when you're about to lose all sanity and jump headfirst off the highest rung of a scaffold in the joint, it's time to punch out and be as free as your home life allows for a day. And so here is my domain: this worn down, previously used street couch my roommates and I found outside our stoop. It's kind of a mix between a dark green and a brownish color, the sort of color where you wonder if it's always been that hue, but you don't allow yourself to think about it too long and risk never wanting to sit on the comfy free thing ever again. On the permanently sunken cushion to my right is a plastic bag full of salty and savory snacks that this payday has allowed me to splurge on. And in front of me, the latest installment of the "Hitman for Hire" franchise, queued up and ready to be played. My left thumb presses the X button on my controller, as my right thumb and index put the pre-rolled joint up to my lips and lights it. Taking a deep inhale as my eyes fixate on the game's

opening scene, I feel the sanctity of Saturday night officially begin.

About half an hour into the gameplay, I hear the front door open and shut, signaling Caleb's return. He frantically walks all around the house, his quick-paced steps leading him from room to room as his head turns rapidly from left to right in an obvious search for something important.

"Dalton, have you seen my new peacoat lying around here by any chance?"

"Haven't seen it, but also haven't been keeping an eye out for it," I reply as I quickly glance through the artillery list before going in for my first hit of the game and my third hit of sativa. "Why do you need it anyway? You're already wearing a coat. Is that one not warm enough?" Caleb is sporting his down puffer, a coat that anyone would agree is perfectly fine for a Michigan February.

"Emily gave me that coat. I want to wear it tonight. You really don't know where it is? I'm running a bit late."

“No, I don’t know where it is. I thought you said you hated that thing. You said that the wool makes your neck itch like crazy, and you hate how tight it feels in the shoulders.”

“It’s not that bad. It isn’t pleasant, but I can survive a couple of hours in it. You’re sure you haven’t seen it?”

“Nope. Does she know you hate it?”

“I don’t hate it—”

“I mean, has she caught you scratching the hell out of your neck or seen the way you stretch your arms to try and loosen—”

“Do you think you might have accidentally washed it?”

“Why would I wash your coat?”

“Maybe you picked it up by accident and washed it with your stuff.”

“I would have been able to feel the difference. Nothing I wear is made from pins and needles like that.”

“It’s not that bad!”

I stay quiet. It’s best that way. I can be pushy and loose-lipped when I get high; I’m aware

of that. I know an argument is coming on. There’s no way to prevent it at this point. So, I’m going to ride it out and try to make this next checkpoint while doing so.

“Look, Dalton, if you did happen to accidentally wash it, just tell me. It’s dry clean only, but if it happened to go through—”

“I didn’t touch your stupid fucking coat.”

Caleb sighs, and then I hear him grumble, “Yeah, and you didn’t touch the stupid fucking dishes either.”

“Did you say something, dude?” The game is now paused.

“No, it’s nothing...Actually, yeah, I did. Can you please do everyone in this house a favor and wash your fucking dishes from time to time?”

“I don’t use dishes. I use the paper plates or just eat things straight from their bags.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious from all these damn crumbs you leave around after you’ve stuffed your face!” Caleb is now pointing to the opened bag of spicey tortilla chips next to me.

“Are you really so stoned you can’t tell how pathetic that is?” Caleb continues. “And

besides, I know that you've been using my pint glasses for all your damn sodas, so if you're gonna steal them like that, could you at least wash all the sticky crap off of them when you're done? For Christ's sake, dude, just even start by putting them in the goddamn sink. How many times do I have to pick them up off of the tables!"

"I don't think that counts as stealing," I state, staring directly into his eyes as I shove another large handful of chips into my mouth.

Caleb lets out another defeated sigh, "You just think you have it so easy around here, don't you?"

I bite my tongue.

"I would love to be able to sit around, getting high as the damn clouds, and not give a care about other people's things. I could just never be so selfish. It's amazing how you can be, though, Dalton, I'm almost envious."

I'm off the couch. I release my tongue.

"If you wanna be able to do what I do, go ahead. But make damn sure you're taking all of it, Caleb. Not just the Saturday nights. Not just the short snippets you see in between keggers

and dates with Emily. Think about the times you come rushing home in between classes, and notice I'm not here. That time on a Saturday when the sun is still up – hell, Saturday before the sun even thinks about rising. You think I'm sleeping in like everyone else in this house? I've already been packing, lifting, and moving several loads of products by the time you go out for brunch. So go ahead and walk in my shoes; have my Saturday nights, but also my 50 hour work weeks, and my four online classes. And I'll gladly trade it for your downtime and inheritance."

The tension in the room feels heightened that much more by the suspenseful music of the now-forgotten game. Suddenly, Kyle emerges from his room.

"Kyle, have you seen my peacoat?" Caleb quickly turns and directs his attention to the other roommate.

"No. I thought you hated that thing?"

One more exasperated sigh from Caleb.

"I'm late. I'll just tell Emily I dropped it off at the dry cleaners. Dalton, we'll talk about this more tomorrow."

With that, Caleb makes quick strides out the door.

“Kyle, do you think I help out enough?”

“You do your part when you can.”

“Could I be doing more, though?”

“With what time?”

And so I think about the argument more. I know Caleb, and I know he’s not going to let this go. And this will pile on to other issues he comes up with throughout the night. So we won’t talk about it more tomorrow. Not on my day off. Fuck that.

I save my game progress, roll up the chip bag, throw it back into the plastic bag, and head to

my room. After I pack a small overnight bag, I leave a check for the rest of the month’s rent, and a small note

I’ll come back for the rest of my things later this week.

~D

I struggle to make my way out the door, as I can’t find my sneakers. I look everywhere around the house until finally, I spot a wrinkled-up piece of fabric in the far corner next to where the door’s hinged. Sure enough, there they are, under a discarded peacoat.

NIGHT OWLS

Sam Flynn

Reed was a night owl. Compared to the day, the night had a potent solitude that was addicting to him. If he could do something at night, he would. Shopping at times where the main commodity bought was condoms, going to dinners as late as restaurants were open, in college he would take as many night classes as he could, and...hiking.

Reed knew there were some “dangers” to hiking at night, he could get lost, trip on a rock, hell Ted Bundy’s revived skeleton could be in the woods waiting for him and Reed wouldn’t know. But there was an upside to it. There were no people to interrupt his time.

He didn’t know time, but guessed it might be an hour or so before midnight. His legs felt like a giant had fallen asleep on them, but he had to keep moving, he was too far on this trail to give up. Every time he looked ahead with his flashlight though—it made him want to turn his sore ass, and legs that had pain pulsing throughout like he got stung by a scorpion—around. His flashlight was the single source of light on the mountain; the trees covered most of the sky above the trail, and the oncoming clouds of a storm took care of the rest of

the moonlight that could have helped Reed see. Beyond the few trees he could see near the trail, there was absolute darkness. The night had turned the bright autumn leaves to a muddy brown.

Dead leaves crunched under his Patagonia boots; the right one had a hole in it that made his toes curl from the night chill. He had to stare at his boots, and focus on one step, nothing more than that. When he stared ahead with his artificial moonlight, he saw the joints-bane. Overgrown roots reached out from the side and wrapped their way around the trail like a snake coiled around a mouse. Pointed rocks, some pebbles, and some boulders stuck out of the trail blocking his way.

But there were no people interrupting Reed’s time.

When his co-workers had asked him what he was doing for the day after work, and he said hiking, they had told him he was a weirdo in everything but words with their stupid sneer. Even though they had personalities thinner than used toilet paper; they still had the cojones to judge him. Well, that was why he was hiking at night. Most people were just sneering

coworkers, judging everything about someone behind their eyes. Never with their mouth.

The trail continued to be a path the devil wouldn't subject someone to walk on. Reed was beginning to think that the earth was moving the incline of the trail to be steeper every time he looked away from it.

The trees around him started to become shorter, some twisting in on themselves, as he got closer to the summit. They looked emaciated: like someone he had seen on the news who had been lost in the woods for weeks with no food. It was some suburbanite on vacation, who had no idea what was poisonous or how to start a fire. The ribs had stuck out of the lost person's chest like they were trying to escape. Reed wondered if he looked close enough with his flashlight, maybe he could see ribs poking out of the trees.

His knees cried as he stepped over another rock on the trail, then another one after that. His breathing, wheezing was more accurate, was starting to sound like he was trying to blow down a straw house. The largest boulder he had seen on the trail sat at the top of the sloped section he was on; the rock blocked him from seeing if the trail kept getting steeper, or if he was almost at the top.

Reed hesitated on the trail for a moment: his legs shook. From uneasiness at what lay beyond the boulder, or the five miles of hiking he had just done, Reed did not know. Before his legs knocked him over like a building with cracks in the foundation, Reed went on.

The granite gatekeeper of the trail stared down at him...Reed turned his head towards the ground and his boots, away from the rock. He continued up like that, not daring to make eye contact with the rock. Reed didn't shine ahead until he felt his hand make contact with the rough grooves of the boulder. If it was possible he would have taken a deep breath, but Reed was breathing to his lung's capacity, so he couldn't. Reed raised his hand with the flashlight first before he looked at it with his eyes, as if his hands would break the news to him that he still had more giant rocky mountain to climb or if he were at the summit. Reed moved his eyes up from staring at the ground.

Ahead of him...surrounded by the infinite darkness of the woods...was a wooden sign, shaped like an arrow, pointing towards the left of him. The sign with fading red paint read: Mt. Gray summit.

Reed didn't realize he was holding his breath until after he read it. His steep rock-filled journey was over! He took his water bottle off the side of his backpack

and drank in celebration. He choked down his water like a camel with an empty hump. He took a break from drinking and checked towards the summit to the left of him. There was a clearing in the trees where the baldfaced summit could be seen, if there was any light. The last little bit of trail that led to the top, seemed boulder free.

There was a reason Mt. Gray was lonely. She was a mean bitch: between the extensive drive from civilization on roads dotted with sinkholes, the river that had to be forded, or the rocky punishing trail; only masochists climbed her. But that meant there were no people on her. No people to interrupt his time. No coworkers that looked at him with eyebrows trying to reach their hairline.

Reed had caught his breath again. So, he heeded the signs directions and headed towards the summit. Tree branches brushed up against Reed's head: they hung over the trail in a rounded shape—turning the last bit of trail to the summit into an almost tubular shape. His flashlight illuminated the tube of trees, but the unknown darkness still surrounded the trail. It became an ascending portal bringing Reed to the distant land at the top of the mountain.

A land with no interrupters.

The hints of the summit being closer came with the razer sharp wind cutting into his body. Reed did a small shake to try and get the wind off and stepped out of the portal of trees.

The baldfaced summit was made of up of slabs of granite, with clumps of sterile moss dotted around on the rocks, like an old man who had lost most of his hair. Reed lifted his light to see the top part of the summit, and maybe—

There was another person...standing at the top of the mountain.

Reed clicked his light off. How could there be another person? Now? At this this time? On this mountain? Reed began the motion of turning around when he realized that this was his time! What was this sucker doing up here at this hour anyway. He clicked the button of his light on and began moving up the granite pathway towards the top.

Reed didn't want to go and shine the light on the person's face: that would just draw attention to himself. But he did shine his light in the other person's general direction. The stranger was masked in the shadow of the night, but Reed could tell he was tall. From the distant look Reed got, he was dressed similarly to Reed in hiking garb made up of wool pants and a puffy black jacket. The Stranger was leaning against the concrete remnants of

a fire lookout tower; he didn't seem to notice Reed down near the opening to the summit.

Reed kept going, no one was going to interrupt his time.

A light appeared from the Stranger's direction, and their flashlights dueled over the darkness between them.

Whether it was Reed's heaving that alerted the stranger or his boots clomping against the rock, he didn't know. But the Stranger was aware of him.

The summit of Mt. Gray was open to the air. Trees were attached to the side of the mountain, but the main rock section of the top was clear. If it were a warm day in the summer during the waking hours of the world, it would be hard to find a spot on the summit, but at these hours there was ample space for both Reed and the Stranger.

The top of the summit was a flat piece of rock, with the square concrete foundation of the lookout tower, in the center of it. As Reed heaved himself to the top, his backpack now so sunken into his shoulders that it felt like a part of him, the Stranger turned his head around from looking out from the mountain. He seemed to be around Reed's age—maybe a little older—and he had a tangled beard (Reed couldn't tell if it was brown or black due to the dark) that masked his

mouth. The Stranger had an expressionless face: nothing in the mouth, no raised eyebrow, no sneer, and nothing in the eyes that would tell him anything about the man.

Reed went to the opposite side of the concrete square and summoned up enough energy to take off his backpack. He almost collapsed to the ground before catching himself and sliding with his back against the concrete square to rest his weary ass.

With Reed's back turned, he couldn't see what the Stranger was doing, but maybe that would put enough resentment in the air so the man would scam. On the trail, or off the mountain; the Stranger could take his pick.

Reed's breathing had slowed from a fat guy screwing to a husky guy kissing. He took this opportunity of free breathing to get his hiking snacks out and replace his air with food. His hands fumbled around between his poncho and first aid kit, trying to find the snack bag in the dark. The Ziploc bag came between his fingers and Reed pulled it out. He ripped open his cliff bar and started eating it one small bite at a time, wishing, maybe, the Stranger would be gone by the time he was finished.

Reed finished off his cliff bar with his wish not coming true. He reached over to

stick the wrapper in his bag, but a strong mountainous wind shot the thing out of his hand. Reed tried to catch it but missed it in the air by an inch. He jumped up to grab it before it blew to a spot where he couldn't get it.

"Lose this?"

Reed turned around from his spot. The Stranger was holding his arm out, with the little climbing man wrapper in his hands. Reed stood for a second, or more, like a racoon caught in the dumpster. "Hey, I think the wind took this?" The question brought Reed back to the moment.

"Y—yeah," Reed said, before he moved around the square concrete remnants towards the Stranger. Reed tentatively reached over and took the wrapper from his hands. "Thanks."

Reed tried to move back to his spot fast without looking weird.

"Hey, I don't meet many other night owl hikers, you do this a lot?" the Stranger's voice was sonorous, and it had a slight echo from being on top of the mountain. It reminded him of Foghorn Leghorn.

"Sometimes." Reed didn't look back at the Stranger, but before he could get back to his territory of the fire tower remnants, the Stranger assaulted him with small talk again.

"Yeah, it is real-nice. The beautiful night sky, no parking problems, and no people to get in in the way."

Reed stopped.

He turned back towards the Stranger. "Y—yeah that's why I like it." At least Reed and the Stranger had some common ground, maybe the Stranger would get the hint that he was not wanted. The Stranger leaned forward with his arms against the concrete square, before reaching an arm out to shake hands.

"I'm Mike."

Reed's palms were somehow sweating even with the mountain wind trying to refrigerate him. Reed wiped his wet palm against his wool pants, and then grasped Mike's hand. "I'm uh, Reed." The mountain wind turned his voice from quiet to a whisper. Reed tried to go back to his zone of the mountain; before the Stranger—Mike, could talk at him again.

"You hike this mountain before, Reed?"

He leaned back to Mike.

"Nope."

Reed stepped towards his spot again.

"Yup, I haven't either. Maybe it was just me, but this mountain was one wily bitch to climb. I thought my knees were

going to have a heart attack.” Reed snorted a little.

He looked back to Mike; the man still wasn’t smiling. But he was friendly, not polite. “Yeah,” Reed said. “There were some pretty tough parts...” Reed leaned against the concrete square.

“So, Reed.” Mike tapped the concrete with his hands like a drum. “Do you get out hiking often, or just when the world lets ya?”

“I try to do it as much as I can. I like the aloneness of nature,” Reed glanced towards Mike when he said that. But, Mike didn’t care, or the night obscured Reed’s hint.

“That’s cool. I get it, being on top of a mountain, it’s a...good escape from things.” Mike looked up. Reed didn’t know at what, the clouds blocked anything worthwhile in the sky from being seen. “I used to go hiking with my brother...but these days its hard getting out there. You know what I mean?”

Reed nodded.

“I’ve been on some pretty cool hikes myself though. I remember me and my little brother had gone on this crazy mountain, what was it called again?” Torpedo Mountain! That was it, anyway it—”

“I went on that mountain!” Reed said. “The scrambling on that was crazy, I almost fell off a—”

Reed cleared a phantom cough out of his throat. “Um, sorry for interrupting.”

Mike’s shoulders shrugged, and he said: “You got to keep going now. I’m invested.”

Reed went on with his story, at one point he even had to reach over to grab his water for his dry throat. Mike listened, not with a smile, but Reed could tell that Mike was *listening*. Mike moved closer when the wind got louder, and asked Reed to repeat himself when he tied his tongue into a knot.

“I am not hiking in the winter again,” Reed said.

“I don’t blame you.” Mike raised his arm. “Hey, shine your light at my watch please.” Reed aimed his flashlight at Mike’s arm. “It’s almost midnight. Time is faster up here I guess. Doesn’t feel like I’ve been at the summit that long.”

Reed sighed. “Yeah, new day soon, I’m glad this one is over.” He didn’t know why he said that, but it seemed like Mike would listen.

“Bad day huh.”

“No. Not the best. I turned twenty-three today.”

“Mazel tov.” Mike raised his hiking water bottle like a glass of champagne.

“Yeah. I’m not a birthday guy really. Never was. My Dad used to ask me what I wanted for a present and I would say ‘silence and calm Dad.’ I work at the office of a gas company. There’re about twenty regular employees plus the manager. When someone’s birthday comes around, the office will pool together some money and get a cake. Not a good one, most of the time, unless someone is retiring or dying. It’s usually the cheapest sheet cake that Kroger’s sells.”

Reed didn’t look at Mike, he stared out off the mountain—where clusters of yellow light came from the nearest town. There were no lightbulbs or streetlamps to light up the woods around the town though, so the landscape was cave-black.

“...They didn’t get me a cake today. I don’t like cake, but even the fucking cleaning guy who comes in once a week got one.” Reed turned to look directly at Mike. “It just doesn’t feel great.”

No words passed between them for a moment. Just wind.

“Sorry for pouring my problems on you. I—I don’t know what got a hold of me.”

Mike stopped leaning against the concrete remnants and stepped over towards him. Mike slapped his back a couple times, and

pain, like belly flopping off a diving board came to his back. “Cheer up man. It may not be on your birthday, but I think a bar has to be open somewhere.”

Reed’s heart started pumping as though he was going up the mountain again. When he tried to speak he found that his tongue was impotent. His instincts took over and spoke for him though: “I’m uh, all set.” Reed couldn’t tell in the dark if Mike was disappointed.

“Dang, well alright. I best be going then.” Mike went over and tossed his tattered hiking backpack over his shoulders. He stepped around Reed, and then turned around holding out his fist. “If, we meet on another mountain, we’ll try for drinks again. How about that?”

Reed answered Mike’s fist with his own. “S—sounds good.”

“Good meeting you, Reed.” Mike headed down the granite summit and reached the entrance to the mountain woods. He stopped for a moment, and then headed into the portal of trees.

Reed went over and sat back into his spot. The whistle of the wind was the only other voice on the summit now. He should’ve gone with Mike. He reached a hand over to his backpack and pulled out his phone, the bright light lit up his spot.

It was midnight...and his birthday was over.

Reed looked over to the trees. In the forest—he didn't know where—Reed heard the hoot of a solitary owl.

TOMATOES BY JENN MADSEN



NO DEGREES NOR MERITS

Chocorua (Lilith) Trask

THUMP! went the boots of the young adult man.

He was finally getting used to stomping through the hard, deep snow when he stepped onto a porch with only a thin layer of the powder.

He panted for what felt like an hour, catching his breath and trying to stay calm.

He read a sign for the name of this old town; it was falling apart; "Colville Lake."

He pulled out his wallet in an attempt to recall why he was even here.

There was a picture of him at the front, celebrating a birthday by himself.

"Why should I expect anyone to even remember me at a high school reunion?"

"I left months before the graduation I never attended."

His hat flew off in the chilling winds as he spoke to himself.

It was lost to nature, like the buried treasure of a pirate captain.

While rooting through his pockets he found his phone, miraculously still alive and with nearly a quarter of the battery left.

He scrolled through his short list of contacts, falling upon a number to call for help, 911.

It may have seemed silly to have that number in your contacts, but it functioned as a reminder for an option, a way to call for help.

He picked his wallet back up, reading a bit about himself as though he had never known the person that he was.

The name read out: "Walter" on his identification.

He was no more than twenty-four and was unemployed.

The expiration date had long since passed because he could not bear to be among the folks at the department of motor vehicles.

He knew people there.

Walter looked at his picture, he was frowning on his lonely birthday.

He looked disheveled, his short black hair a mess and his oversized clothes old and ragged.

He had a collection of pictures identical to this from previous years, but none of them were with him.

The cold wind blowing into his face and his long black hair reminded him that he was now facing a blizzard.

As he knocked on the door of the most likely abandoned house, he wondered if the whole town was abandoned.

"Just my luck, my car breaks down in the town with no mechanic."

"Or anything," He added to his sentence.

"Oh, shut up Walter!" He said to nobody but himself.

"..." He had no rebuttal for himself.

He stayed quiet as he opened the door and walked into the abandoned cabin, the hard wood squeaking under every step.

The house was clearly not insulated, and the fireplace had likely not seen use in ages, yet there was a small tray of dusty logs next to it.

He continued grumbling as he sat down on the only intact piece of furniture in the room, a dusty old couch that was missing the cushions it so desperately wanted.

He shivered while sitting on the couch, a new feeling washing over himself.

Purposeless.

Walter took the backpack off of his exhausted back.

He looked through to see if he had somehow missed something to get him out of the situation.

The bag did not have much: an inconsistent lighter, the frankly flimsy resume of a high school dropout, and a metal box containing most of the money his late parents had left him.

He looked at his resume, it mentioned his great grades in middle school, the time he played a minor role in the play "Hamlet," and the detail he was close to graduating high school when he quit.

He then took the lighter, dragged a log into the fireplace and tried to start it.

No luck.

He had an idea.

He took his disappointing resume and tossed it into the fireplace, lit it aflame, and started a fire successfully.

Walter was warm, if only briefly.

A large pile of snow came down the chimney, likely from a nearby overgrown tree, snuffing out his fire and his resume, already burnt.

He yelled.

He yelled louder than he even knew he could.

"WHY!? WHY!? WHY ALWAYS ME!?" he cried out, anger overwhelming him.

Walter kicked the now snow-covered log, and he screamed again, now in pain from his mistake.

He stumbled onto the couch and assessed his foot.

Something was likely broken and if it was not, it felt like it was.

He bumped his hurt foot into the backpack, knocking the metal box in it onto the floor.

Walter stared at the box for a few minutes, tears forming in his eyes.

"I'm sorry dad," he quietly spoke.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make you proud, I'm sorry I wasted my life, and I'm sorry I haven't gone to the DMV..."

It took him a while to return it to the backpack where it belonged.

His inner monologue took over for a moment.

"So that's it then. You're going to die in the middle of nowhere with nobody caring, including yourself."

"You're less than pitiful," he thought, the tears in his eyes freezing on his already cold face.

That is when something happened.

His phone rang.

He could barely move himself to pick it up, and he caught it on at earliest the ninth ring.

It was a voice he had not heard in a very long time.

It was Walter's best friend from high school, Jeremy.

"Uh, hey Walter are you there?" Jeremy spoke.

"Y-yeah, what's up Jeremy?"

"I'm in the middle of Colville Lake where my car broke down, and I was hoping you could help. I'm in the old town hall and my phone is about to..." The call suddenly ended.

Walter had a goal now, if he could not help himself, he could help a friend.

Walter picked up his backpack and left the cabin, hoping he would never have to return.

Frostbite was finally kicking in, his gloveless hands in immense pain.

He started off into the snow, the storm still raging on above and around him.

Walter did not know where the town hall was, but he knew he should get there quickly before Jeremy would go elsewhere.

It was hard to see more than a foot in front of him, the cold wind pushing thousands of flakes towards his eyes.

Ten minutes had passed since Walter left the cabin.

Fifteen, twenty.

Despair was setting in.

His fingers were writhing in pain and his toes did not fare much better, but he knew he had to keep going, someone was relying on him.

Someone he cared about.

Someone that was special to him.

Someone that he loved.

Someone with a future.

He stumbled onto a crumbling building that was much larger than the others.

This must be the place.

He stepped inside, moving beyond the pain his body was screaming at him.

Screaming to give up.

"Hello?" Walter called out to the entrance room as he stepped inside.

Without even a word, he felt someone dash out and hug him.

His body might have disagreed but Walter finally felt warm.

"My phone still has fifteen percent left, let's call 911."

Jeremy agreed, so Walter called.

"You have reached 911, what's your emergency?"

Jeremy prepared to talk.

They knew how Walter felt about calling for help, yet Walter responded.

"Me and my friend are trapped in Colville Lake where a snowstorm is taking place."

"We're stuck in the town hall."

It was only twenty minutes before a dispatched rescue vehicle came and brought them far from the town.

"Thanks for the save, Walter" Jeremy spoke, his injuries minimal from being out only briefly.

Walter despite being out for so much longer suffered none.

"Thanks for giving me a reason to save myself, Jeremy."

"You want to skip the reunion tomorrow and do something just the two of us?" Jeremy asked, expecting a neglectful response.

"I would love to. ... I'm not cold anymore."

IMAGE BY ELLIE TUTTLE



THE FATE DIARY

Katlynn Caron

October 21, 2088. Days are getting faster as my time is slowly coming to an end. The disease that resides in my body has only become stronger. The medicine for this new illness as not been made as countless scientists struggle to make it successful. It was only karma for this to fall upon me, it was bound to happen, but would I go back to undo everything that ever happened just so karma wouldn't be so cruel? Not a chance. To those who may read my diary after my death, you can hear my story and witness a mystery come to an end. To that lucky person who solves the many cases, I applaud you. I guess I should start by the first incident where I drew my knife.

Growing up wasn't easy, people thought AI was a masterpiece and those who didn't, those voices were not heard. Artist lost their jobs, and the arts were now done by this artificial intelligence who basically ran the show. It wasn't the arts that had just been taken over, jobs were as well, many people lost their jobs to now be homeless and starve in the

streets. It was a tragedy that could be turned back but those with power and money preferred it this way, so it didn't change. I was one of those people affected by this, I wasn't able to find a job and to the only other person in my household did. I begged and pleaded for money for food, I told them I would continue to look for a job, but I was given nothing. You would think the person who brought you into this world would care and nurture you, but I was dead wrong. Whenever I did get my hands on any food, it always came with a beating. Belt on skin, words in ears. It was ruthless behavior. I struggled and cried. No one listen to what I had to say. Be grateful I even had gotten food, even if it was only enough to sustain my life. I had enough, that night was the perfect moment, the creator sitting idly on the couch, beer in hand as she was drunk out of her mind. The smell of booze in her breathe was strong, it was like I had been drinking myself. It was a thought that plagued my mind, one hit, one swing, one stab, one shot. Before my

mind could even comprehend what has just happen, a dead body laid upon the couch. Blood splatter across the floor and dripping from the couch. The deed has been done. I felt relief that the torture was done but anxiety that I would be found especially considering my mother had cameras inside our home, these cameras were built in with an AI feature to detect people with built in recognition. My mind raced as I tried to come up with a plan. Maybe jail wasn't all too bad anyways. My hands were only part of me that had blood on them, somehow nothing else on me had any blood. After I washed my hands, I kneel down to the corpse but when my neighbor had arrived tears ran down my face. I was surely done for, it wasn't tears for the fact I killed the women who those would call my mother, it was tears that I know would be labeled a murder for a deed that should have been done years ago. To my surprise my neighbor didn't suspect me at all, he only tried to reassure me that I was safe from the murderer who killed her.

Days go on and the camera never was able to pick up that I was the murder. Trials went on as different suspects rose to the stage who looked like the person

from the video, it was like luck from the gods that I never went on trial and that I didn't look like myself on the video evidence and I didn't understand why. By this point it had been a month since the killing and my interest became clear on how the camera didn't recognize me. For days and weeks, I did my research, trying to come up with a conclusion on how but it was after a late night I was able to pick up on how I was able to get away with the dead. I will not give out how I got away with it, that's for whoever finds the diary. With that sigh of relief that came from my lips I smiled but an itch felt upon me that I had been feeling for a month now. The urge to kill again. I had never been violent person, the opposite could be said, but the thought of killing another human brought me joy. It wouldn't just be any human being, no no, it had to be someone who deserved such a fate to be brought upon them, and so I thought of who my next victim would be.

Another month goes by, and I finally find the lucky person who would be killed next. This person was a rich individual who flaunted their cash. The people who worked under them were starved for food and barely had any

money to their names. Mothers who tried to take care of their children were begging and pleading for money, or at least food for their kids, not even for themselves. This man was the perfect target by all means and so I would start coming up with a plan. I never wrote any of this down and I never spoke to it about to anyone or anything. Not even the words would seep out of my mouth.

That night was warm, it may have been close to winter but with global warming, all days were hot, and no snow fell upon the ground. People foresaw this happening, but the rich didn't care, they wanted money and by this point there was no going back. Now with the weapon at my side I enter the mansion, quiet as a mouse I make my way to the room to where the rich man lived. Within a few seconds the man laid on the bed with no pulse and not even a look of fear planted on his face. The man looked as if he never felt fear in his life. I made my way to where I would make my escape to only see a woman and her young daughter. I made no eye contact and didn't show myself at all, the only thing that could be seen was my coat to which blended into the darkness. I prayed that they could live

a happy life, no more struggling for money. When getting home I looked upon the ceiling wondering if my itch to kill would continue, and it did, the itch was still there.

That morning it was all over the news, the AIS that were in charge told the story, and when interviewing the maids, the mothers, they explained they found him dead but did not show sorrow. To those who may not know what happened with the man's money, it went to the maids. To many people's surprises, the money went to the son to which the public never knew he had. The son promised to give the money to the family's who worked for his father and to never be like the man who raised him. To this day the people who live in the mansion are thriving and trying to help others in need.

Trials again happened and no one put two and two together that this could be the same killer, but the public was worried about their AI camera having a massive flaw. If people knew about it, how much more trouble could arise. I wonder if I was doing the right thing but when I watched the news and saw the girl smile, the words that left her mouth

stating she was happy and how her mother could now eat, I realized I was doing the right thing. That night I stared at the ceiling being unable to sleep. Who would be my next victim, it was only after a few days of walking around in town that I came to my next target. Another wealthy individual who owned many of the businesses that caused deaths among the public. He got away with the death saying he was not to blame for the horrible air pollution that his business caused. The closer you are too said building the worse the air quality got. Workers died trying to earn money from working inside that building. He said he advocated for human work but when his employees were dying from the toxic fumes, he said it wasn't his fault. He knew how many people needed jobs, he knew how desperate people were, he knew everything wrong with what he was doing, but he did not care one bit. With that in mind I came up with the next way to kill this man. And so, within the next few days I did exactly that. I got everything I needed and went along with the plan and once again it went as planned. People started to piece together that it may be the same person and some of these individuals called me a hero for

what I did. Years go on and the murdered continue to take place. It was only two years ago that I became gravely ill. I cough blood and my fingers go numb. This disease had started claiming its victims left and right. I remember the day I started to feel ill. The people that I murdered appeared in front of my eyes, their screams are deafening, my ears are bleeding as if they were really there next to me. I thought I was dying but it was only just the start. My vision became blurry, and days go on with blood flying out of my mouth. I refused to see a doctor; it was just karma taking its course to whatever I may have. It was only until my neighbor checked in on me that I woke up in the hospital, my diagnosis written on the device near my bed. The robots giving me my papers and explaining the situation at hand. It was truly karma at its finest. I was discharged and I've been at home. My urge to kill was strong but I couldn't kill anyone. I could possibly kill a weak living entity, but I could never do such a thing. So, my body became the painting of the art. I refused to see my neighbors, I refused to go outside. To those around me, assumed I was too depressed to leave my own home. But

they were wrong. The screams from my mouth were from agony and pain of becoming the canvas. And it's been this way since.

I'm now 44 as I celebrated my birthday alone. My neighbors would leave gifts at my door, and I accepted them with a smile on my face. I was grateful for the neighbors on my block, they treated me like family. I had no family, I never knew my father, I never knew the people who gave birth to my creators. I never found a wife or a lover as I wish to never drag them into this mess. I could have easily had a lover, and I could have easily had a child, but I was with the many people who didn't want to bring another life onto this planet. And so, I lived alone for 24 years now, ever since I killed my first target. So once again I'm writing everything down. I know my days are dwindling and I'll eventually wake up with fire beneath my feet. As I write this, I feel my lungs no longer working and I can barely write anymore. Once again to that lucky human who reads my story, or even the robot who analyzes the words on these pages. I am the murdered behind the killings, and I would never change a thing. If on the last moment i breathe I was given a key to go

into the past to undo everything I did. I wouldn't take it, even if it means I could live a longer life, if I could be a better human. Why should I go back and change the actions I had made when humanity should have never been this way. The earth will last maybe another one hundred years before it's gone. This could have all been preventable but for this timeline, this galaxy upon the many that existence, this was what fate has brought upon to us. May the world remember my name and maybe someday if a hero who can alter this world to before it become a mess, I welcome this hero and say my thanks.

My name is Alexander fate, and I am the murderer who not even the great AI could face.

With the diary now closed the man smiles. His hands grasp the diary with the best of his ability. He pushes it away from his body. The diary falls onto the floor, the book upon to the start of the entry of his tale. His hands no longer have feeling, his mouth filled with blood that falls upon his body.

If there is a god out there watching this all unfold, may we never meet as for I

wish not to see the man that let this world crumble beyond saving.

His last thoughts that filled his mind before his heartbeat stopped and his body moved no more. Fate was a cruel

thing to behold but he regretted nothing that he had transpired and if given another chance, he wouldn't change a thing.

MUTED GAZE BY GEORGE MILLIOS



LITTLE LIZARD (EXCERPT)

Devon Kerr

I could hear her humming to me. Somehow, wrapped in the warm darkness, I didn't feel alone. I was so drowsy it didn't occur to me to worry about the details of where I was. I just knew I was safe. I was warm. I was loved. I didn't know where I was but it didn't matter because I knew that I was where I was supposed to be.

~

I didn't know how much time had passed here in the darkness. It was getting easier to stay awake, and just listen to the vibrating song around me. I was getting better at hearing, I could hear the rich harmonies of the vibrant voice. I could hear breaths and birdsong. My cozy darkness was getting smaller somehow though, I entertained myself by imagining the things that I heard. What did they look like? I was also clear headed enough to realize that I knew things I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to. I knew what the sky looked like, I knew what a bird was, I knew the sound of

wind through leaves, I knew that I'd experienced it before. I was curious where this knowledge was coming from if I'd never seen any of these things. As I was sifting hard through the information I somehow knew, something elongated before my eyes forming out of the blackness. It was... a box? A box that I couldn't touch? Oh wait, it had writing in it.

Transfer requested...Accepted

Transference commencing... (100%)

Transference complete...

Wiping... Failed

Rewriting... Success

Distilling rewrite... complete

Soul skill integrated

Scanning soul...complete

Assigning sympathetic species...

Success

I stared in puzzlement at the long list. I knew what it said but I didn't

know how I knew that. Thinking about thinking was making my head hurt, especially when trying to make sense of what was essentially a computer startup configuration? Transferring what? Rewriting what? Soul scanning? Wait, did that mean this thing had scanned my soul?! I shivered in my darkness feeling like ants were crawling on me. That's an uncomfortable line of thought that I didn't like. Then the elongated box suddenly winked out taking the text with it. Wait! I wasn't done looking at it yet! I felt a little panicky as the barrier of the darkness seemed to close in around me, I wriggled uncomfortably. The song vibrated through me and as it washed over me it helped me relax. Can't worry about it anymore since I can bring it back, but the way it was set up like a computer log itched at the back of my mind. The biggest question was why? But wondering why hadn't gotten me very far yet.

I knew I knew things ('cause that's not confusing at all) so I started mental exercises in addition to trying my best to hear and interpret all of the noises around me. Mental exercises like counting, and more dumb things like what the heck is a Ninetendo? I knew information about the world, I knew what things were, but as I tried

to think about myself it seemed my knowledge was lacking. It's almost as if someone had spilled ink on the page about myself. I have vague feelings about myself. I knew I liked reading a lot. I liked imagining things and then drawing them. I liked playing video games. Essential information though? It was just gone. I didn't know my name, I wasn't sure how old I was. Did I ever graduate from high school? What was my family like? Did I have any friends? I knew basic math and I could remember biology lessons about the environment and ecosystems. So I must've gotten an education at the very least. I remembered the joy I felt at things in my imagination becoming real on the page. I remembered my love for my family. But their faces? Their names? Where they were supposed to be, it was just warmth. My confusion turned to melancholy as I mourned the loss of the things I did not know. Who was I? And who am I now? With that last thought and with the song humming around me another box, no, a screen, opened up in front of me that left me gobsmacked. This is what it said.

=====
=====
=====

Name: Unnamed

Species: Undetermined

Level: 0

HP: 5/5 STA:7/7

Ability: Echoes of a life before

STATS

Strength:7 Constitution:7

Endurance:9 Dexterity:9

Intelligence:8 Wisdom:9

Innate Abilities: Song of Scales

Innate Skills: —

Skills: —

=====
=====
=====

WHAAAATTTT?!! Wait, is this for real?! I would try to pinch myself if I

could move but holy guacamole, a stat sheet? A friggin stat sheet? What is this?! A tabletop game?! A Litrpg novel?! Don't tell me I've been isekaied!? What am I supposed to do with this information?! Now that I had the information I kind of wished I didn't, isn't that how the saying goes? Ignorance is bliss? It made me worried about my situation. What was going on? Where am I? What happened to me?

I was calming myself down from all the questions buzzing around me. The song that seemed just for me started its opening notes again. I let my worries go for a minute and just listened. Listening to the song never bored me, it actually kind of bothered me when it was quiet without the song or the birds and the wind. The song was a kind of language in a way. The thought of language made me listen harder than I normally did, trying to pick out anything that made any sense to me. The more I listened the more it dawned on me... I understood the song! Kinda...It wasn't words per se but feelings and ideas in a nebulous form. What I heard most in the song was love. She loved me and the song conveyed the intensity of her love, like only a parent could a child and that's when I knew who she was. My mother

of this world had been with me the whole time, telling me she loved me.

~

As more time passed, with my space in the darkness becoming smaller and smaller I was able to understand more bits of the song she sang and I clung to every scrap. I managed to understand that it was just her and me and she was guarding me on her own. I figured out our names by the repetition of certain feelings and noises. The best way to translate our names into the language I knew before would be a long sentence. Her name was Round red leaf floating on the wind. Not a perfect translation, as when she referred to herself I could feel the freedom in her name and the rush of the wind. It took me longer to figure out my name as she only mentioned it a couple of times when I started to run out of space in the dark. She mostly called me little, from what I could gather with the feeling of a cute sweetness behind her tone. The last time she said my name I figured it out because something shifted in me like a jammed piece of my soul had finally got unstuck and clicked into place. I was Within ashes an ember grows. I

could feel the hope and the warmth she had for me in the name, about how I might grow to be a wildfire someday. The name fit me, like the missing puzzle piece to my new self.

I was asleep in my very tight fit of darkness when I heard her leave. I don't know what happened. I knew she'd gone to hunt and feed herself. But something had happened to her, I was so sure I could almost feel her connection snap within me. That was just silly me though, imagining things more likely. Surely I was just having a nightmare or I was off daydreaming again... right? But more time passed and she didn't return. It was a little unsettling in the quiet darkness by myself. Alone. I was saddened, what had happened to her? D-did she leave me? No! No way! I mentally throttled that awful thought, and remembered how much she'd wanted me to live and how she'd put her love and hope into me, I won't let my doubts cloud me again mother! I was strong, I could do this! I flexed feeling the strong burn of determination light up inside me as I flexed in my space. I felt the darkness suddenly give slightly underneath me. Huh? Did I break it? I wiggled around toward it and saw something I hadn't seen in a long time or at all in this life: light! I smashed into the spot with as

much force as I could muster! And promptly went through it like it was paper, rolled and smashed my face on a rock. Ow! What the heck?! Guess I overdid it...

It was so bright and blurry that it took me a second for my eyes to clear. I glared at the offending rock that had a bit of a bloodstain in an outline that looked suspiciously like a snout. I looked up and my jaw dropped, it was beautiful! I was on a craggy bit of hill that was too big for a hill but too small for a mountain. The sun was just resting over the treetops of the thickest forest I'd ever seen. Mist still clung to the air but it was already starting to heat up as the soft puffs of cloud formed in the sky. Everything seemed larger than life! Like something out of a fairytale storybook. Waiiiit a minute...I looked at my immediate surroundings. I started comparing myself to the rock my face had met and tried doing the mental math. Halfway through I got frustrated because math had never been my strength but the way the rock was... and my point of view being weird... DID I SHRINK?! I mean I knew I probably wouldn't be human anymore, considering I could understand the weird song language, but I still wasn't completely prepared! I was a shrimp!

Tiny! Looking around I caught a look at an egg that had been broken open. Waiiit... I'm an idiot, I'd been in an egg this whole time?! Why hadn't I figured that out sooner?! I sighed and looked down at the ground about to mentally chide myself when I finally got a good look at my body. Two scaled arms clad in a scattering of black and gray. They ended in a strange five digit almost hand topped with short but sharp claws. I flexed and my claws elongated slightly. I most definitely did not immediately freak out. Uh huh this is totally and completely normal...Okay maybe I did freak a little, but once I got the hang of it, it was fascinating the way the claws slid in and out of my... paws? Hands? Phalanges? Craning my neck around I realized I was on all fours with a thin tail coming out my behind. I was mostly black and gray but my tail had a gradient of red starting from the tip and fading out until the base of my tail. A pretty vibrant shade if I do say so myself. Huh, I whipped my tail a couple of times and in the light, the faster I whipped it the more dangerous it looked. When the sun caught my scales just right it looked like my tail was a flickering flame. Cool! I filed it away as maybe an attack I could use later.

I tested the rest of my body out on the top of the rocky hilltop and quickly found out a lot of useful information. I wasn't very strong and I knew I wasn't great at taking hits (if the rock incident was anything to go by) but one thing that made me feel hopeful was that I was fast. Meaning anytime I came across something dangerous I could just escape from it. Probably. I couldn't really talk, I did try but um...it didn't go great? It straight up didn't work. I'd made a wet "gurk!" sound and other variations of the unappealing noise until I accepted my situation and gave up.

I did realize that I could make a sort of sound with my lungs that sounded a little like a quiet whistle. That's right! Mother could sing! Maybe I could too. I filled my lungs with air and tried to belt out the first notes of a song! Aaaand all that came out was a pitiful squeak. Let's just ignore that embarrassment for the time being. Ok, practice probably is the teacher here. So I couldn't be a master like Mother right off the bat. I mean the fact I could do all this within minutes of being born was nothing to sniff at. Compared to humans whose heads weren't even formed correctly at this age I was waaay ahead of the game. Oh game!

My stat sheet! With a couple of mental aerobics I pulled up the box again.

=====
=====
=====

Name: Ember

Species: Lesser Ash Lizard

Level: 1

HP: 3/5 STA: 2/7

Ability: Echoes of a life before

STATS

Strength:7 Constitution:7
Endurance:9 Dexterity:9
Intelligence:8 Wisdom:9

Innate Abilities: Song of Scales

Innate Skills: Flicker Tail, Advanced Hearing

Skills: —

=====
=====
=====

Huh, my level changed, was that because I'd hatched? I was trying to

make sense of some of these abilities and skills I had when I swear I felt something like a centipede crawl down my spine. I spun around and in doing so, talons barely missed my nose! Holy smoking yikes! Noooo thank you! My feet were already moving under me before I'd even half thought about it. I only dared to look back once I was moving, and then promptly wished I hadn't. The thing looked like it was some frickin roided up chicken crossed with a snake! My panicky brain helpfully offered that it was probably some sort of crossbreed of the two and NOT HELPING RUN!!!

The big snakey McNugget was in hot pursuit as I bolted down the mountain. Another sensation crawled at the tip of my tail and I whipped it around as the chicken snake was suddenly on me! How'd it do that?! I'd had a head start! Oh holy crap, that's a ledge! Oh retractable claws save me! I went screeching over the edge of the hill managing to dig my claws into the dirt and stone to roughly ride my way down. Ow, ow ow! I barely had time to assess my damaged claws before I felt my instinct scream almost at the same moment I saw the shadow. I looked up in disbelief at a fat-ass snake chicken gliding down on tiny little wings. You

have got to be kidding me. How come they get to fly?!

I took off running, I was feeling ragged and near empty in the tank at this point. I heard the snake chicken behind me squawking hungrily, drawing closer as I desperately scrambled up a plan. (Haha pun. Not the time brain!) We were racing in the forest at this point and it was larger than I was so there were plenty of places for me to hide. Problem was it was pretty locked onto me so how to get it off my tail?

Flinging myself through the underbrush my eyes alit on a small hollow log, oh it was a horrible option but at this point I could hear the snake chicken's breath in my ear! I dove for it, scrabbling my way inside, my claws digging into the rotted wood. I sunk my claws in and spun around, either way; this was my last chance to turn the tables. The sight that greeted me though was not what I expected.

The fat-ass had gotten stuck! I would've collapsed in laughter if I wasn't breathing so hard and it's fanged beak wasn't a hair away from me. I stumbled away as it snapped at me, sheesh why are you after me? You'd think that it had a vendetta against me or something the way it was

glaring at me. Now that we were in a bit of a stalemate I could finally get a good look at this impossible bird...thing.

Its head was bald like a vulture's but instead of skin it was scaled like a snake. It still had a beak? It was hooked like a beak but only at the end of a crocodilian maw, like a crazy scientist decided to put a snapping turtle's sharp beak at the end of an alligator's snout. From the neck down it got even stranger. It had poofy neck feathers like a fancy feather boa around its shoulder area and it did have small stout wings. That's actually where it was stuck. The body was rounded like a plump chicken's but the stout wings were what made it more than too large to fit in the hollow log. It kept screeching and lunging forward to try and get at me and it might've succeeded if it weren't for its protruding wings. It didn't seem to have the greatest control over them and at the size they were I shouldn't have been surprised. How the hell did this thing fly on those wimpy little things? As I finished trying to make sense of the top half of this strange hybrid I finally had the wherewithal to realize that I had some sort of notification in the corner of my vision.

After significantly less mental aerobics this time I managed to open the blinking dot. Boy was I glad of those mental exercises I'd practiced in my egg. Another list of text appeared in a box before me as I endeavored to pay attention in case this one blinked away before I could read through it all.

=====

Skill Discovered: Sprint

Skill Discovered: Climb

Skill Discovered: Assess

Skill Discovered: Examine

Sprint to lvl 5

Climb to lvl 2

Assess lvl 1

Examine lvl 1

=====

Okay, skills huh? I was still getting over the weird gamification of my life. At level one I knew I wasn't going to get anything interesting or cool but come on, these things need better names! I guess whatever it is (system? machine? malevolent god?)

could've called it run instead of sprint so maybe I shouldn't complain. But seriously?! What was the difference between Examine and Assess? It's basically the same thing! Surprisingly a smaller box opened up under them to provide a short and vague description. Sprint and Climb were self explanatory but Assess was more vague in its description, "Ability to assess a situation?" What kind of situation? Like strategy? When would a skill like that activate? And how? Examine though, I'd saved it for last for a reason, every light novel and litrpg I'd ever read to pass the time had some sort of identification skill and usually it was a freaking powerhouse. I held my breath hoping for any crumb of information as I opened the description. "Ability to examine an object or entity." Wow...sooo helpful... gee thanks universe, you really shouldn't have...At my measly level 1 I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up, but aren't the main characters in most of the stories I'd read thrown a bone? Ugh, I'm not one of those lucky ducks am I?

I mentally flexed and the notifications closed and with my brain spinning in twenty different directions all at once my vague thought made a health bar and stamina gauge appear

in the bottom left of my vision. The snake chicken had stopped trying to lunge at me at this point but its beady black eyes were still glaring at me. A small window popped up again. One that I hadn't been able to see behind all my other ones.

=====

Examine Success!

Species: Chickatrice

Level: 5

A rare sighting for any monster fanatic as a chickatrice is often protected by its aggressive mother and rarely leaves their side until they are ready to fledge and evolve. Many have been turned to stone by Henatrice protecting their young, but the

chickatrice hasn't developed their signature deadly gaze yet. Only when it grows out its wings does its mother declare it ready to survive on its own. A chickatrice's only motives for its first year of survival is food and sleep.

=====

Great, a rare monster just happens to find me, awesome and if this is a chick then that means there are adults. Don't get me wrong I knew there was some weird biology going on as soon as I saw the size of myself. I may be small compared to a human but I'm flipping big for a lizard! But a cockatrice?! Or whatever they call it? Ugh, it's one thing to read about monsters and another to see one glaring at you from where their dumb ass is stuck in a log. It explains why it was so focused on me though if food is pretty much it's only motivator. The chickatrice and I just stare at each other for another awkward moment. Yep, I'm just gonna leave now...

Thankfully there was plenty of room for me to fit as I slipped out of the other side of the hollow log. I wanted to put as much distance between me and the chickatrice before it figured out how to get itself unstuck. Or before a bigger, nastier monster rolls up my

brain interjects unhelpfully. What? I should've killed it? No way! It had four levels on me and no way was I going in range of those teeth! I shuddered at the memory of how close those teeth had gotten to my tail.

I needed to find shelter, the problem was I didn't know much about my own species besides what I was able to piece together from my impressions of mother. Would I be better low to the ground so chickatrices wouldn't notice me? Or higher up in the trees so I can spot dangers coming? I knew that the forest was definitely preferable to my semi barren hatching site, not only was it super exposed but it also had no visible food. I didn't even know what kind of food was palatable for my new self, that didn't stop me from fantasizing about a juicy cheeseburger though.

I stopped for a minute curled up, hopefully camouflaged, by the roots of a tree as a thought occurred to me. I tried to examine myself again. Maybe the skill would activate now that I had it.

=====

Examine automatic success

Species: Lesser Ash lizard

Level: 1

An omnivorous undiscovered variant of the lesser lizard species that live in the deepest parts of the untamed wilderness. Many different colored variants have been found and are highly coveted for their unique magic properties. Their element varies depending on the color and the rune inscribed on their tongue. A dried lesser lizard is a very pricey ingredient in many spells and potions. Many young spellcasters and adventuring parties risk the dangers of exploring the wilderness for the chance to find new undiscovered variants and species.

=====

Wow, okay, uh good thing my hunch was right and uh good thing I had this information now. I still felt a little detached from what I could piece together about my previous self but knowing me and my luck (and my love of fantasy) I probably would've made an adventuring party very happy and very rich without this tidbit of info. I could practically feel the wish of the bullet dodged or I guess it would be an arrow if we're talking about cockatrices and adventuring parties. The description said that I myself was an undiscovered variant so a big reason to just ...not, with adventurers. All the more reason to try and find a good place to hide though. On the plus side I was an omnivore so I could eat whatever I wanted! Okay well maybe not everything. I'm no chickatrice.

I was at this point getting beyond tired and a little hungry, it was hard to gauge the time based on the sunlight filtering through the trees which made me nervous. Everyone knew that more badass monsters came out at night, that's why humans were more prone to being afraid of the dark because predators can hide within it. I'm not human anymore but being a lizard did not decrease my nervousness of the dim lighting. I knew I could probably just dig a hole

and hide in it for the night (like in a certain cubic video game) but the way my claws were... I think I'd hurt myself more from the attempt than anything else. Right shelter, I'd need it to be at least close to a water source and in the general area of food. The biggest stipulation was that it needed to be safe, which made finding an ideal spot hard. One thing at a time, I needed to find water, preferably running water. I wondered idly if lizards could get dysentery? I did practice my hearing in my egg, maybe I could hear a nearby stream or something? I narrowed in on what I could hear around me, closing my eyes probably wasn't the best idea but I needed to focus. Wind rustling leaves, the calls of some of the strange birds, far away I vaguely heard the movement of other living things, and picking through all of that I heard it! The distinct sound of rushing water! With my ears I tried to figure out which direction it was coming from, and only once I was sure did I break my concentration and open my eyes. Deep breath, let's go.

Sticking to the lower plant life of the undergrowth I was fairly certain I was being sneaky. I was right by the way, the light was definitely dimming, making it more and more difficult for me to master myself and not go into

full on panic mode. Decision making is harder when you're panicking. I found a little creek by the time the light started to noticeably dim. I didn't have much of a plan besides drinking my fill, so I decided to follow the creek upstream. I was exhausted, my ruined claws ached, and my stomach was a rumbly whiner but at least I wasn't thirsty. The shadows around me lengthened and darkened as I kept following the stream, I gritted my teeth and pretended not to notice. I refused to give up but as the forest darkened I had to get realistic and come up with a backup plan. Just as I was lamenting my own lack of forethought I thought I saw something. Was that a light? A dull reddish orange glow was gently suffusing the growing darkness. I sniffed the air suspiciously. That had better not be a fire from an adventurer. I couldn't smell any woodsmoke though. I did pick up some faint hints of sulfur. Either way I had to check it out. I know, I know, an awful idea. But besides my burning curiosity I had no better ideas and I was always going to wonder what it might've been if I didn't check it out. I crept slowly through the brush trying my best not to crush anything beneath me. The strange glow made everything around me change to an orange color as I

crept closer, the wash of the light made everything look more alien. Finally I reached a bush that was the closest to the glow, I held my breath as I crept up underneath it. Sliding on my belly I pushed forward, having to let my eyes adjust to the now very bright light. Blinking, my jaw once again hit the floor.

Wow, where to even start? It was the stoutest tree I think I have ever seen. You'd have to have four humans reaching around the trunk to even get close to its circumference. Its branches twisted and split until it made itself a crown in the clearing. None of the other trees were growing near it so it had its own space cleared out around it. When you looked closer at its bark and leaves the stranger it got, the bark was an ashen gray with a small glow in between the cracks of the bark texture. And the leaves! They were golden, bright with light, lit up like a sparkler! A spring bubbled up between its twisting roots, the source of the stream I'd been following. The last thing I noticed was that it emanated heat, a warmth I could feel even from the edge of the clearing. This, this has to be it. Besides sheer practicality, the wonder I felt at this sight made me want to know more about this tree and how it worked. Did

it photosynthesize? What was making it light up? It sure wasn't bioluminescence from what I could tell from this distance. I cautiously skittered forward, I couldn't see or hear any other threats near this tree. As I came closer the warmer the heat became, it felt like stepping into a warm cozy room from a cuttngly cold outdoors. There weren't any normal looking plants around this gargantuan tree. Instead there were red and purple grasses that thickened the clearing. They felt warm as well, fluffy too, like a blanket. There were strange gnarled looking bushes and some flowers that looked like they were somehow reflecting light. I got to be honest I didn't pay much attention because the warmer I got, the more exhaustion registered with my body. My eyelids struggled to stay open. I picked a particularly fluffy group of the red grass and settled down. I barely got my tail curled up under me before I was asleep.

~

I felt light upon my face but I was so luxuriously warm that I didn't want to leave my blankets. As I cracked open an eye though, the

golden leaves of the tree I fell asleep under snapped me back to reality.

Right, this is my life now, but why did I still feel so comfortably warm? My pinched stomach let itself be known almost immediately, that food was needed and now! Casting about nothing looked appealing to eat, in the light of day I could examine this strange clearing better, but first food.

I quickly took stock of the clearing, surprisingly there weren't any other animals around that I could hunt, not that I'd know how. There was an abundance of strange plant life everywhere though. The tree's golden leaves were like a thousand tiny mirrors during the day. The fluffy red and purple grasses were very interesting. The texture was fluffy and soft but if you moved your skin over it the wrong way it got rough and a little sharp. I tried to eat a strand but biting through that stuff was impossible, I couldn't believe it! How in the world is grass this tough to cut through? My stomach pain quickly whipped my thoughts into shape though, so if I couldn't eat the grass maybe I could try some of these other plants? In the back of my mind I was a little worried about accidentally eating something poisonous but at this point my hunger

had reared its head and that thought was only the barest whisper as I tried other plants.

There were orange bushes scattered around the clearing. I tried some of their leaves. It was nice and crunchy but as soon as I had a couple I realized that they were like potato chips. Crunchy and salty but not filling, good for snacking, but not sustainable. One of the other plants I'd left for last because of how odd it looked. It was freaking everywhere in the clearing, almost as prolific as the red grass. It looked like a flower, sort of? There were various colors but always a variation of orange, yellow, and red. The stems and leaves were a rusty red brown color and the petals of the flower were the weirdest shape. Did I mention the flowers were huge? One bulb was about the size of my head and I was already freakishly large for a lizard. They grew low to the ground like a cabbage with petals going out and up in a rough diamond shape. Don't get me wrong they had some beautiful gradations in the flower but it was just...odd. I cautiously nibbled on a bit of the leaf. Oh friggin YUCK! That was SO bitter, ick! It reminded me of a grapefruit which I'd apparently had before, a memory of hatred had immediately sprung up.

Glaring at the leaves I remembered that different parts of plants could be inedible or edible depending on the plant. So I wasn't giving up yet. I worked up the courage as I bit the tiniest bit out of one of the petals. Immediately I was glad that I'd kept at it. My mouth burst with a warm spicy flavoring which also had a strange but not unpleasant twist of cinnamon that swirled on my tongue. Before I knew it I had already eaten a whole long petal right down to the pod of the plant. Finally taking a moment to breathe, I sat back comfortably full for the first time since I'd been out of the egg.

What luck, I had a food source and I didn't have to worry about running out too soon because of how many of these flowers carpeted the clearing. If one petal was enough to fill me up then I was as golden as the tree leaves in terms of food. As I sat back in the grass I realized that even though it was the daytime a lot of warmth was still coming from the ground. Frowning I lurched to my feet and started towards the golden tree.

Sure enough, my hunch was right. The closer I got to the tree, which was suspiciously smack dab in the middle of the clearing by the way, the warmer I felt. As I drew close to

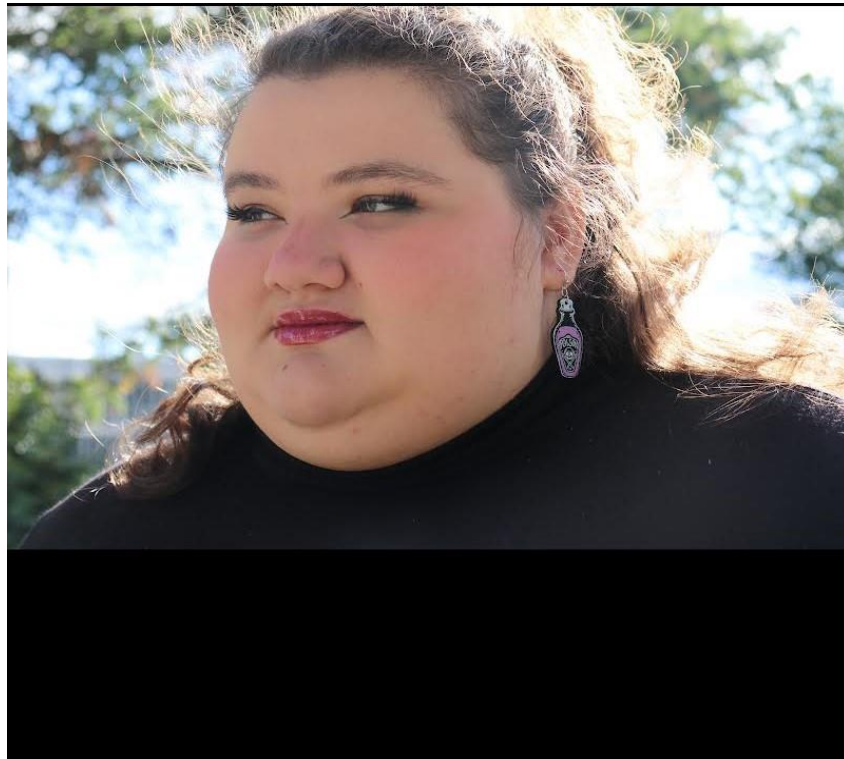
inspect the gray bark I saw the reddish orangish cracks I'd noted the night before. The cracks made it look like the tree was lit with fire from within. As I had that thought I cautiously poked it with a claw. It was really warm, almost hot, but not uncomfortable like putting my hand up to a bonfire or stove to try and warm them up, intense but not unbearable, yet. Huh, weird. I'd tried to use my Examine skill on all of the plants I'd munched on by the way but so far it hadn't worked which made me even more frustrated with the stupid skill. I know it's level one but universe are you for real right now? Like how useless can you get?

Anyways, I knew the clearing was a good safe place for me to hide. If a big badass monster came along I could hide in the tree branches, blending in with the bark. I had plenty of food and water not to mention all the warmth I could ever want. Part of me wanted to just play it safe and stay here until the end of my days, but another part of me, the realistic part, pointed out that when a big bad predator rolls up if I'm still sitting at level one and I fail at hiding that's it. Finito. The end. When there are levels you can level up, and the Chickatrice Examine description mentioned something about evolution. That had to

be how I got stronger. I needed to be able to defend myself, mother was gone, so it was all on me. As I thought of Mother I wondered what had happened to her, if I wanted to find out

I had to be able to take care of myself. Alright, this was a good rest stop, and it'll probably be my home base for a while but time to try and level up.

IMAGE BY DESIREE LAVERDIERE



LATE LUNCH

Matthew Cortes

The time was roughly 2:30 in the afternoon as Tim entered the Subway. The Subway was fairly small with some tables on the side and an open entrance next to the counter where they prepared the food. However, he was on the phone.

“Y-yeah, hold on I just walked into Subway right now you’re gonna have to give me a second man.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, lemme just finish this real quick,” Urged Dan.

“Dude just give me like ten seconds the person at the counter is coming ove-”

“Hi! How can I help you today?” Said a cheery small lady that walked over to the counter.

“Uhhhhh- just give me oooone second...”

She smiled and nodded then stepped back, waiting patiently.

“Yeah so like I was saying, I was in the middle of the meeting and I was like *you can’t talk to me like that, I’ve been working here for years.* And everybody was staring right?”

“Uhuh.”

“And so the manager got all angry like I was the bad guy.”

“Oh wow, that’s crazy.”

“Can I just get a medium BLT?” Tim whispered to the lady.

“What was that?”

“Huh? Nothing.”

“No no it’s fine what were you trying to say? I’ve been going on.”

“I-it’s fine, really i’m just in Subway like I said.”

“Oh okay. So like I was saying, the manager got all angry right? And then the supervisor came over and was like *what’s going on over here? Is everything alright?* So I’m like, no everything isn’t alright, this guy’s been super disrespectful-”

“Did you want any condiments with that?”

“Oh- uhhh, just mayo please.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Nothing.”

“Alright. So like, the supervisor takes us into the back office right?”

“Mmhmm...”

“Yeah and so he starts talking to us and everything and the manager starts spinning this super stupid story about how I’m ‘not a team player’ and ‘don’t pick up my workplace which is why this is happening.’”

“Wait, isn't that what started everything?”

“Nononononono. So the manager walked by and told me to clean up my station while I was in the middle of the thing that *he* told me to do, so I was like *yeah just give me a minute man*, and he got super butthurt about it.”

“Here’s your order. Will you be paying with cash or card today?”

“Listen man if you don’t wanna listen to what happened I’ll just hang up.”

“Wh-what do you mean I- ugh, sorry hold on, card please.”

“No it’s fine I got this,” Dan hung up.

The lady at the desk looked awkwardly at Tim who seemed simply exhausted.

“Sorry... Here you go.”

THE NEWS BY HAYDYN ATWOOD

