

2021 SOUTHERN  
LITERARY FESTIVAL

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# NOTE:

All works have been proofed and edited at the discretion of the editor and SLF faculty advisors at Mississippi University for Women; however, we have strived to honor and maintain the creative integrity of each author.

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Courtney Miller Santo

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Paulette Boudreaux

## POETRY

C.T. Salazar

## DRAMA

Susan-Sojourna Collier

## FORMAL ESSAY

David A. Davis

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2021 SOUTHERN LITERARY  
FESTIVAL MEMBER  
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Berry College  
Rome, Georgia

Blue Mountain College  
Blue Mountain, Mississippi

Christian Brothers University  
Memphis, Tennessee

Columbus State University  
Morrow, Georgia

Delta State University  
Cleveland, Mississippi

Hendrix College  
Conway, Arkansas

Middle Tennessee State University  
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Millsaps College  
Jackson, Mississippi

Mississippi State University  
Starkville, Mississippi

Mississippi University for Women  
Columbus, Mississippi

Tennessee Wesleyan University  
Athens, Georgia

University of Arkansas at Fort Smith  
Fort Smith, Arkansas

University of Mississippi  
Oxford, Mississippi

University of North Georgia  
Dahlonega, Georgia

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

# CREATIVE NONFICTION



## FIRST PLACE

### How to Tell Your Ex-Girlfriend's Ghost That You Cannot Attend Her Funeral

Madeleine Rouse

Christian Brothers University

#### *Words of Caution*

\*\*\*

As you walk into the kitchen to notice her ghost standing in the corner by the summer glow of the window, take a moment to taste every golden-yellow crumb of glee-filled memory. Let the delectable richness of your affection for her dissolve into your memory. Remind yourself that bitter taste in your mouth is not hatred, just anger—just grief. You still love her, but you haven't forgiven her for dying yet.

Do not attempt to pathologize seeing her ghost. Whether a paranormal experience or a brief stint of psychosis, at least you have an opportunity to see her, to love her better even for only a few hours, to talk to your favorite person in the whole world one last time.

Don't let the memories of your enabling her addiction seep into your synapses right now. The nights you drove her to conveniently sick people's houses, how Bella conveniently carried her lock-picking kit in her clutch, how you conveniently never thought to ask *why would you need to pick a lock at a dinner party*. Even though she never told you, you knew she was stealing drugs and you didn't stop her! What kind of imbecile enables their girlfriend like that? You loved to pretend that you had no idea what was going on because you weren't strong enough to face it. You weren't strong enough to be a good girlfriend to her and now she is dead and it's partially your fault. How can you sit here thinking about how angry you are at her when she deserves to be even more angry at you. How can you live with yourself after this? How could you ever not hate yourself after this?

*Love her better now*

\*\*\*

Tell her in your kindest voice that you think about her every day. Bring her a pint-sized coffee mug of homemade mango kombucha because you know it's her favorite and walk her to the red paisley couch—the one she helped you rescue from a greedy, emerald verge one misty summer morning and let her lay her head in your lap while you weave your fingers through her ashy-blue hair.

When she looks up at you from the couch and tells you that she feels like a part of her brain was constantly replaying the worst day of her life while she was alive, let yourself feel angry that you know exactly what she means and she got to give up. Take all that anger and tuck it away for a time when you really need it. When the time comes, convert the rage to energy. Use that energy to commemorate her radiance in your everyday life until you have nothing left to add. Use that energy to craft a potently kick-ass essay. Use that energy to move forward, even when it feels like the shame of your mistakes is trying to pull you into the ground with her.

*What to say*

\*\*\*

As you weep together, tell her that you are sorry that she was in so much pain. Tell her that you are sorry that you weren't there for her; that as her friend, she didn't believe you to be reliable or safe or understanding enough to help her consider any options other than death or be there for her in her final moments.

Ask her if she has made any friends as a ghost. Ask if she feels cold all the time. Ask how she has been since Friday. Tell her that every room you've entered since you last saw her has felt like there's some fundamental piece of matter missing from the space. She is the only way that you survived junior year of high school and you would have absolutely died if she hadn't been there to cry over math homework and the harsh comments from the

judgmental bitches in your chemistry class.

Listen as she tells you about her ghosting adventures. About the mischief she has done; about the flowers she picked and laid at the doorstep of a stranger's house, just because; the caves in Cumberland she finally got to climb through; the various smells of the people she has followed; the little downtown tabby she befriended; this new, glorious feeling of flying as fast as you can into the sky, letting your arms fly out beside you so that they may taste the sweet, concentrated mist-puffs. "The clouds really aren't cushy sky couches—they're just fat clumps of mist! Ugh, the science nerds were right."

Tell her you miss the sleepovers and the thrill of bamboozling your Deeply Southern Baptist parents into allowing you to pursue a homosexual relationship right under their pious noses. Tell her that you can't stop thinking about the secrets you whispered to each other in her parents' extravagantly refurbished basement.

Tell her that you still haven't watched the final season of *Game of Thrones* because you swore to her that you guys would watch it together. Tell her that you wish you could attend her funeral, but you can't find a ride and you can't afford the Uber from Memphis to Nashville.

*The whispered secrets*

\*\*\*

You told her in that convivial drunken crackle you think apples are overrated. "I once lived almost entirely off of apples for three months because I wanted to lose 40 pounds. Now I can't stand to be in a room with an apple and I only lost 34 pounds!" she agreed. Bella said she didn't believe that clouds were just water. She swore they were plush sky couches, the science nerds just wanted to keep the clouds for themselves so that they would have privacy when resting their giant brains.

You told her that once when you were 10, you snuck into your parents' liquor cabinet and sampled every bottle of booze to see

what all the hype was about and you realized that alcohol is disgusting and the idea of being a Grown Up is just glorified masochism.

She said that when she was 14, she was prescribed Valium for anxiety and never stopped getting high for 2 years.

She said, “I once chugged half a bottle of gin right in front of my SuperChristian™ parents because they wouldn’t let me get a septum piercing and my parents just laughed at my tomatoey-red face as I immediately proceeded to the toilet to throw up everything in my stomach, plus my stomach herself, plus my intestines, gallbladder, pancreas, spleen, and kidneys.”

You told her about that one night when you were 15 and all you had for dinner was a bottle of Tylenol and Sprite. She told you that she has known for years how she would do it if she were ever really going to kill herself, but she said she wasn’t going to. She pinky promised that she would call you if she changed her mind.

*Your Body’s Response*

\*\*\*

Your mouth wants so desperately to pick a fight, to shout and scream and look her in the eyes as you cry so that she will see the pain she caused you and everyone who loves her. Your suddenly flimsy legs want to collapse into the crumbly abyss of your stupid smelly couch. Your feet want to run as far away from her as possible. Your stomach wants to dump your breakfast and the entirety of today’s supply of gastric acid at her feet—a nervous sacrifice to the smokey, silver outline of the girl you once worshipped. Your arms want to fling themselves around her frail body, embrace her, to commission your hands to build a museum—Memories of Bella, and everyone who loves her would donate their memories of her to show Bella one last time how much she is loved. Your brain knows that if right now, you do not communicate that you so cherish her, you might truly lose her forever.

*Memories of Bella*

\*\*\*

Her mother: *The Wondrous Quirks of a Person I Created. The Night Bella Gave Her Family a Mini Concert of the Brilliant*

*Songs She Wrote All By Herself. Bella's First Driving Lesson. Bella's Contagious Belly Laugh: A Collection.*

*Her Father: The First Time Bella Out-Ate Dear Old Dad at the Cici's Pizza. Bella's First Driving Lesson: Father Edition. Bella: World's Best Midnight Waffle House Buddy.*

*Her Little Sister: A Portfolio of Bella's Art Projects I Confiscated From the Garbage. The Night I Got Bella Grounded and Convinced Our Parents to Let Her Have a Cat in One Conversation. The Pick Bella Gave Me After My First Guitar Lesson.*

*Her Cat, His Royal Highness, Mister Macho Pants: The Craigslist Photo That Won Me a New Home and Bella's Heart.*

*Her co-workers from the boutique: The Lighters Bella Was Always Happy to Lend Out Even Though She Knew I Always Accidentally Stole Them. The Time Bella Travelled to the Abortion Clinic with Me When I Had No One Else. A Kazoo from The Birthday Party Bella Threw for Me When No One Else Remembered. The Time Bella Covered All My Shifts for Me for Two Months When My Dad Was in The Hospital.*

*Her Classmates: The Tears of Gratitude from The Day Bella Paid for My Lunch When I Had No Lunch Money. The Crumbled Paper "Snowballs" From Bella's Idea for An Iconic Senior Prank . The Juul Bella Was Always Happy to Lend Out to Nicotine-Addicted Peers. The Sweater Bella Gave Me When I Got My Period in The Middle of Biology Class.*

*You: The Day That Cool Girl from Art Class Stopped to Help When Some Fellow Tired Teenager Totaled My Car. The Day the Cool Girl from Art Class Became My Girlfriend. The Makeup Brushes Bella Gave Me the Night She Taught Me How to Do My*

---

<sup>1</sup>Bella came up with the idea to gather all the paper garbage we could find, then crumble the paper into balls and pelt them at unsuspecting victims in the hallway of our school. Everyone joined in and most of the school spent the majority of a class period enjoying a cathartic game of "indoor snowball fight". Bella also made sure to recycle as much of the clean paper as she could because the earth is dying and "climate change might destroy us all if we don't act fast!"

*Makeup Correctly and Didn't Tease Me for Not Knowing These Things Sooner Because She Knew I Was Sensitive About That Kind of Thing. A Paintbrush from the Time We Painted Bella's Bedroom Yellow and Didn't Get in Trouble with Her Parents Because It Looked So Good. An Abbreviated List of Secrets Whispered on The Floor of Bella's Parents' Half-Remodeled Basement. The Beauty and Strife of Dating A Closeted Bisexual—As A Closeted Bisexual. The Night I Had to Bail My Girlfriend Out of Jail Without Her Parents Knowing.*

*The Big Argument After Bella's Third Relapse. The First Time I Ever Saw Bella Be Mean. The Confusion of Loving Such a Blindingly Brilliant Addict. Our Adventures from My Last Night Living in Nashville. The Preposterous Moment I Realized That I Found Someone Who Could Actually Rock Neon Platform Crocks.*

*Let yourself be a little selfish goddammit*

\*\*\*

Your rebound from Bella, a scrawny 30-year-old boy says that suicide is just selfish, when you tell the stories of your previous relationships. You cannot explain why at the time, but his words, spoken on the highway leading to Bella's favorite bookstore, make you want to bash his head into the steering wheel of his stupid Subaru. If she knew that pain wasn't all that life was about, maybe she'd still be here. She calculated her detriments and mistakes as so devastating that dying was the more worthwhile option. She concluded that the possibility of the future being better was an insignificant factor. She didn't search for anything better than what she had, and that's not all her fault. She never knew that anything better had ever existed. In her world, hope was synonymous with fiction. It was selfish of her to inaccurately calculate the effect her actions would have on those she loves. It is also selfish to not acknowledge the agonizing dichotomy that she didn't reach out for help and you weren't someone she deemed to be helpful enough to reach out to. It is also selfish to wish her back, but that kind of selfishness—if kept reasonably contained—never hurt anyone.

## SECOND PLACE

The Place I Used to Know

Calley Overton

University of Mississippi

When I drive to and from Oxford, I sometimes turn off the highway at the sign with the bronzed bird dogs. There is the National Bird Dog Museum—the town’s claim to fame—where I once won a little glass bluebird that still sits on my shelf, Ms. Martha’s rose memorial, and the crumbling buildings along Main Street. The Junction Inn welcomes people into town like a beacon, and beautiful Victorian homes line Washington Avenue still. In so many ways, Grand Junction is unchanged, but time has moved on since it was the place I called home until four years old. The Junction Inn has changed hands yet again, and Mr. Stone is no longer there to talk with my mom and me as we wait on our Sunday special, asking me about whatever book I brought with me that day. The bluebird houses I helped my dad build in the garage either are disintegrating on the poles or no longer stand, the poles repurposed to tell lawn mowers where to avoid in the cemetery. The trees he planted, rimming the cemetery, have grown tall and healthy, or died long ago. My metal playground under the trees is long gone, replaced by plastic heated by the sun. Fish fries around the white gazebo have come to an end as more and more stone markers fill previously empty space.

A new family lives in my house, the place where I learned to make biscuits as dust motes flitted in the early morning light of the kitchen and light glinted off the antique Coke bottles lining the upper shelves, the place I danced on my dad’s toes, the place we all camped in the living room in front of the fireplace. I can only look at the yard where my dad taught me to blow ginormous soap bubbles and where my mom and I built snowmen from afar. “No through traffic” the sign reads, half the pavement of the once circle drive I treated as a race track for my tricycle long gone. The rows of trees and plants he grew are all gone, either sold, given away, or

cut down.

The little white church where I used to check out books on amphibians and reptiles sits vacant, the library moved to a small, dingy building that used to sell dog collars and pet supplies. My childhood library looked like it belonged on a Hallmark card; the new library is attached to a crumbling high school with broken windows, dilapidated even when I was a child. My dad and I used to roam around the grounds of that school with flashlights, “hunting” for armadillos to see how many we could spot.

Across the road is my friend’s house where I was introduced to 80s movies, cheesy sitcoms, and Alfred Hitchcock, played air hockey, and swam during summer evenings under bright stars and darting bats. We knew each other when we were small, but lost touch when I left, reconnecting at VBS years later. Late in the evenings, when the tv finally turned off and our caffeinated selves tried to sleep, we’d share our hopes, dreams, and fears as teenage girls do at sleepovers. For a while, it was where I felt connected to my past. I could see my old house from there. At night, sometimes I’d hear the same train whistle I grew up hearing, sharp and long and accompanied by a low rumbling. But our friendship faded away before college and now that lovely house is just another place home to the memories of my youth. There’s a Memphis Tigers sign out front now. I assume she is well. I hope she is well.

It is a town full of memories. There is nothing present for me there anymore. The people who once knew me, who knew my dad, who knew the three of us as a unit are fading away until it’ll be like I never existed in that town. My Sunday school teacher is gone, memorialized by roses. Mr. Stone is gone even as his restaurant remains. The pastor who baptized me has moved. The adults who laughed at my small self once crawling under the pews are becoming fewer. My former home is owned by strangers. My one hometown friendship slipped away with the end of high school. My dad is gone. I—the version of myself I was and could have been if I stayed—am gone.

The version of myself that would have lived in that house is lying six feet under a well-decorated and well-adorned marble headstone. I feel sadness and nostalgia when I drive down those

streets, but I wonder what would have been if things were different, if cancer didn't ravage my father's brain and body. A part of me wishes I could return to the brick house where I baked biscuits, to step into the kitchen one more time. The rest knows that it is perhaps for the best that the kitchen is inaccessible to me because the reason it is the only room in the house I can see and I can describe so vividly is because it is the place where my father knelt down, hugged me close, and told me what was going to happen to him; it is where he told me that there was no hope.

It seems fitting somehow that Grand Junction lies between the place I can truly call home—the place that raised me where my roots run deep, the place of my mom's family—and the place that has begun to feel like home over the last two and a half years. It would be all too easy to leave the shadows of the past in my rearview mirror as I'm cruising down the road at 55 mph with the radio blaring. I have to make a conscious choice to turn off the highway and drive down the roads of memory, to stop and tell my dad about who I have become and who I am still becoming. As I'm leaving, either turning right towards home or left towards Oxford, as I'm shaking my head clear of the cobwebs and hazy remembrances, sometimes I hear the train whistle. Some things never change.

## THIRD PLACE

### A Bone to Pick

Sarah Duley

Blue Mountain College

Walking along the cobblestone streets, the Roman sunshine smiled upon our shoulders. Inhaling the crisp city air, we weaved our way through the masses of bustling life, tailing our tour guide closely. Every other street seemed to contain scaffolding that boasted of the city's progress. Roma, where the clash of history and innovation could be seen on every corner.

We found ourselves in the quiet alcove of an alleyway, filing through an ancient doorway of deeply stained wood. The tour guide was a towering, lanky, raven haired Italian man with a playful manner and bounding step; he looked too young to work in a museum. The guide led us briskly through a museum of various artifacts under polished casing. Sneakers violated the holy silence, squealing in protest against the glossy floors. The smell of a lemon scented cleaner permeated the air.

Shuffling our way down a flight of stairs, it felt as if we were transported into an alternate reality. The floor turned to thick, dusty stone, the walls growing narrower. The distinct smell of mold and decay hung over us like a wet blanket. We had arrived - the Capuchin Bone Chapel.

We stood at the threshold of the hallway, peering in. Our guide stood at the crown of our small band, explaining the history of the chapel with hushed reverence. My eyes wandered past the man's face to the hallway beyond. There hung a massive chandelier. Its spindly fingers encased a lump of hardened wax, once serving as a candle. It was made of human bones.

As the tour guide continued to speak, a hard knot settled in the pit of my stomach. Across the ceiling, the lifeless bits of human anatomy hung in swirling patterns. As we stepped into the stone walkway, panic flooded my mind. The vivid scene of a decaying limb falling from the ceiling and landing on my shoulders replayed over and over in my mind. I wanted to sprint through

the hallway with my eyes closed. Like a morbid wedding procession, each painfully slow step brought us closer to the corpses of the long gone.

There were five alcoves that cut themselves into the right wall. Six scenes of horrifying history to endure, and then we could leave. The first alcove held a macabre scene, depicting a dwarfish monk raising a skeleton from the dead. The tour guide explained it was meant to depict Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The preserved, eyeless face of “Jesus” held my gaze as the cold hands of fear ran its spindly fingers down my back.

We continued on, and I held my breath, fearing the next sight that awaited me. I exhaled in relief. The crypt was bare of bones. Only an altar sat at the far wall, above it a painting depicted Jesus and Mother Mary. A lone box sat with peeling red paint on the table.

“This room was created as an area of worship for the monks to pray. It was made to honor Pope Sixtus V’s great granddaughter, Maria Felice Peretti,” he paused. “Can anyone tell me what’s inside the box?”

The tour guide met our confusion with a mischievous grin. “Her heart.” I was revolted at the thought.

We shuffled on to the third crypt, home of the skulls of the dead monks. Each skinless face stacked one upon another, looking at us with their eye sockets wide and jaws unhinged, as if we were the grotesque invaders. Three monks stood with their heads bowed in the caves created by the soulless skulls. I looked at the skeletons and imagined the person that took the time to dress them and pose them against the wall. Quickly, I moved from the gruesome thought. The dirt floor of the alcove was littered with tiny cross grave markers. Elaborating, the tour guide nodded toward the makeshift burial site.

“The Capuchin Monks fled persecution in 1631, moving to this very church.” He added somberly, “They refused to leave the deceased friars behind, so they carried along 300 carts containing the remains of their dead brothers.”

I examined the skinless faces once more. These were once people like me; people that had loved ones and stories to tell. The

holes that bored into my soul, once held eyes consisting of an array of colors and imperfections. Were their noses crooked like mine? What was the color of their hair before is faded to silver? Did they live long enough for it to fade?

Who was I to be disgusted by my fellow man?

We traveled to through the next crypts with a new sense of reverence and sadness. What kind of life did my deceased brothers live? Upon leaving their bones, where did they go?

The crescendo of artistry stood in the final crypt. Three skeletons stood with scythes, surrounded by swirling patterns of various parts of human anatomy. A dusty, iron plaque sat fixed under the center angel of death. It read,

“What you are now we used to be; what we are now you will be.” The message was meant as a reminder of the inevitable threat of time; however, in the moment I felt the weight of sadness. One day we would turn into bones just as they, and people would wretch and writhe at the thought of us. An unspoken apology passed between the bones and I as we stepped back into the Italian sunlight.



# FICTION

## FIRST PLACE

Blue Pieces

Reed Carroll

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

By the end of today, I'll have made enough money from the lemonade stand to run away from Dad, but I don't like to say that I'm running away from home because that implies that he ever made this place a home to begin with. I'm through cleaning up his mess, which I've been doing for three weeks since Mom left me alone with him on account of his inordinate laziness and haphazard apathy, as per the pink sticky-note she left on the front door. That's three weeks worth of me washing dishes and bringing the trash to the curb while he gets home from work hours after he is supposed to. Dad's got a bad habit of not buying the right groceries too, he brings home beef-flavored ramen—the worst flavor—and lemonade. Both of which I tolerate in comparison to the moldy white bread that's festering in the cabinet next to the crunchy peanut butter; but I don't touch the peanut butter because I'm saving it for the long bus ride to Atlantic City. Mom said that's where she'd go if she could go anywhere.

The day she left, the three of us were eating lasagna for dinner when she suggested we go to Atlantic City for my fifteenth birthday. "Elise would love that new Ferris wheel on the pier, Ray." She smiled at me, her white teeth were startlingly white like tiny marble tiles, as if to convince me that riding a Ferris wheel was all I had ever wanted.

Dad leaned over his plate and chewed with his mouth opened. He closed one eye and pointed his fork at me, "I'm not taking our daughter to some trashy place full of drunk tourists."

Mom gulped down the rest of her vodka lemonade and raised her thin eyebrows, a thing she does when she's trying not to lose it, "Well I just wanted our daughter to have a bit of fun."

But Mom took all the fun with her, leaving me all alone to run our lemonade stand. I still use her lemonade recipe, a jug of Minute Maid mixed with a generous amount of the cheapest vodka

she can find at the store. “The brand doesn’t matter with this stuff, just the price,” Mom always says that when we’re shopping.

I don’t come out of my room until I hear Dad slam the door and start the car. That’s another thing that Mom hates, and she always yells at him from the bedroom to shut it gently. My duffel bag is ready to go, stuffed with my summer clothes, the peanut butter jar, and seventy-five dollars rolled up in my socks. The hallway is a dim tunnel even with all the lights on. The whole house is a husk filled with mismatched furniture: a sunken leather couch pushed up against the window and a glass coffee table covered by an abandoned puzzle, a beach fractured from the hundreds of blue pieces meant to be its ocean. The round table in the center of the kitchen (a poor choice on Mom’s part) seems too large without her. The fridge is empty besides the lemonade and a half-eaten cheeseburger wrapped in crumpled yellow paper. I open the cabinet under the sink where Mom keeps her booze, stashed in plastic grocery bags out of Dad’s critical eyesight. The vodka’s running low and so are the cups, but the cup issue is Dad’s fault.

Setting up the stand takes longer with just one person, I haul the plastic table and lawn chairs out from the garage into the heavy heat; the cloudless sky is like the bottom half of a fishbowl, so technically I’m floating upside down. The lawn looks especially dead today, the brown grass refuses to come back to life despite Mom’s efforts. One year, she poured a bag of Miracle Gro everywhere in a vain attempt to compete with Loretta Warren’s green yard across the street.

Mom had the idea to start the stand right after she got fired and was desperate for some sort of revenge. Some kids half my age had set up a stand on the sidewalk in front of our house. Their screams for customers pierced through our living room, interrupting Mom and I as we tried to put five-hundred tiny pieces of beach together. She turned around and propped her elbows on the couch. “We can do better than a bunch of little kids,” she said.

She started spiking the lemonade when Bradley, her high-school friend who lives up the street, stopped by in his new bright blue, noisy sports car. His beer belly proceeded him, and their inability to stop talking about all those “one time-s” inspired them

to spike the lemonade. The next day, neighbors came clamoring to our yard, praising Mom's innovative spin on a child's business venture; they laughed as I refilled their cups and raised the price each week to keep up with demand. Now I charge five dollars per cup.

The street is quiet today, too sweltering for the power walkers to breeze by, yet still too early for the afternoon rush. Maybe I'm too early? The Warren's sprinkler ticks across their yard, spitting most of the water onto the cracked sidewalk where William Tate, at seventy-nine, fell down and broke his hip on an ambitious evening jaunt with his senile beagle Flint. Flint disappeared after the incident because William was never as mobile afterward, but we all were secretly grateful that the block wasn't haunted with the dog's relentless barking. The sprinkler's ticking crawls into my ears like a scrutinizing timer reminding me that Dad could come home any minute and take away my chance at freedom. I need just twenty-five dollars more for the bus ticket, and I have to get to the bus station early since you can't book online without a credit card. It's one of those buses that includes WiFi and reclining seats that are guaranteed to be comfortable.

The sprinkler stops ticking and the Warren's garage door rumbles up as if opening the gates of Hell. Macy Warren, the twelve-year-old mastermind who tortures us with her incessant cookie-selling and badge earnings, clutches a pitcher of her own brew. She waddles down to the edge of her saturated yard, titling the pitcher as she goes so that it leaks onto her floral dress. I want her to trip over her own feet so badly it makes my fists ball up so that my fingernails feel like they could rip through the flesh of my palms. Loretta Warren follows Macy out with a folding table and a poster board tucked under her arm like a proud hen clucking after her favorite chick. Macy rocks back and forth on her heels, the lemonade splashing down her hands while Loretta does everything for her. Mom calls Loretta a helicopter mom and says she's got no life other than spoiling her daughter. "She's going to ruin that poor girl coddling her like that," Mom mumbled once while putting out her cigarette on our front step.

Perhaps she's been too coddled notice that wasting all of

her product on her own clothes. My fingernails threaten to break skin and with all my being I wish that Macy would fall face first onto the sidewalk—even William is more agile than her. Loretta props the sign up on the front leg of the table; in big pink magic-marker letters it says *All Profits go to the Animal Shelter*. What’s a dog supposed to do with cash? I hear Mom’s raspy scoff in the back of my head, as if she’s not off on that Ferris wheel spinning at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Macy starts to wave at me but Loretta grabs her wrist and points back to the garage. Upon their second trip, they lug down two lawn chairs with built-in canopies. There’s something incredibly off-putting about someone who can’t handle the sun.

I shift my weight and let the heat of the day fill me with anger; I will not be sitting down like the weak Warrens. A growling engine rumbles from a few blocks down—Bradley. I know he’ll do the right thing and stop by, he has to, but the engine doesn’t stop. His windows are too tinted to see his face, and so it’s a cruel twist of fate when he stops in front of Macy’s stand. Loretta leaves the shelter of the canopy, pointing her floral chick towards his idling car, a sleek silver machine that he probably hasn’t paid off yet—that’s what Dad said to me in his quiet jealous voice when we first saw it parked in Bradley’s driveway. Macy waddles to his window with a cup, wasting more liquid with her uneven stride. Loretta’s indecipherable clucking voice echoes under the rumbling engine as Bradley drives away, her long hand held open for the crumpled dollars wrapped in Macy’s wet hand. The girl hands her profits over to her mom indifferently, retreating to the shade of her chair. The jealousy makes me thirsty, and surely having one cup won’t cost too much. The taste sterile bitterness with the cold sweetness pushes Bradley’s mistake away, so I refill my cup each time a customer chooses Loretta and Macy over me. After refills, I sit back into my favorite rusty lawn chair to ease my growing dizziness and kick off my too-small flip flops. *Those cars weren’t even from this street*, I tell myself, trying to ignore the empty chairs waiting around me.

The irritable voices of Holly Combs and Robin Turner carry well in the windless ear, but plummet when I bounce up to call

them over—the once-trusted customers tilt their heads down so that their visor bills hide their new disapproval. The stout women look like Easter eggs strutting along in their matching athletic clothes. Mom says that they're only in love because neither one has met another as irritable as they both are. Holly and Robin were the first to take to our lemonade stand, namely because Holly hates exercise and will make any excuse for a break. A new sharp rejection jolts me like a electrical shock as Robin diverts her to the crosswalk, the rejection swells into an indefinite spike of rage when they humor Macy's shrill calls for patronage; and eagerly dig around their fanny packs for spare change.

Gulping down more lemonade dilutes the feeling, a desperate act that proves the recipe's worth. Loretta leaves the protection of her shaded chair to triumphantly receive the traitors with a bouncing voice that sounds like a daytime talkshow host greeting famous guests. Mom has been uncharging our customers all this time. A few weeks ago, Robin would have broken her perpetual frown at my impression of Mom's drunk-and-arguing-with-Dad voice. She'd insist that I'd become an actor, Holly would agree too, offering me a tip for the entertainment.

Macy distributes the cups to each traitor while Loretta takes their filthy money. She leans towards them and whispers something under the protection of their bills; the four of them clump around the table and shoot concerned looks at me. Is this because Mom isn't here to validate with their irritability? They lean in closer to Loretta, who scrunches up her face and clucks louder while pointing a long manicured finger at me—the kind of pointing that lets you know you're the source of the problem. Holly and Robin are like riled ducks the way their visor bills move as they nob in agreement with Loretta. My rage grows again, making me nauseous as it reminds me that I have not made any money—my cup is empty too.

I stand up and walk to my neglected pitcher, suddenly it seems so far away; the ground bends under my feet like a worn trampoline and the sun boils down hotter and hotter until I reach the stable edge of the folding table. My pitcher weighs more than before, taunting me while my spinning vision tires to aim at the

cup, so I hold it to my mouth. The chugging makes the heat stop and drowns out the awful image of Mom swinging at the highest point of the Ferris wheel without me. I imagine her trying to yell loudly enough to reach the tiny people scurrying around the Boardwalk. I'd tell her that there's no way they can hear us, but she'd laugh and try harder just to prove me wrong.

I bet too that the beach looks just like the fragments of our puzzle all put together, which is too much for my rage to ignore; it makes me crank my arm back and throw the pitcher at Robin and Holly as if I am too far inside myself to ever reach her. The hollow plastic skids over the sidewalk and rolls onto the road. My floral-clad neighbors and the Easter eggs stare at me, don't they know that this rage is their fault? Isn't their fault that I cannot afford to go to Mom before Dad gets home and traps me in this gray house with only a sticky-note and a half-finished puzzle?

The pitcher does not deserve to be abandoned on the road so close to their scrutiny, so I stumble even though moving makes the spinning faster, my stomach churn sharply. The thin metal skeleton of a speeding bicycle hurtles right in front of me, the voice of the rider reaching me only after I'm tumbling backwards onto the sidewalk. The moment my head hits the pavement, I move inside of myself, all dark and distant so that the muffled commending voices of the three women against the bicyclists and the beating pain are miles away from the memory of Dad's voice looming across the dinner table: "I'm not taking our daughter to some trashy place full of drunk tourists." But being sprawled across sidewalk doesn't seem so appropriate either.

A thumb tugs at my eyebrow and a blade of sunlight cuts straight through my head. "Elise," Holly says. "Can you hear me?"

The light stops and Robin's deep voice booms down at me. "Her pupils are huge."

I vomit. The taste of soured lemonade burns and the dizziness is a vortex. "She needs to go to the hospital," Holly says.

My flimsy limbs won't listen to me, *don't let them take you*, I tell them as Holly and Robin wrap my dead arms around their shoulders. I let my feet drag, anything to get me back to my pitcher, but Holly and Robin are too strong to let me succeed. Loretta

orders the Macy back inside; her round, bamboozled eyes linger on me—she’s mastered the look of innocent bystander.

“Traitors,” I spit. “Mom would be so pissed.”

“At,” Robin say, “for throwing a pity party.”

They pull me into the shade of the Warren’s garage where Loretta’s car cackles to life so loudly that I wish my head would roll off. It means we’re leaving. “My bag,” I grumble as I’m folded haphazardly into the backseat.

One of the Easter eggs sits beside me in the car, I can’t tell which anymore. Mom’s voice washes up, asking me to pack. My bag’s on the bed with all my savings, clothes, and the peanut butter. But the Mom inside my head keeps changing topics. “You sort out the blue pieces,” she says.

I’m sinking into car seat, but it feels so much like our couch. Loretta drives erratically and either Holly or Robin pinches my arm.

“Ask her questions,” Loretta orders.

“What’s you name?”

“My bag.”

I know my name, but this is more important. I packed perfectly, only my most favorite outfits and the socks. Mom would be proud that I thought to pack my own snacks too.

“Your name,” Robin or Holly says.

“Cash in the bag,” I respond. “Need it for the bus.”

There are too many words floating around inside, all wanting to come out first. My forehead rests against the cool window; I find that the spinning changes when I move, a floating feeling that hoists me up out of the car.

“Can you tell me where your dad is?” Loretta is more inconvenienced than worried.

“No,” I mumble.

My eyes don’t want to open anymore, so I keep finding all the blue pieces in my head, forcing them together even though they don’t quite fit—just as long as it’s all blue, that’s the goal. Today I will have enough money to get to Mom. The woman sitting next to me could be Holly or Robin, but brain keeps pushing for Mom. Her voice wants my attention, and the floating keeps

carrying me up until I'm hanging above all the blue pieces piling up behind my eyes.

## SECOND PLACE

The Trade

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Now, I don't believe in God, but I do think there's a higher power: something that can have a grudge against you. I know 'cause of what happened after me, my cousin Slim, and my uncle Rattlesnake parked our Winnebago in the woods near the highway just outside Tuscaloosa. Well, we ran over a guy the minute we got there, but that's not the reason. We kinda thought of that as good luck.

"Did he croak?" Rattlesnake said, taking a puff of his cigarette while me and Slim dragged the guy out by his boots - red snakeskin boots.

"Yep," said Slim.

No mean feat neither. This was a big guy, nearly seven foot, dressed in leather pants and a vest with weird symbols I'd never seen before. I pointed to the scabbed-over gunshot wound on his chest. "Somebody else got to him first."

Slim pulled at least five hundred cash out of his wallet. "No family pictures in here," he said. "Don't think nobody'll go looking for him."

Rattlesnake tossed his cigarette, crushed it under his boot. "All right, fellas," he said. That meant it was time to cut the guy up.

See, Slim and Rattlesnake and me are werewolves, which means we have to have fresh meat - people meat - and usually it don't fall into your lap. One stiff would last the three of us a day, cut up into steaks and frozen - two if we were lucky. Rattlesnake was the hunter. He could take down five guys in fifteen minutes. But after our last run-in with the Whitehill Gang, his knees were busted up, so now, it was up to me and Slim to hunt in the city - our first real hunt.

Rattlesnake leaned out the trailer as we left. "You boys be careful, now," he said.

“Learned from the best,” I shouted.

A hunt was the only reason any of us would ever get within five-hundred feet of an EarthMarket. We hated them places.

It was bright as a lighthouse. When the doors opened, people drifted out - women in transparent dresses, men in cuffed jeans with their hair in pompadours. The idea was that the clientele would be easy to catch.

“None of ‘em have any meat on their bones,” I whispered.

A woman in tight yoga pants walked out and Slim nudged me.

“I disagree. What do you think of her?”

“To eat or something else?” I asked. “No to both.”

Slim huffed. “Man, do you even like women? Look at her!”

Best for a werewolf to get somebody on their own, no witnesses. The store lights faded. The last stragglers drove off. We waited. When the moon came out, we stowed our clothes in our backpacks.

Transforming is kinda like a rollercoaster drop. First you feel it coming - a tingle like to set your skin on fire - then there’s the drop. You seize up, shiver something fierce. Mine were always worse than Slim’s - lights popping behind my eyes and an ache up my spine like my torso might rip in half. I pulled up fistfuls of grass. When it was over, Slim and I were two wolves in the dark, him black and me blond, up on our hind legs, snarling with hunger.

It wasn’t long until the late shift manager came out and locked the doors for the last time. This would be our guy.

He was short, not fat but soft in the middle, curvy, with blond curls long enough to reach his chin. Gotta admit, he was pretty – but more than that, good eats. He stopped to clean his glasses under a spotlight. It was too perfect. And maybe that’s why things went bad - whatever higher power was trying to teach me that nothing’s perfect.

I snuck up behind him. If he heard me, he didn’t show it, not until I was right up on him, too close for him to get away. Then he turned around, yelled, and fell back on the pavement.

“Whoa, what the fu--”

I put a paw over his mouth. His eyes were blue as blue gets,

bright and fierce. I'll give him credit - he pepper sprayed me - but nothing doing. It wasn't until I had my claws around his face and my teeth around his shoulder that I noticed his earrings: two heavy studs, pure silver.

Soon as my face brushed against one, my skin burned, and I pulled off too early. Even so, the bite wasn't nothing to sneeze at. I could taste the blood, see the blood on his shirt after he wrestled himself free and sprinted off. But something didn't go right with that bite. I could feel it. As I watched his Prius peel out of there like to pick up and fly, I could feel it.

Slim padded over. "Hey, man, you good?"

"Yeah," I said. "To heck with this - let's just go home."

My uncle's RV was as old as him and twice as run-down, an old Winnebago covered in mud. She had two broken windows covered with blue plastic and her rear bumper was a two-by-four. We called her Daisy.

The door was swung open and the lights were on. Me and Slim walked up slow so's not to spook Rattlesnake, even though he could smell us coming.

He was piled up on the recliner, watching TV and sipping a Bud with his legs propped up on the ottoman. Rattlesnake's one of those guys who, you can tell by lookin' at him, used to be a big shot, but all his muscle'd turned to fat. There was a woman with him, too, with tiny sunglasses, hair like a sheepdog, and a long skirt with some tribal pattern on it.

When he saw us, his mouth was watering.

"What'd you boys get for ol' Rattlesnake?" he said.

"A whole lot of nothing," said Slim. "Weren't nothin' out there to be got."

Uncle Rattlesnake spit on the ground. "What do I keep you two around for anyway?"

He didn't mean it. Without Slim and me, there wouldn't be anybody to bring him a cold compress when his knees swelled up, or help crack his back. "Don't you have no manners?" he hollered down the hallway as we went to clean up. "We have a guest! Boys, this is Moon."

“Thanks for covering for me,” I told Slim. We were piled in the bathroom, me at the sink, him sitting on the closed toilet while he worked a stain out of his jeans.

“No worries,” he said. “Listen, man, you can’t let ‘em get in your head like that. You just gotta go in for the kill without thinkin’. Grab, bite, done.”

I nodded, but his words washed through my head without sticking. I watched the blood run off my arms and down the drain, spiraling, red on the white sink like peppermint candy.

Moon was somebody Rattlesnake knew from way back. I could tell she was a witch soon as I saw her. She had this floaty, far-away look that they all have. She’d given him a cream to rub on his knees, and a blue bottle of suppressant pills we can take to keep us from transforming into wolves, except on full moon nights. When Slim and me came out of the bathroom, Rattlesnake was telling her about the stiff.

“We don’t know where he come from. He’s just out here lyin’ dead on the side of the road.”

“What’d he look like?” she asked.

“Huge beard, muscled up, with red snakeskin boots.”

Moon jumped forward. “I know that guy - he’s a warlock! Lives out in the boondocks. The Whitehill Gang came through witch territory yesterday and he told ‘em to get lost. I bet it was them what done it.”

My blood turned icy and Rattlesnake went pale. “You seen the Whitehills around here?” he asked. “Did they ask about us?”

Moon shook her head so hard her hair bounced. “Nope. Probably long gone.”

See, the Whitehill Gang was a werewolf gang down south. Used to be our gang. In fact, my old man - Rattlesnake’s brother - was the leader. We’d been on the run from them for weeks at that point, with them always hot on our tails. A couple of Whitehill deputies had almost run Daisy off the road just a few days prior. Rattlesnake still wore his vest with the Whitehill symbol on the back, but we were all fugitives now.

“I’m gonna hit the hay,” I said.

Rattlesnake raised his Bud and hollered “goodnight” over

the game show he was watching on TV.

Slim and I shared the back bedroom. The mattress had a hole in the middle where a few springs had given out, and when I raised the covers, empty beer cans and Virginia Slim boxes flew into the floor. It was just me, and the dark, and the smell of steaks sizzling on the stovetop - Slim's midnight snack. My head was splitting, so bad I thought maybe I'd never fall asleep. But I did sleep.

That smell was the first thing when I woke up, too - steak, charred to black. Burning flesh. It made my eyes water. I looked for my phone, couldn't find it, remembered I'd fallen asleep in my jeans, pulled it out of my pocket, and turned it on. Twelve o'clock noon. Made sense - I was so hungry my stomach felt like it'd start digesting itself.

Rattlesnake was laid out on the recliner with his vest still on and his mouth hanging wide open. I stepped over the ottoman and went to the kitchen to see if there were any leftovers.

In the fridge, crammed in between a tub of Miracle Whip and a box of sliced ham, there was a Dixie plate wrapped in aluminum foil with a sticky note on top: "For Billy."

Dry steak, dryer now after being in the fridge all night. I horfed it down fast as I could before I realized something.

I absolutely hated the taste of steak.

I could barely choke it down. There was a lump in my throat, trying to keep it from passing. No way could I finish something this putrid. What's with that? A werewolf hating steak?

It was just because Slim did such a bad job cooking it, I reckoned. Usually it was me cooking, and he probably just fried the life out of it. Breakfast was Miracle Whip that day and I thought nothing of it.

Then it didn't go away.

That night, Rattlesnake was the one cooking the steaks. He pulled out the grill and we set up folding chairs outside. Grilling was the only thing he liked better than the open road, and he was a master, cooking up his Mona Lisa in meat. He flipped a couple of juicy, irresistible steaks onto our Dixie plates, and I couldn't stand the sight of them. The smell alone made me want to puke.

I was gagging it back when he looked my way, fork in mid-air. “You alright, Bill?” he said.

I nodded.

“What’s the matter with him, Slim?”

Slim shrugged, but his eyes were round as coins.

I looked between the two of ‘em and my head was swimming again. “I think I’m gonna hurl,” I said, and booked it to the bathroom.

I had to lay in bed with all the lights turned off and the door shut to feel any better. I thought maybe it was migraines. Rattlesnake told me that my mom used to have ‘em. My mom, she was blonde like me, but I could barely remember anything else about her. Last time I saw her was the back of her, disappearing as she left me on the porch of my dad’s house, when I was maybe five. That was where me and Rattlesnake met for the first time. He came out before my dad and sat down next to me on the porch steps, still young then, with all his hair still on his head. “You okay, little man?” he said.

My dad. He was enormous, tall with hair past his shoulders and a beard almost as long, and an ugly white scar running over one eye. Last time I’d seen him was just a few days before Rattlesnake and Slim and I had gone on the run, when he’d tried to take me on my first hunt with him and his right-hand men.

He’d picked the target, a man with a limp to keep him from getting away. When Rattlesnake hunted, he just went out, found somebody, and took them out. Not my dad. Hunts for my dad were a ritual, where they kidnapped the target, brought ‘em out to the woods, and killed them slowly. My dad had struck the first blow - a swipe so deep that the guy was bleeding out, writhing on the ground. Then he’d looked at me, one eye red, the other white, ruined by his scar.

“Finish him off,” he’d said, “or are you too much of a weakling to do it?”

I could still remember the look of him when he said it - the hate in his eyes. At some point I heard Slim come back to our room, take a suppressant, wash it down with beer and toss the

bottle - faraway sounds in the dark, drifting through my ears as sleep pulled me under.

Then I realized it.

I jumped up so fast it made Slim jump too. “What time is it?”

Slim yawned and pulled his phone out to check. “Five minutes past midnight.”

Bile rose in my throat. I hadn’t taken my suppressant, and I didn’t transform.

That was how I ended up at an EarthMarket for the second time. When I walked through the doors, a gust of cinnamon and turmeric and who knew what else washed over me, so strong I had to sneeze. I had two goals for this mission: to buy food I could eat, and to figure out how I got turned into a vegetarian.

It was a menagerie in there: sprawling displays of candy-bright apples and mangos, walls of metal tea tins, glass bottles of fresh-squeezed juice and organic energy drinks. There were more colors in here than I’d ever seen in one place. There was regular flour, wheat flour, almond flour, any kind of flour somebody could want, and something called “patchouli.”

Soon I had a lead on my mission, too: EarthMarkets also sold witchcraft. I found that out in the pharmacy section, where there were low shelves full of herbal supplements whose names I can’t even spell, never mind pronounce. The smell was so strong it made my eyes water. A display of pink and purple crystals was lit up under its own spotlight, and I thought for a minute, was it magic that did this to me? Revenge against the Whitehills for murdering a warlock?

Next to the crystals, there was a display of earrings. I picked up a pair of silver studs. No sting, no burn. I turned them over in my hand, and pocketed them on impulse.

“Excuse me, sir, do you need help?”

The hair on my arms stood up. I knew that voice. Turning around, I saw him: the guy I bit.

His face was round and covered in freckles, surrounded by curly hair, with a bow mouth and a short nose. Still pretty, but he

was looking rough. Dark bags hung under his eyes, his glasses were cracked, and a dark bite scar showed under his shirt collar. But he also got a good look at my eyes, gold like they were as a wolf, and he frowned for just a minute. I had to change the subject fast.

“What’s patchouli?” I said.

His retail smile popped back into place. “It’s like a perfume,” he said. “You can also use it for bug repellent. First time here?”

“Yeah,” I said. That was good - he didn’t recognize me after all. “You?”

“I work here,” he said.

God, stupid. “Just kiddin’,” I said. Lame. “Um, what happened to your--are you okay?”

“Oh, this?” he said, gesturing to his left shoulder. “Yeah, I’m good. Thanks for asking. Let me know if you need anything else!” He turned to go.

“Wait.” I reached out, but he jumped back before I could touch him. “What’s your name?”

He gave me a good look up and down, and said, “Aaron.”

I set to loading up on every vegan food substitute I could get my hands on: spaghetti, hamburgers, pepperoni pizza, pot pies. For a minute I even thought about buying vegan chitlins. My mouth started watering, just like Rattlesnake’s when he saw fresh meat. Just like me when I saw fresh meat too, before. Felt a little bad paying for it with the cash we got out of the warlock’s pocket, but it is what it is.

I got to the edge of the parking lot before I felt the pocket knife in my back.

“Walk into the woods,” he demanded. It was Aaron.

Now, wolf or not, I’m no slouch. Could’ve easily taken him, but not in front of all the soccer moms getting their groceries. More trouble than it was worth. I did what he asked, walked into the woods and out of sight - and then spun around, dropping my groceries, and pinned him to a tree.

“Let me go!” he shouted, and I clapped a hand over his mouth. When I checked to see if anybody from the store had heard,

he bit my palm. I jumped, and he squirmed away, picked his knife up, and pointed it right at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Aaron swallowed hard. “I know it was you who did this to me,” he said. “I recognize your smell.”

My first thought was, I know Daisy was kind of a bachelor pad, but surely I didn’t smell that bad. Then I realized what he meant. Of course he turned into a werewolf - should’a known he would. Rattlesnake had taught us that if you bite a human, you better finish the job, or they’ll come back snarling for revenge.

“Listen, man, I get it,” I said. “I’m sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I’m not turning into a wolf any longer.”

“Funnily enough, it doesn’t,” he snapped. “I woke up this morning completely naked in the woods - who knows what I did last night? You gotta help me.”

“Might not want to point a knife at a guy if you need his help,” I said, rifling through my jean pockets. Slim’s jeans - I’d borrowed ‘em. Just as I hoped, there was a spare suppressant in his pocket. I dropped it in Aaron’s palm. “These make it so you won’t transform, except on full moon nights.”

He popped it in his mouth, closing his eyes as he swallowed it. His eyelashes were so long they cast shadows on his cheeks - like a doll’s eyelashes. He was small, sick, and pretty much helpless, and I felt something bubble up in my stomach. Pity? Guilt?

“I can bring you more of those,” I said. “Tomorrow night.”

By the time I got back to Daisy, Uncle Rattlesnake was out patrolling, in case Whitehill deputies came after us. He paced back and forth, fully transformed into a shaggy gray wolf.

His eyes lit up with anger when he saw me.

“The hell were you?” he spat.

“Out.”

“And what’s that?”

“Nothing,” I said, trying to fold over the top of my grocery bag. Rattlesnake stuck his snout in it, though, and reared back in shock.

“Is that tofu?” he demanded. “What in God’s name do you

have tofu for?”

He was shouting now, because I'd unlocked Daisy, and gone inside to shove the food in the freezer before it turned to mush. He poked his shaggy head in the door.

“Did you hear me?”

I pushed the freezer door closed around all them boxes. “Rattlesnake, let's just talk about this like adults,” I said.

Now that really pushed him over the edge. He starts pacing back and forth, fuming like smoke was about to come out of his ears, and then he had to stop because his knee was acting up. “Adults? I am the man of this house!” he said, eyes wild, sitting outside on the grass.

“I just think we could eat healthier around here,” I explained.

By now Slim was awake, human, stumbling groggy down the hall, but too smart to jump in. Rattlesnake snarled at me. “You just hate meat now,” he said. “That's all this is. You just decided to up and hate meat.”

“I didn't ‘decide’ to do jack squat.”

Then Slim did pipe up. “Pa, Billy caught some guy with silver earrings the other night,” he said. “It got him all messed up. Threw him off.”

“He is rejecting what we are,” Rattlesnake said. “Meat is what we are. We're hunters!”

“I'm not about to get lectured on being a hunter by a werewolf with dentures,” I said.

That was the big secret of Rattlesnake's existence: he'd lost all his teeth five years ago. Of course, there were no dentures for giant wolves, so all his prowling outside Daisy was pretty much for nothing - nothing but a show for himself. Boy, that really did it. Rattlesnake looked like he might explode.

“Why'd you have to go and bring that up!” Slim punched me in the arm. He looked like he might well up and cry. He was really just a kid - hardly more than eighteen.

“You want the truth?” I shouted at my uncle. “The truth is I'm not even transforming no more. Something's gone screwy in my head. No meat, no hunting, no nothin'.”

Rattlesnake looked over at me and the fire in his eyes calmed a bit. “You must think your uncle’s a fool,” he said. “I might not have no teeth, but I got ears. I heard you and Slim talking about it last night.”

I looked from Slim to Rattlesnake and back again. “You ain’t bothered by that?”

Rattlesnake huffed out a long breath and sat down in front of Daisy. “I thought this might happen,” he said. “Billy, your mama wasn’t one of us. She was just a human. Your daddy and I always knew... there was something different about you.”

I swallowed down the dread in my throat, and walked out to sit next to my uncle.

“Is that why my old man always hated me?” I asked.

“He doesn’t hate you,” said Rattlesnake. “He’s just...”

“He does and you know it,” I snapped. “He always thought I was weak. And after I botched his hunt so bad... I know that’s why we had to leave.”

Rattlesnake groaned, stretching out his knees as best he could on the ground. “Listen, kid... I’m just trying to look out for you. This world is a tough place for a wolf who can’t hunt.”

“I got fifteen minutes until my break,” Aaron said. “Wait right here.”

I nodded and waited at an empty table in the EarthMarket cafe. I’d come back to give Aaron one third of Rattlesnake’s suppers, seeing as I wouldn’t need them anymore. He was working at a cash register, swiping credit cards and bagging groceries. Under the dim cafe lights, I could see that dark hair was growing over his lips, under his chin, down the sides of his face. When he went to clock out for his lunch, he came over to me, and his eyes flashed, blue as you like.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” he whispered. “Meet me in the woods.” Then he whirled away, smelling like something addictive. My stomach felt weird as I watched him go.

“Billy!”

I spun around. It was Moon, still wearing her dark glasses, wrapped up in a striped knit shawl. She grabbed one of my arms

with her long fingernails. For just a minute, I was surprised to see her - almost felt the need to hide why I was there - but then I realized that EarthMarket was just Moon as a store, so it made perfect sense.

Then I realized that she was panicked, breathing heavy, like she just got done running.

“What’s up, Moon?” I asked.

“Bill, you gotta go home right now. Your uncle’s in danger. It’s the Whitehills, they’ve--”

I didn’t need to hear any more. I was already heading for the door.

I heard my old man before I saw him. His voice was gravelly, low as the devil. I snuck up until I could see the light coming from Daisy, glowing in between the trees, and hid behind the bushes. My dad was a shadow, standing there with a cigar between his lips and a beard down to his chest, his scar white on his face. There was only one guy with him, but he was a big good-old-boy, with a bald head and a baseball bat. Rattlesnake was on the ground.

“You’re in no position to refuse,” my dad said, looking down at him. “You tell me where my son is or I’ll beat it outta you.”

It took me a minute to realize why he couldn’t smell me. It was the market - the turmeric and patchouli and all that.

“I already told you,” Rattlesnake said. “He split from us back in Georgia--”

“Liar,” my dad said. The bald guy walked over and kicked Rattlesnake but good right in the knee, and he reeled back. I gripped my pocket knife - it was all I’d have.

Then I felt a hand on my back and almost jumped out of my skin. It was Aaron - his blond hair shone under the moon.

“The fuck are you doing here?” I hissed, pulling him down to hide with me.

“You ran out on me,” he said, eyes sparkling.

“Can’t you see I’m busy?” I said. “Those two guys are some of the most dangerous werewolves around.”

“Who’s on the ground?”

“My uncle. They’re gonna kill him if I don’t stop ‘em.”

“But you can’t transform,” Aaron said. He reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. “Wait - I have an idea.”

But no sooner had I turned to look at him than I felt his hand shaking, clammy and slick with sweat. When I looked at him, he was convulsing, shaking with the effort to stay quiet, heaving as his nose grew into a snout and his curly hair turned into wavy fur. The moon shone from between the clouds, his eyes glinted yellow and wild, and he jumped over the bushes.

Now, if you’re an experienced wolf, you can think and talk just like you normally would. Not new wolves.

Aaron bounded over like a bat out of hell, snarling, headed right for my old man. It caught him off guard. The bald guy took a swing with the baseball bat, and Aaron caught it in between his jaws, breaking it into splinters with one bite.

“Bill?” called my dad.

Aaron was a small guy, but a huge wolf, bigger than I had ever been. He circled around Rattlesnake. The bald guy made a run for him, and Aaron swatted him so hard he flew backwards into a tree trunk and cracked his skull.

My dad tossed his cigar down. “Look at you, son,” he said. “I never thought you could be this powerful.”

Aaron snorted. My hands trembled as I looked through the bushes, and saw my dad reach for his belt, where he kept his gun. Aaron may have been a big wolf, but not immune to bullets.

I only had one idea for what to do. I circled around, getting closer to my dad so I’d have a better shot at him, keeping low and quiet in the dark. When I’d come around almost behind Daisy, and my dad was close enough to where I could see the wrinkles on his face, I reached into my pocket, pulled out one of the silver earrings I’d got at EarthMarket, and took my shot.

The earring hit him right on the ear and he flinched hard. “Who the hell was that?” he demanded, swinging around - giving Aaron enough time to run right up on him, so fast that Daisy shook, and take a good swipe at his side. He howled and fell to his knees, the gun flying out of his hand, far enough to where Rattlesnake could crawl over and grab it.

Aaron wanted to finish him off. I could see it in his eyes.

“Let him go,” I said, coming out of the bushes. Rattlesnake cocked the gun at my dad, aiming steady. Aaron circled around me while my dad limped over, mounted his motorcycle, and sped off into the dark.

Soon as the sun came up, Aaron turned back, shrinking from a wolf back into a man. He’d fallen asleep outside Daisy, curled up around our firepit, and his clothes were shredded. I took my flannel off, laid it over him and shook his shoulder. “Aaron, wake up.”

He sat up and sighed, long and slow, pulling the flannel around him like a blanket. “Man, I have a headache.”

“Rough night,” I said, sitting down next to him.

“Sure as.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “How do you deal with this, man? I feel like a freak of nature.”

I looked over at him, at the hair curling around the nape of his neck, and swallowed. “We can be freaks of nature together, if you want,” I said.

He was quiet for a long time, as we sat in the grass. In the distance, between the trees, we could see something sparkling, maybe the solar panels on top of EarthMarket, glittering all the way down in the city. I laid my hand on his hand, waiting for him to consider my offer.

## THIRD PLACE

### Dead Mall

V. Taylor Davis

Middle Tennessee State University

#### **I. Open**

Carla Yates walks the halls of the Grand Treasure Mall on her way to the Lady Foot Locker, keys slapping on her thigh. Two retirees in loud windbreakers pass her. They huff and pump their arms and keep to the tile path, a line of chipped red and violet that guides all mall-walkers around the corner, past the dusty fountain, and into the sleeping food court. In the atrium, the sun can't quite touch the shadows in the industrial halls, reaching with grey fingers through the hatchings on the ceiling. An enormous fake palm tree waves at Carla as she approaches, its fronds bowed by the insistent and equally enormous AC unit positioned directly overhead, ugly and square. A pair of doves nestle in its boughs. One has its head tucked under a wing, and the other looks at her, the fluorescents shining in its eyes. She says something soft to let them know that there is something else alive here. The doves take off in a flurry, their wingbeats echoing in the empty chamber, clanging like metal. They squeeze, one after the other, through the small panel of shattered glass in the sunroof, and then alight in the soft-slung branch of an elm a few yards away, and when she leaves to open shop and is safely gone, they fly back again.

#### **II. Close**

She passes the pretzel stand where the ICEE machine has been sloshing overnight, a steady ghost groan. She used to kick her feet here when she was nineteen, her butt on the counter as she waited for Bobby Kemp to finish cleaning the toaster ovens so he could go buy her beer. They used to make out on the air hockey table in the arcade after dark, the cabinet lights glowing like candles, the stuffed animals inside the crane machine staring at them with glossy eyes. The games flicker, muted light flashing onto gum-blotted carpet. She has two customers all day: an old man

her squalling toddler as he kicks at both of their heads. The rubber soles bounce off Carla's forehead, painless. That night, when everyone is gone, Carla pulls the grating back down to lock herself in and lies behind the counter. She breathes in the soft smell of new shoes and receipt paper, the carpet hard and tacky under her folded hands, the loneliness exquisite in her belly. She is a forgotten doll put to bed in the wrong room, playtime over, lights out. The mall settles around her like a grand glass sphinx, protective, a tomb for the last woman who ever lived.

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# FIRST PLACE

First Draft (after "Palace at 4 a.m." by Alberto Giacometti, 1932)

Michael A. Beard

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

I remember the night we drank away our words,  
built a palace out of them, lived  
before we slept  
as a beautiful architecture.

A sheet of glass hangs,  
suspended in its own kind of melancholy;  
I can see myself in it, alone  
like the skeleton  
of a bird flapping its wings at nothing.  
Your pillared spine sinks inside the fragile woodwork;  
I recognize it.

The first drafts of Autumn fell into us,  
sprawled on the floor,  
footsteps of my old apartment walls settling.  
Outline or not, there was a moment when we were  
an idea, lying in a floor plan,  
remembering each other  
before the moon chiseled you to sleep.  
We were just charcoal sketches of ourselves  
in those days,  
only a year ago and still rough.  
I think you fell in love with me only that night.

When you got on the road back home  
it was warm,  
and the paper-thin afternoon  
seemed the only thing worth loving anymore.

SECOND PLACE

each mind, 40 acres

LeKe'la Jones

Christian Brothers University

of The Acreage

is divided

by moats

filled by pails.

or sometimes a thin

thin line

drawn in topsoil

by limb.

and each section 40

will have a cottage

painted steel blue,

or a lupine meadow

whose grass will encircle

ribs and soles

to warm in nightfall.

or there may be a castle

grey, stone, knights

armored in the crenels.

their coin silver breastplates

inlaid

with grinded emeralds

## THIRD PLACE

State Fair Elegy

Lauren Ladner

Millsaps College

we won't go to the fair this year—  
    *(you know they don't*  
    *wipe those rides down.)*

but it comes anyway.  
we drive by the first day,  
& rainbow lights off the interstate  
sing their siren melody;  
resolute, we sail by and the notes  
die  
in our wake  
    *such a waste*  
we click our tongues  
at the rides that run for ghosts.

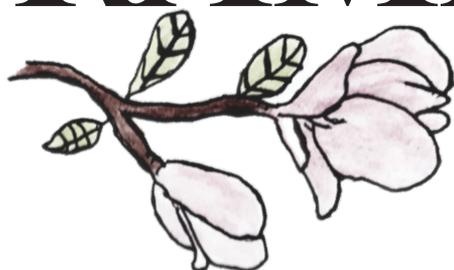
I don't tell you  
that later, I drive past  
alone; the ferris wheel  
wheels its empty baskets  
through the cooling air—

*and I swear*  
we were in the basket  
at the tippy-top  
two years ago  
when I saw you

& the wheel  
screech-stopped;  
our basket strung  
with blinking  
star-lights,  
*you were the brightest—*

a copse of trees  
blocks the lights from me;  
the interstate rolls on,  
& my high-beams  
can no longer cut  
the darkness.

# DRAMA



## FIRST PLACE

Baby Steps

Morgan Thoem

Berry College

VERDIE- A spunky, precocious girl in her early-mid teens, a few years younger than her sister TIFFANY. She embodies a degree of effortless cool and simultaneous dorkiness. Her tongue-in-cheek humor gives the sense that she is mature for her age, yet she can still be a bit of a brat.

TIFFANY- A senior in high school, extremely concerned with social image and popularity. A bit of a priss, used to getting her way, and can be incredibly high-strung and bossy, especially towards younger sister VERDIE.

BEA- Also a senior in high school, one of Tiffany's cooler, more popular friends who is coping with an unplanned pregnancy. It is insinuated that she is also hyper-concerned with being cool, yet we see that façade being broken down in her most vulnerable state.

*[It is Halloween, and TIFFANY is having a house party while her mother is away. The setting is the bathroom: there is a bathtub, which VERDIE sits in, separated from the toilet and sink by a small wall. There is loud music drifting through the door, which is juxtaposed with the sound of rain through the open window.*

*VERDIE has been hiding away to avoid her sister's rowdy friends, where she sits in the tub flicking a lighter that sporadically illuminates her face- one of the only lights on stage. An angry knocking interrupts her, as lights are softly brought up to reveal the bathroom, and a perturbed TIFFANY standing on the other side of the door.]*

Verdie – *[Flicks lighter on once more and, squinting, holds it up to the door like she is wielding a weapon]* Who goes there? Who dares disturb the-

Tiffany - Verdie, it's Tiffany. Can you please come out? People have to use the bathroom.

Verdie – Ughhh, make them go outside. All your friends are dweebs and they smell like weed. And cheap beer. *[Teasing her, now]* And from what I've heard- and smelled- they take MAS-SIVE-

Tiffany – *[Cutting her off]* V, that's enough, just get out.

Verdie – *[Mocking her]* Okay your highness, I will depart this sacred shittery *at once*.

Tiffany – I swear to god I'm gonna kill you. *[Getting irritated, not just exasperated]* God, you're ruining everything. This party is actually really important to me, it's my last year here and it's my only chance to celebrate Halloween-

Verdie – I'm sure you'll go to *plenty* house parties in college.

Tiffany – *[Getting slightly frantic, this has obviously touched something deeper for her]* You didn't let me finish! It's my only chance to celebrate Halloween here, at the house, since Sarah and Bea finally agreed to let me host even though their houses are always nicer, because mom was going out of town. And I promised them you'd be cool. Can you please be cool, V?

Verdie – *[Resigned]* Fine. Just go. I'll be out in a second. *[Listens for her sister's footsteps leaving the door. Whispering, under her breath]* Fucking princess. *[Flicks the lighter again, makes no effort to move from the bathtub]*

*[Suddenly there is another pounding on the door; even more frantic than before. Verdie drops the lighter, unlocks the door to rip it open in frustration]*

Verdie – Shit, Tiffany, I said I'd be out-

*[BEA bursts in the door, gagging, and runs for the toilet. Verdie is pushed aside, loses her balance, and nearly falls back into the tub]*

Verdie – Oh, uh, hey Bea. Sorry about that.

*[BEA lifts her head and makes an effort to answer but ends up retching again. VERDIE has collected herself from the fall and is*

*sitting on the edge of the bathtub, kicking her feet.]*

Verdie – [*Waits for BEA to stop retching, before asking*] So umm, are you drunk?

Bea – [*Sitting back on her heels and wiping her mouth*] No.

Verdie – Well then are you high? [*Dubious*] Because, y’know, not from personal experience or anything, but I’ve heard that sometimes if you- [*Trails off, but it’s going somewhere like “if you get too high it’ll make you sick”*]

Bea – [*Interrupting*] I’m just nauseous.

Verdie – Mhmm. [*Waits for a better answer*]

Bea - And pregnant, apparently. [*Now sitting with her back against the wall separating the toilet and bathtub, grabs a pregnancy test from her pocket and tosses it in the direction of Verdie.*]

Verdie – Huh, figures. [*Sarcastically*] Congrats, sorry I didn’t bring any pink and blue balloons, didn’t know I’d be having a baby shower while I was shitting.

Bea – God, you’re not really-

Verdie – [*Interrupting*] No I’m in a bathtub, I’m not an animal.

[*More to herself than anything*] Shower and shitting, nice alliteration, both “sh” sounds. Both things you do in the bathroom too, huh.

Bea – (Beat) What the hell am I gonna do?

Verdie – Wash your hands. Find some mouthwash. Get a ride home and change out of your puke clothes.

Bea – No, I mean about the... thing. The baby. [*Stuttering, trying it out*] M- my baby? [*Gives a disgusted look, obviously uncomfortable with the way it sounds*] Ugh.

Verdie – Do you know who the father is?

Bea – I mean, I thought I did but I’m probably wrong. I feel like a grade-A whore.

Verdie – Yknow, second wave feminism would say you’re just a [*Doing air-quotes*] liberated woman, or whatever.

Bea – Liberated or not, that doesn’t change the fact that I am barely eighteen, pregnant, and info-dumping on some poor kid passed out in a bathtub.

Verdie – I am barely a kid. And I am not passed out. [*Climbs out of*

*the bathtub and up onto the sink, dangling one leg off. She plucks a tube of lipstick from the messy counter and begins applying it.]* See? This bathroom is simply my hiding place because the music is too loud. [*Matter-of-factly*] Also because Tiffany's friends won't stop trying to break into my room to have sex.

Bea – Watch it, I am one of her friends y'know.

Verdie – Yeah, but you're not sneaking into my room and forcing me to cock-block you. [*Lets out a small giggle*] Although, maybe someone should've. [*Motioning towards BEA and the toilet as she says this, and then pauses.*] Too soon?

Bea – Eh, gotta find the humor in it I guess. (Beat) You know, a few years ago I thought I liked girls. Guess not, huh.

Verdie – Oh really? D'you ever tell Tiff that?

Bea – No, honestly I didn't even consider it. I thought she would be too judgmental, tease me and say I'm a carpet-muncher or something stupid like that.

Verdie – Well I'm gay and she doesn't mind all that much. She hates me because I'm lame and a brat and really nobody likes their kid-sister, but other than that-

Bea – [*Only half-listening to VERDIE, obviously still caught up in her thoughts*] Actually I don't think I ever old anyone that, but I guess that doesn't matter now.

Verdie – I mean, hey, you might be Bi.

Bea – Yeah maybe.

Verdie – But uhh, maybe one thing at a time. First the fact that you belong on Teen Mom and then the sexuality crisis. Baby steps... pun intended.

Bea – Yeah, you're right. (Beat) Hey Verdie?

Verdie – Hmm?

Bea – You're pretty cool. Thank you for talking to me.

Verdie – Of course, thanks for tolerating your friend's nosy kid sister.

Bea – Any time.

Verdie – And Bea?

Bea – Yeah?

Verdie – You're gonna be alright. I promise.

[*After a beat, lights dim*]

## SECOND PLACE

Trial of the Mite-y

Adam Garrett

Middle Tennessee State University

### Characters:

ALEX	The Chosen One. In their mid-20's, any gender.
MARIA	Alex's mother. In her 40's-50's, slightly chubby.
GRAVE	The city elder/seer. In his mid-60's Wears a blue stone around his neck.
JOGGER	A modern day jogger. In her mid-20's, she's both fit and trendy.

All the characters are dressed in fantasy esc. clothing that is made of leaves, acorns, other small, natural things. The jogger is dressed in modern fitness clothes.

Time: Early Morning

Setting: An empty field. The stage is divided between a "normal" view and a "zoomed-in" view. On the "normal" side, the backdrop is a clear sky with ankle high grass stretching out into the horizon. There is a small rock with a four-leaf clover next to it. On the "zoomed-in" side, the grass takes up the entirety of the backdrop, stretching as high up as possible. There is a large boulder with a hole bored into it. Next to the boulder, farther back, is a large clover standing about a head taller than the tallest character.

*On the zoomed-in side. Everything is frozen in place as the characters are covered in a red light. ALEX is marching away from the city, confidently gripping a spear that appears to be a large sewing needle with a blue cord wrapped through the hole. MARIA is chasing after them with her arm outstretched. Under the clover is a smaller rock. During the freeze, a small, red light flashes on the normal side near the rock. This indicates where the characters are. This image holds for a few seconds, and when ALEX and MARIA begin to move MARIA speaks immediately.*

MARIA

Alex, dear, please wait for just a second. Can you not wait for your poor, old mother for just a second?

ALEX  
(Stopping)

Mother, would you give it a rest for today at least? You've been beating this drum for how long now?

MARIA

I would hope you realize why I'm being so persistent by now.

ALEX

Yes, I'm perfectly aware that you don't want me to go on this adventure. I appreciate the concern, Mother, really, I do. I just wish

you'd trust me.

*MARIA embraces Alex in a desperate hug. ALEX looks cramped, but refuses to fight it.*

MARIA

Dear, you know I trust you more than anything. But do you seriously think I'd ever give up on protecting my baby?

ALEX

Protect me from what, achieving my destiny?

(Showing off the spear)

You know this weapon means that I was chosen to go on this quest, right?

*MARIA sighs and sits on the nearby rock motioning for Alex to join her. ALEX sits nearby on the ground. GRAVE enters from the entrance of the large boulder and stays back, quietly observing.*

MARIA

Yes, yes, I remember all about the spear. I just about fainted when I saw Grave at our door that night, brandishing the damn thing. I thought the poor, old man had finally lost it. You were still such a small child... His story about the "Chosen One" was enough at the time, but honestly, I've never accepted it.

ALEX

Never? I thought your worries only began after I started training. Are you telling me that you were hesitant even after hearing it from the Elder himself? You know his word is absolute.

MARIA

Of course, Alex, I learned that very quickly after we moved here. I respect Grave and his “visions” as much as the rest of the city, but you have to admit that this entire process has been rather... strange.

ALEX

Mother, please don't start with this silly theory again. You're the only one in all of Clover to doubt the Elder. Even old man Rook knows not to second guess him.

MARIA

Alex, I've told you this isn't some wild theory. I just don't think that Grave is telling us the whole story. Everyone seems to think that it's all perfectly reasonable, but I just don't understand it. The elder has a vision once every few years, and suddenly some poor child has to go on a deadly quest? I just think that maybe--

*GRAVE clears his throat.  
ALEX and MARIA jump as  
they realize that he's here.  
ALEX rises.*

GRAVE

Good morning, Maria, Chosen One.

MARIA & ALEX

Good morning, Elder.

GRAVE

I see you're heading out already, Chosen One. Rather early for that, don't you think? I understand that you've finally completed your training, but the rest of the city hasn't even awoken yet. I'm sure they'd be delighted to see you off.

ALEX

Sir, with all due respect, I've been waiting for this day for forever and I just couldn't wait a minute more.

GRAVE

Ha, ha, yes, I suppose that's to be expected. It's good to see that you're so eager to fulfill your role. I'm sure you'll become a fine champion of our fair city Clover. We're all so excited to see what you'll accomplish.

ALEX

You flatter me, sir. Since you're here, do you think you could possibly convince my mother to relax? She's still a little reluctant to see me leave, it seems.

MARIA

Elder, you know as well as I do that the outside world is filled with danger. I'm fully aware that my child is capable of plenty, but adventuring just seems...

GRAVE

Ah, Maria, I understand your concern. It's quite difficult to let your children go out on their own. I remember when my own daughter finally left. I know it was before you and the Chosen One arrived, but I promise I understand your misgivings.

MARIA

I'm glad to know that you understand sir. Since that's the case, I'm sure you know why I can't let Alex do this.

GRAVE

I'm afraid that the Chosen One's destiny is not up to us, Maria. You know this just as well as I.

MARIA

But weren't you the one who--

GRAVE *quickly raises his hand to cut Maria off.*

GRAVE

Be that as it may, I'm afraid I do need to stop the Chosen One.

ALEX & MARIA  
(MARIA rises)

What?!

ALEX

What do you mean you need to stop me? Don't tell me you lost faith in me as well! I know most of the city looks fondly upon me, but I've also felt the heat of many a critical stare.

GRAVE

Please, calm yourself, Chosen One. I would never stop you from pursuing your destiny, and I have no doubt regarding your abilities. However, there's something I haven't told you about your quest yet.

GRAVE *closes his eyes. He opens them and raises his arms in a grand gesture as he looks at the sky.*

GRAVE (continued)

Ahem. O' Chosen One, whose spear bears the mark of a champion, hear me. Before you set forth to bring glory to our fair city, you must endure a Trial. You will head out beyond our walls and enter the Northern Cavern. After facing the traps and monsters of the accursed grotto, you will retrieve a stone much like the one I bear. Only then will you be truly prepared to embark on your quest. As soon as you have gathered your nerve, you must go forth and face The Trial of The Mighty.

ALEX

Sir, why would you wait so long to tell me this?

GRAVE

I wished to watch over you, to ensure that you were growing properly. As you already know, the Champion bears the great weight of fighting the darkness.

ALEX

Of course, you taught me as much when I was a child.

GRAVE

That's correct. However, you have another duty to fulfill as you embark on your journey. There are many out there who suffer, and the ability to help the weak is the mark of a true champion.

ALEX

Wow, I knew being a champion was a big deal, but this is even bigger than I imagined. Travelling across the land, fighting the darkness, and helping everyone I can? I suppose that sounds pretty normal for a champion.

MARIA

Wait, does it?

(To Grave)

Sir, I must make sure that I understand you. Alex needs to complete a trial to obtain another mark that's different from the one on the spear.

GRAVE

Yes, that's correct.

MARIA

And this mark will prove that Alex is qualified to go on this quest to stop some "darkness"?

GRAVE

Yes.

MARIA

And my dear child will need to be an errand boy for anyone who calls? Just for another symbol?

GRAVE

... Yes.

*MARIA looks over at Alex,  
Grave, and then back at Alex.*

MARIA

That sounds absolutely--

ALEX

Incredible!

MARIA

Alex, dear, you can't be serious.

ALEX

Of course I'm serious! Didn't you hear what the elder said? If I go through with this, I'll be twice as ready to go on my adventure. That's, like, double the destiny!

*ALEX begins to pace  
excitedly.*

GRAVE

I'm glad that you understand the importance of the Trial Chosen One. Maria, I think you'll find the Trial to be worthwhile as well.

MARIA

Why would you think something like that?

GRAVE

Well, I understand that you're concerned about the Chosen One

not being qualified to undertake this quest.

MARIA

That's not my biggest concern, sir. I simply don't believe that this is what's best for Alex. We've never been an adventuring family.

GRAVE

Hmmm. In that case, I would ask that you treat the Trial as a testament to the Chosen One's abilities. Watch it unfold, and see that your fears are unfounded.

*MARIA pauses and ponders, looking at Alex for a second.*

MARIA

Well, I suppose that sounds reasonable enough. Does it have to be this trial though? Can it not be anything closer? Perhaps Alex can help the farmers collect this year's harvest instead.

GRAVE

I'm afraid only the Trial can prove a future champion's worth.

ALEX

Mother, please at least let me do this. I can't think of any other way to calm your fears. I promise, I'll complete this trial and return safely.

MARIA

Before I agree I have to ask you something, for my sake. Are you absolutely certain you're up to this? There will be much pressure put upon you once you set out.

ALEX

You've watched over me for my entire life. You've seen me train with soldiers who've taught me to stand my ground. You've spoken with medics who've taught me how to heal myself. I'm so prepared that nobody else would be better for this.

MARIA  
(To Grave)

Are you sure there's absolutely no way to stop this destiny business? You can't try for another vision, see if another child is worthy?

GRAVE

The visions are not mine to control, Maria. I merely receive them, and share their secrets. That's how it has worked since the city of Clover was founded.

MARIA

Alright, one last question. I'm not going to stop either of you from doing this, am I?

*GRAVE and ALEX look at each other before looking back at Maria.*

GRAVE & ALEX

No.

MARIA

Well, I suppose I have no choice. My dear, though I don't really approve of this destiny business, I'll support you as best I can.

ALEX

Mother, thank you! I can't believe this day is finally here!

*ALEX drops their spear and embraces MARIA in a giant hug. BOTH laughing.*

GRAVE  
(To himself)

How wonderful it is to see a parent and child come together. Even if it wastes precious time...

ALEX

I promise you won't regret this decision. I'll come back with that stone, and after that I'll come back a champion.

MARIA

I'll be waiting for you with bated breath dear.

GRAVE

Maria, your approval clearly means the world to the Chosen One. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.

MARIA

I'm putting a lot of faith in you, Grave. If you ever put my child on the wrong path, remember that you'll have to deal with me.

GRAVE

Ha, ha! I'll be sure to keep that in mind. If you two will excuse me, I need to prepare before the Chosen One sets out.

*GRAVE exits into the rock  
leaving MARIA and ALEX  
to talk and prepare.*

MARIA

You're sure you have everything you're going to need?

ALEX

Of course I do. I prepared provisions with the baker, and I've been training my endurance non-stop with the Pebble twins. I've even been working on my herb studies with the Nightshades. My friends have been helping me, so you have nothing to fear.

MARIA

Right, of course. Remember, if you ever feel you're not up to the task you can always come back. This city is your home, and I'll never turn you away.

ALEX

I appreciate the thought, but I don't think I'll have to take you up on it. With how handy I've become with this spear I doubt anything will even be able to touch me.

*ALEX picks the spear up and flaunts it, almost hitting Maria. MARIA barely flinches, and doesn't try to dodge.*

MARIA

I don't doubt that, dear. Honestly, I've been too close to the receiving end too many times. Maybe it's best for my health if you get it out of the house. Ha!

*As they talk, a booming noise and tremor begins. MARIA and ALEX brace themselves until the tremors pass.*

ALEX

Did you feel that, Mother? Even the gods are approving of my journey. They bang their war drums as we speak.

*GRAVE enters again carrying a small pouch. He hands it to ALEX and then sits on the small rock. ALEX looks inside the pouch.*

ALEX

Um, sir, what is this?

GRAVE

I've made a medicine for your journey, Chosen One. The Northern Cavern is rather famous for its toxic vents. This medicine will-

MARIA

Toxic vents?!

GRAVE

Ahem. I assure you both that this medicine will render the Chosen One completely immune to the vents.

ALEX

I'm very grateful for this, sir. I'll be sure to treat it with care.

GRAVE

Think nothing of it. If you ever find yourself in need of some advice my door is always open.

ALEX

Thank you very much, sir. Well, on that note I guess I'd better be off.

*ALEX moves to leave, but  
looks back at the city,  
MARIA, and GRAVE.  
ALEX is thinking.*

ALEX

Um, Mother, I want to say something before I head out.

MARIA

Yes, dear?

ALEX

When we first got to this city, nobody seemed to give us a passing glance. Sure, we were outsiders at the time, but it felt like we didn't belong. I felt like nothing. So when the Elder told me I meant something, I was overjoyed. I knew your reservations about my quest, and I lashed out. I thought you didn't care. But now I know that I was wrong. I'm sorry for the grief I've caused you.

MARIA

Aw, Alex, I'm sorry too. You know that I'll always care for you no matter what. I never realized that I was hurting you. Even if I have my misgivings, I believe that you'll do right by the city and by me. So, go out and be the best champion you can be. And never forget, I love you dear.

ALEX

I love you, too, Mother.

*As ALEX exits, a red light appears on the normal side of the stage to indicate their position. MARIA looks on proudly. The tremors and booming start up again, and JOGGER enters on the normal side. She steps on the light, causing it to go out.*

JOGGER

(Looking at the sole of her shoe)

Ewwww, gross.

JOGGER *exits.*

GRAVE

\*Sigh\* There goes another one. These champions really aren't what they used to be.

*GRAVE picks up the spear and begins to trudge towards the entrance of the city. MARIA falls to her knees and wails as she looks towards where her child was. The lights fade.*

The End

## THIRD PLACE

Name Your Torture

Ian Rossin

Columbus State University

### Cast of Characters (In Order of Appearance/Scene)

DEVON, M/F, 30s-60s. The literal Devil. Personality is open to interpretation. Pronouns in the show must be “they/them.”

GRAHAM, Male, 30s. An ex-IT support.

COURTNEY, Female, mid-to-late 20s. An ex-waitress.

RALPH, Male, 18-23 years old. An ex-college student.

HELEN, Female, 40s/50s. An ex-meter maid who comes off as a sweet Southern lady.. Wife to DREW.

DREW, Male, 40s/50s. An ex-assembly line manager who is very protective of his loved ones. Husband to HELEN.

NATALIE, Female, 20s/30s. A germaphobe and used-to-be mother of three.

CODY, Male, 30s/40s. An ex-telemarketer.

**Extras:** ( Scene Two:) MAN, WOMAN (Scene Three:) HOST, WAITRESS, CUSTOMERS, (Scene Four:) DR. TURNER, SAWYER, HAILEY, JAZ, (Scene Six:) NURSE, GUARDS, HOSPITAL PATIENTS, (Scene Seven:) FRAN, HOWARD, (Scene Eight:) NEW TORTUREES<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Extras can be used or featured in more than one scene. For instance, restaurant customers in Scene Two can also be hospital patients in Scene Seven.

**Settings:** A bland conference room, an office space, a restaurant dining room, a college dorm room, a street, a hospital waiting room, and a parking garage.

**Time:** Modern day

**SCENE ONE: WELCOME**

*(The lights come up on a bland conference room. The conference room has one door SL, one door SR, a podium at the front, and seven chairs. In the seven chairs are GRAHAM, COURTNEY, RALPH, HELEN, DREW, NATALIE, and CODY. They are all dressed exactly alike: black button-up shirts, black dress pants or jeans, and black dress shoes. They're conversing, interacting, and ad-libbing to each other for a few moments before DEVON enters from SR and moves to the podium. DEVON is a non-gender conforming entity passing for a 30 to 60-year-old dressed in mostly red and black, as they're the literal devil. The room falls silent.)*

DEVON. What's up, asshats?

*(Everyone glances around the room, unsure how to respond.)*

DEVON. Damn. I always get the boring ones. I need to talk to HR about that.

*(Still no reactions. DEVON sighs.)*

DEVON. Fine. Don't speak up. Whatever. So uh...

*(They look around, searching for something.*

*DEVON rolls their eyes and opens the SR door.)*

DEVON. HEY! ASSHOLES! YOU FORGOT TO HAND ME MY FILES!

*(Immediately, they're smacked in the face with a clipboard. DEVON picks it up, scoffing, and slams the door shut.)*

DEVON. Some people are so incompetent, I swear to God. *(They look up.)* SORRY, GOD! Anyways, where was I...Ah, yes. *(Flipping through his files:)* Welcome to...uh...Hell. Welcome to Hell. Yeah, that's where we are. Any questions?

*(HELEN, an ex-meter maid approximately 40 to 50 years old, raises her hand. DEVON nods at her.)*

HELEN. Is there a manager I can speak to, sir?

DEVON. Ma'am, I am not a sir. I am nothing but a powerful entity who enjoys torturing shitty souls. Also, to answer your question: No, there is no manager you can speak to. Your name is Helen, so stop being such a Karen.

HELEN. Actually, *sir*, you *have* to have a gender.

DEVON. (*Mimicking HELEN:*) Actually, *ma'am*, I don't think someone who ended up in Hell should be acting the way you are. Don't try me.

*(HELEN scoffs. DREW, a 40 to 50-year-old ex-assembly line manager who is also HELEN'S husband, stands to fight.)*

DEVON. (*Points at DREW.*) Sit.

*(Immediately, against his will, DREW sits. DEVON surveys the room.)*

DEVON. Does anyone else have anything to say?

*(No one answers. DEVON smiles.)*

DEVON. Good. Now, let's move on. Basically, at some point within the next few minutes, each of you will exit this room, and enter a landscape that has... (*Winking:*) no exit. These landscapes hold your tortures. It'll be a blast.

*(They look at their watch.)*

DEVON. Ah! The few minutes are up. Alright, when I call your name and tell you where to go, you go there. Simple. Okay...in this order, line up at the door to *my right*: Graham, Ralph, Natalie.

*(GRAHAM, RALPH, and NATALIE do as they're told.)*

DEVON. In this order, line up at the door to *my left*: Courtney, Helen, Drew, Cody.

*(COURTNEY, HELEN, DREW, and CODY do as they're told.)*

DEVON. The first person at the doors on each side will enter first, then the second person/people at each door will enter at the same time, etc., etc.. Sound good? Cool. Now...Graham, you took joy in making other's lives harder. Open your door. (*He does.*) Courtney, you never took any job you possessed seriously, and in doing so, sent innocent people to the hospital on some occasions. Open your door. (*She does.*) Now...enter your rooms. (*They do.*)

*(Blackout.)*

## SCENE TWO: CUSTOMER SERVICE

*(GRAHAM, an ex-IT support in his thirties, finds himself in an office space. There is a desk with a chair, a computer, a cell phone, a printer, and only one door--the one he came through.*

*GRAHAM jiggles the doorknob and is not surprised to find that the door is locked. He looks around suspiciously. After a pause, he slowly walks up to the desk.)*

GRAHAM. What kind of torture could this possibly be?

*(He sits down and cautiously turns on the laptop. If possible, it might be effective to project the laptop screen onto a projection screen of sorts. He begins surfing the net. At times, the audience should hear sounds of internet games being played or loading web pages. After a few minutes, the internet on the laptop crashes, and we should hear sound effects to indicate this.)*

GRAHAM. Damn! Let's see...

*(GRAHAM attempts to refresh his screen, to no avail. After more struggling, the screen turns black.)*

GRAHAM. What's this?

*(The screen then turns completely white, and a message pops up with a phone number: 666-420-HELL. GRAHAM stares at the message, confused, before moving his eyes to the cellphone. He hesitantly picks it up and dials the number. After a few rings, a woman with a very customer service-y voice answers.)*

WOMAN. Hi! How can I help you today?

GRAHAM. Hello--um, I'm having issues with my laptop...

WOMAN. Excellent! Can I get your name and phone number in case we disconnect?

GRAHAM. My name is Graham Foreman. The phone number is--um, if I'm in Hell, would I have the same phone number I did when I was alive?

WOMAN. I'm sorry? I don't understand the question.

GRAHAM. Never mind. I guess I'll give you the number I had

before I died. Um, it's 5-8-9, 8-9-0, 7-2-3-5.

WOMAN. Great. I'm going to go ahead and repeat that back to you. Your name is Gavin Forehead, and your number is 8-9-5, 9-8-0, 5-2-3-7?

GRAHAM. No, ma'am. My name is Graham Foreman, and my number is 5-8-9, 8-9-0, 7-2-3-5.

WOMAN. So sorry about that! Okay, so once more, your name is Gravel Foreskin, and your number is 5-9-8, 0-8-9, 3-7-2-5?

GRAHAM. I--No, that's wrong. *Very* wrong. My name is Graham-- "G" as in grandmother, "r" as in remote, "a" as in alpha, "h" as in hunter, "a" as in alpha, "m" as in morose--Foreman--"F" as in false, "o" as in orange, "r" as in remote, "e" as in emoji, "m" as in morose, "a" as in alpha, "n" as in norse. My number is 5-8-9, 8-9-0, 7-2-3-5.

WOMAN. Your name is Groundhog Frogman and your number is 9-8-5, 0-9-8, 2-7-5-3, got it. Now, what issues are you having today?

GRAHAM. I was using the laptop and suddenly the internet crashed. After a moment, the screen just went dark.

WOMAN. You said your internet crashed and the screen went dark?

GRAHAM. Yes, ma'am.

WOMAN. Lovely. Have you attempted to turn your device off and then back on?

GRAHAM. No. Let me just...try that...

*(GRAHAM turns off the laptop, then turns it back on.)*

GRAHAM. Okay, I did it.

WOMAN. Did it work?

GRAHAM. I'm not entirely sure, let me check...

*(He messes around with the laptop, only to find that the internet still does not work.)*

GRAHAM. No.

WOMAN. No what?

GRAHAM. No, it didn't work.

WOMAN. Hm. Can you try rebooting it for me?

GRAHAM. Uh, sure. One second.

*(GRAHAM attempts to reboot it, but the laptop*

*begins updating--very slowly.)*

GRAHAM. Ma'am?

WOMAN. Yes?

GRAHAM. I tried to reboot it but it started updating.

WOMAN. Do you know how much longer the update is going to take?

GRAHAM. No, but right now it's only two percent updated.

WOMAN. Okay! Sometimes updates can take a while, so what we can do is end the call, and you can call this number back once the update is complete. When you call back, make sure you ask for me specifically. Have a great day! *(The WOMAN ends the call.)*

GRAHAM. I didn't--I didn't even get her name...but I guess I'll wait for the update to finish.

*(The laptop continues to update at a slow crawl. After more waiting, the Jeopardy theme song begins to play in order to emphasize the slowness. Eventually, though, the laptop does complete its update.)*

GRAHAM. Finally! Okay, let's call the number again.

*(He dials the number again, and the phone rings. However, an IT support specialist does not answer immediately this time; an automated voice message answers instead.)*

VOICE. Hello, valued customer. Unfortunately, all our representatives are tied up at the moment.

Press "1" if you wish to stay on the line to talk to a specialist without hanging up the phone. Press "2" to leave your name and phone number so a specialist can call you back at your earliest convenience.

*(GRAHAM presses "2" on the number pad.)*

VOICE. You pressed "1." Please stay on the line.

*(Hold music begins to play through the phone. The hold music can be anything, as long as it is excruciatingly obnoxious.)*

GRAHAM. Damn. Being on the other end of the phone is not fun. Every time a customer told me to go to Hell, I guess I deserved it.

*(All of a sudden, the door opens. DEVON pops their head out.)*

DEVON. You really did.

GRAHAM. Hey!

*(He sprints towards DEVON, but they slam the door shut. GRAHAM tries the door, but it's locked again.)*

GRAHAM. Shit.

*(As the hold music plays on, GRAHAM paces around the room aimlessly, doing several things to prevent himself from being bored. After a while, the hold music stops. A male IT support specialist answers the phone.)*

MAN. Hello?

*(GRAHAM snatches the phone off the desk.)*

GRAHAM. Hi! I'm here.

MAN. Hi there, sir. Can I get your name and phone number in case we disconnect?

GRAHAM. Yes, yes, my name is Graham Foreman and my phone number is 5-8-9, 8-9-0, 7-2-3-5. I was on the phone with a female representative earlier.

MAN. Alright, let's see...Interesting. Sir, I don't see any records of a phone call with a "Graham Foreman." Do you remember the name of the representative you spoke to?

GRAHAM. No, she never gave me her name.

MAN. I see. Well, if you catch me up maybe I can assist you. What was the issue?

GRAHAM. I was using this laptop, and the internet cut out. I turned it off and on again, and that didn't do anything. I then attempted to reboot it, but the laptop started updating instead. That's when I got disconnected. I still have no internet connection.

MAN. Is there a printer in your vicinity, sir?

GRAHAM. Yes! Yes, there's one right next to me.

MAN. Excellent. Some printers have routers built into them. Can you please tell me the make and model of your printer?

GRAHAM. Sure. It's an, um...It's a HellFire 3000L.

MAN. Okay, let me get some information on that type of printer... Ah. You're in luck! That make and model of printer *does* have internet connections you can link to your device. I can walk you through it.

GRAHAM. Please do.

MAN. Alrighty. First, power it on.

*(GRAHAM hits the power button on the printer.)*

GRAHAM. Done.

MAN. Good. Now, once it finishes turning on, there should be a button on the touchscreen that resembles the wifi symbol. Do you see that?

GRAHAM. Yes.

MAN. Press it.

*(He does.)*

GRAHAM. Okay, I pressed it.

MAN. Alright, what's happening now?

GRAHAM. There's a blue blinking light next to it.

MAN. That means it is attempting to make a connection. Please go to Settings on your device and connect to the printer. When you ask to connect, you should be prompted to put in a password. Let me know when you get there.

*(GRAHAM does as instructed.)*

GRAHAM. I'm there.

MAN. Are you ready for the preset password?

GRAHAM. Yes.

MAN. Wonderful. Okay the password is: *(Rapidly:)* 9-G-8-L-M-R-4-S-5-6-W-7-P-Q-G-7-A-8-B-5-4-C-3-D- 2-1-X-2-5-6-Z-7-6-E-5-F-4. Did you get that?

GRAHAM. Wha--I'm sorry, can you repeat that please?

MAN. Sure. The password is: *(Rapidly:)*

9-G-8-L-M-R-4-S-5-6-W-7-P-Q-G-7-A-8-B-5-4-C-3-D- 2-1-X-2-5-6-Z-7-6-E-5-F-4. Did you get it that time?

GRAHAM. Sir, can you--Can you repeat that again, but slower?

MAN. Of course. 9...G...8...L...M...R...*(Then rapidly again:)*

4-S-5-6-W-7-P-Q-G-7-A-8-B-5-4-C-3-D- 2-1-X-2-5-6-Z-7-6-E-5-F-4.

GRAHAM. Hm. Ah--Okay. Let's do this: Can you just email me the password?

MAN. Yes, that won't be a problem. What's your email address?

GRAHAM. g\_foreman@gmail.com.

MAN. Let me go ahead and type that in...Okay! The email...has...been...sent!

GRAHAM. Fantastic, thank you so much.

MAN. Not a problem. Is there anything else I can help you with today?

GRAHAM. Nope! I'll call back if I have any further issues.

MAN. Great. Have a good eternity!

GRAHAM. You...too?

*(Awkward pause.)*

MAN. Bye!

GRAHAM. Oh! Uh, bye.

*(GRAHAM hangs up the phone, and stares at the laptop for a moment before the realization hits him, and he sighs in defeat.)*

GRAHAM. I need wifi to open my email, don't I?

*(He picks up the phone again, and begins dialling the number while shaking his head.)*

GRAHAM. This is going to be a loooong eternity.

*(As the phone rings, suddenly the printer begins to rumble. The next few lines between GRAHAM and the automated message VOICE should overlap each other as the rumbling gets louder.)*

VOICE. Hello, valued customer.

GRAHAM. What the...

VOICE. Unfortunately, all our representatives are tied up at the moment.

GRAHAM. What--what's happening...?

VOICE. Press "1" if you wish to stay on the line to talk to a specialist without hanging up the phone.

*(The printer begins to smoke.)*

GRAHAM. Oh god!

VOICE. Press "2" to leave your name and phone number so a specialist can call you back at your earliest convenience.

*(GRAHAM hangs up the phone and dials 9-1-1. A DISPATCHER picks up.)*

DISPATCHER. 9-1-1, how can I help you?

GRAHAM. Hi. My printer is currently smoking--

*(A small fire starts at the back of the printer.)*

GRAHAM. Sorry, no, my printer's actually on fire now. Can you send someone to put it out?

DISPATCHER. Sir, are you aware that you're in Hell?

GRAHAM. Yes, but--

DISPATCHER. Goodbye.

*(The DISPATCHER hangs up.)*

GRAHAM. What--what was that?

*(The fire gets bigger.)*

GRAHAM. Lord! What the here am I supposed to do now?

*(The printer begins beeping obnoxiously loud.)*

GRAHAM. Is there a plug somewhere?...

*(He bends down and sees the plug for the printer)*

GRAHAM. Aha!

*(He yanks it out of the wall, and is immediately shocked. He stands up to find that the printer has indeed stopped beeping, but it's also still on fire.)*

GRAHAM. Damn, that hurt. Uh...

*(Something else begins beeping.)*

GRAHAM. I thought I unplugged the printer! What could that--

*(The laptop itself then begins to smoke.)*

GRAHAM. Oh, god. Oh, lord, what am I going to do?

*(Blackout.)*

**SCENE THREE: WAITER!**

*(COURTNEY, an ex-waitress in her mid-to-late twenties, finds herself in the lobby of a restaurant. In the restaurant are five empty tables with two tables each, and on the tables are salt and pepper shakers and napkin holders. The restaurant itself is quite fancy and classy.)*

*COURTNEY is surveying her surroundings when a HOST/ESS appears.)*

HOST. Hi there! How many people are in your party?

COURTNEY. Uh...just me...I hope.

HOST. Alright! Follow me.

*(The HOST guides her to the table in the center, and sets down a menu.)*

HOST. A waiter will be with you shortly.

COURTNEY. Great, thanks.

*(The HOST exits and COURTNEY continues to look around.)*

COURTNEY. Everything's so calm right now I'm almost scared to do anything.

*(She picks up the menu and begins to flip through it, and a couple walks through the door. The HOST greets them, and guides them to a table. A few minutes later, a WAITRESS enters. The WAITRESS appears to be walking towards COURTNEY, but she veers away and goes to the new couple instead. COURTNEY notices.)*

COURTNEY. Ma'am? I need a waitress.

*(The WAITRESS doesn't hear her and takes the couple's order. When she walks away, COURTNEY waves her hand to catch her attention.)*

COURTNEY. Ma'am? Ma'am! I need a waitress.

*(This time, the WAITRESS sees her, and comes over to her table.)*

WAITRESS. Sorry about the wait! What can I get you to drink?

COURTNEY. I--Um, if I order something, I won't be poisoned, right?

WAITRESS. Pardon?

COURTNEY. Ignore that. I'll just have water, please.

*(The WAITRESS exits. After about five minutes, COURTNEY'S stomach rumbles loudly, the WAITRESS not in sight.)*

COURTNEY. *(Mumbling.)* The service here isn't very 5-star, is it? *(All of a sudden, the HOST is seating a new couple at another table. The WAITRESS begins walking toward COURTNEY with a glass of water. However, like last time, she veers away and goes to the first couple's table. She sets the water down in front of them, and COURTNEY can hear her ask:)*

WAITRESS. Are y'all ready to order your food?

COURTNEY. Wha--I was here first, wasn't I? Why is she taking *their* order before me? Am I, like, invisible?

*(When the WAITRESS finishes taking COUPLE #1's order, she starts moving towards COURTNEY again, but she goes over to the second couple).*

COURTNEY. What the hell...?

WAITRESS. What can I get y'all to drink today?

*(When the WAITRESS finishes getting COUPLE #2'S drink order, she comes over to COURTNEY.)*

WAITRESS. I noticed your table looks empty! Can I get you anything to drink this afternoon?

COURTNEY. Well, I--I ordered water like five minutes ago, so...

WAITRESS. Oh my gosh, I apologize! Let me go get that for you. When I come back, I'll take your food order.

COURTNEY. Great, thanks.

*(The WAITRESS exits again. Moments later, she comes on with another glass. She sets it in front of COURTNEY.)*

COURTNEY. Thank you! Um, I would like the--

*(The WAITRESS walks away, and goes over to COUPLE #2'S table. She starts writing down their food order.)*

COURTNEY. *(Visibly confused.)* What...was...that? I--um, I guess I'll drink my water then?

*(She takes a sip of her water before spitting it out)*

*all over the table.)*

COURTNEY. Oh, god! What the hell *was* that? That was *not* water. Was that seltzer?

*(The WAITRESS comes back to COURTNEY'S table.)*

WAITRESS. Are you ready to order your food, ma'am?

COURTNEY. Ah--yes. Yeah, I am. I would like the tofu steak, cooked medium well, please. And a side of vegetables.

WAITRESS. Sounds good! Anything else?

COURTNEY. Yeah, can I get a new glass of water? I think this is actually seltzer...

WAITRESS. Of course!

*(The WAITRESS picks up the glass and leaves.)*

COURTNEY. I wish I had my phone so I could go on Yelp and give this place a negative 5-star review.

*(The HOST seats another table, and COURTNEY waves her over.)*

HOST. Do you need help, ma'am?

COURTNEY. Yes, thank you. Uh, this might sound weird, but can you get me some children's menus and crayons, please?

HOST. Sure!

COURTNEY. Thank you so much. Again.

HOST. Not a problem!

*(The HOST return to their HOST stand to get the menus and crayons. COURTNEY's stomach rumbles again.)*

COURTNEY. Ugh. Maybe I'll see if they have garlic bread.

*(The HOST sets the menus and crayons in front of COURTNEY and leaves again.)*

COURTNEY. Ooh, yay. Alright, do I want to play tic-tac-toe against myself, go through the maze in point two seconds, solve the word scrambles, or color in the pretty zoo animals? I think...I'll do the maze. Let's see...

*(She begins to draw on the children's menus. Time passes, and eventually COURTNEY completes all the activities on all the menus she was given. Her stomach rumbles.)*

COURTNEY. Man, I need some mother-effing food.

*(She looks around for the WAITRESS, and notices that every table seated after her already has their food and drinks. The WAITRESS appears.)*

COURTNEY. Hey! *(Mumbling:)* What's her--never mind. Waitress!

*(The WAITRESS comes over.)*

WAITRESS. Is there a problem?

COURTNEY. Hi. Yes. I don't have my food yet, and it seems like everyone else does. I've been waiting for a long time.

WAITRESS. Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. Do you want a dessert? On the house?

COURTNEY. Yeah, that sounds great! But I still want my food.

WAITRESS. Sure. Yes. Absolutely. Let me check to see where they are on your order. I'll be right back.

COURTNEY. Great.

*(The WAITRESS exits to check on the food.)*

COURTNEY. I bet myself five dollars that I have to wait another ten minutes.

*(The WAITRESS enters with COURTNEY's order and a glass of water, and sets the plate down on the table.)*

COURTNEY. Wow. Quick.

WAITRESS. There you go! Again, I am so sorry for the wait. Enjoy the food!

COURTNEY. Thanks, I'm sure I--I'm sure I will. Thanks.

WAITRESS. Let me know if you need anything else!

COURTNEY. Yep.

*(The WAITRESS leaves COURTNEY to eat her food. COURTNEY cuts off a piece of her tofu steak and takes a bite. She chews for a few seconds before she spits her food out and realizes that...)*

COURTNEY. Oh! God! That is not tofu! That is not tofu! Is that meat? God!

*(She takes a sip of water and immediately spits that out again, as well.)*

COURTNEY. And that's seltzer again! Seltzer! Again! What the--God!

*(COURTNEY spots the WAITRESS and waves her*

*over.)*

WAITRESS. Yes?

COURTNEY. I ordered *tofu steak* and *water* .

WAITRESS. Is that not what you received?

COURTNEY. No. What is currently on my table is regular steak and seltzer.

WAITRESS. Oh no! That's so embarrassing! I--

*(The HOST seats a couple at the last table, and the WAITRESS glances over at them.)*

WAITRESS. One moment!

*(The WAITRESS jogs over to the fourth table to take their order.)*

COURTNEY. Wha--I--What? Did that--I mean--What?

*(The WAITRESS leaves COUPLE #4's table and exits to get them their drinks. COURTNEY stands.)*

COURTNEY. Is she serious? Did she--did she just leave to get someone else's order while I'm *starving*? Oh my god! Oh my god!  
Ugh. I just--*God!*

*(The WAITRESS enters with two drinks, and COURTNEY recovers herself and attempts to calm down. The WAITRESS gives the couple their drinks, takes their food order and comes back over to COURTNEY.)*

WAITRESS. Where was I?

COURTNEY. Do you know who Tantalus is?

WAITRESS. Sorry?

COURTNEY. Do you...know...who Tantalus is?

WAITRESS. I don't understand.

COURTNEY. Tantalus is a dude from Greek mythology. He ended up in the Underworld because--well, I forgot how he ended up there--anyways, his torture is...Basically, he was sentenced to a lifetime--or deathtime, maybe...?--of starvation and dehydration. He stood in a pool of water that he couldn't drink from, and was within reach of a fruit tree he couldn't eat from. That's who I feel like right now. I feel like Tantalus. Do you know why?

WAITRESS. I--

COURTNEY. I feel like Tantalus because I have been in this restaurant for--for *so long*--and I have been given seltzer I didn't

ask for, and *regular steak* I didn't order. How do you think that makes me feel?

WAITRESS. Do you...want two free desserts? I can--

COURTNEY. No! God, no. Enough with the desserts. I just want food and water I can actually consume.

WAITRESS. Okay.

COURTNEY. Are you going to go get my order redone? Are you going to do that?

WAITRESS. Yes.

COURTNEY. Are you sure?

WAITRESS. Yes.

COURTNEY. Good. Now go.

WAITRESS. Okay.

*(The WAITRESS exits, and COURTNEY puts her head in her hands, sighing. DEVON sits.)*

DEVON. Sucks, doesn't it?

COURTNEY. Jesus! Where did you come from?

DEVON. The big bang. *(They wink.)*

COURTNEY. I--alright. No. What do you want? Is my torture over yet?

DEVON. Over? *(They scoff.)* Not even close. You literally died after *purposefully* spilling an annoying customer's drink, slipping, and splitting your head on the concrete floor of the restaurant. I just came cuz it's fun to see you suffer. Well, fun for me.

COURTNEY. I hate you.

DEVON. Aw, thank you! I'd stay longer, but I have to go. There's so much more paperwork involved with this job than I'd like there to be. Bye!

*(As DEVON makes for the door, they slightly pull out an empty chair from the nearest table.*

*COURTNEY puts her head back in her hands.)*

COURTNEY. I wish I wasn't dead so I could kill myself.

*(The WAITRESS enters with COUPLE #4's food. As she's crossing behind COURTNEY, she trips over the chair that DEVON moved, and spills the food on COURTNEY. The WAITRESS moves right as COURTNEY stands up.)*

COURTNEY. Ah! What--What did you just do? What is *on* me?

WAITRESS. Oh! I am *so* sorry ma'am, that was a complete accident, I didn't see the chair there, and--

COURTNEY. Napkins. I need napkins.

WAITRESS. I--

COURTNEY. Go!

*(The WAITRESS exits to get some napkins, and the couple whose food was spilled comes over to COURTNEY. When speaking, they will be CUSTOMER #7 and CUSTOMER #8.)*

CUSTOMER #7. Ma'am, that wasn't very polite of you.

COURTNEY. What?

CUSTOMER #8. The way you yelled at that poor waitress. You should apologize when she comes back.

COURTNEY. Are you saying *I* need to apologize because *she* spilled your food on me?

CUSTOMER #7. That would be the right thing to do.

CUSTOMER #8. It really would. Also, I believe you should pay for our food if you *really* want to make things right.

COURTNEY. You--You want me to pay for *your* food that *I* didn't make the waitress spill. Is that what you're asking me to do?

CUSTOMER #8. It's only fair.

COURTNEY. I--Um, no. No. Absolutely *not*. What would be *fair* and *right* is if I had gotten my food before *all* of you because I got here *first*. I don't need this. I don't need strangers telling me what to do.

*(More customers come over to COURTNEY's table, and a big, loud argument ensues.)*

*(Blackout.)*

## SCENE FOUR: ALT+Q

*(The lights come up on the conference room that everyone started in. At the SR door is RALPH and NATALIE, while at the SL door is HELEN, DREW, and CODY. DEVON stands between them.)*

DEVON. Alright. Ralph, Helen, and Drew, you're up next. Who's excited?

*(DEVON glances at the three of them. None are amused. DEVON claps.)*

DEVON. Great. We love the energy. Okay, Ralph, you constantly skipped classes in college, therefore making your classmates' and professors' lives unbelievably harder, and wasting your parents' hard-earned money. Open the door. *(He does.)*

DEVON. Helen and Drew, well, we saw your behavior earlier. Your behavior is atrocious, and I'm surprised you died the way you did, because someone probably should've killed you before now.

Open your door--without saying a word, I might add. *(They do.)*

DEVON. You may now enter.

*(They all step through their respective doors. When RALPH steps through his door, he finds himself in a college dorm bedroom. In the bedroom are two doors - one door SL and one door SR, a bed, a nightstand, a desk w/ chair, and a laptop. RALPH looks around, and eyes the laptop. Not only is it already powered on with the app Zoom pulled up, but there's a slip of paper on the keyboard.)*

RALPH. What...

*(He sits down at the desk and picks up the slip of paper.)*

RALPH. Meeting ID and password...?

*(He glances at the laptop.)*

RALPH. Am I supposed to join a call?

*(He hits the "Join" button on Zoom and types in the meeting ID and password, then "Submit." The screen loads for a second before the call comes up. On the call are nineteen students and a professor, DR. TURNER.)*

RALPH. Hello?

DR. TURNER. Mr. Lewis, nice of you to finally show up. Just so you know, you have been dropped a letter grade for being tardy.

RALPH. Excuse me?

DR. TURNER. I don't need your attitude today, Mr. Lewis. Accept responsibility for your mistake, and move on.

RALPH. I think I'm in the wrong place...

DR. TURNER. You're not. Don't go anywhere, or I will drop you another letter grade.

RALPH. Okay, that settles it. I'm leaving.

*(He clicks on the "Leave Meeting" button and nothing happens.)*

RALPH. Hm, it's not working...What's the shortcut to leave?...

Right! Alt+Q.

*(He hits "Alt+Q" on the keyboard, and still nothing happens.)*

RALPH. Damn.

DR. TURNER. Mr. Lewis, please do not swear during class. I would like to keep a professional environment during my lectures.

RALPH. Maybe I can leave the room itself?

DR. TURNER. I would advise against that.

*(RALPH stands and tries to open the door he entered through, but it's locked. He moves to the other door--the bathroom door--and attempts to open it as well, but it's also locked.)*

RALPH. No, no, no, no, no.

DR. TURNER. Ralph--Mr. Lewis--come back to the Zoom call immediately. You're disrupting class, and being an overall nuisance.

RALPH. Good, because once I do this, you won't have to deal with me any longer.

DR. TURNER. Do what?

*(RALPH closes the laptop, and smiles at his accomplishment. However:)*

DR. TURNER. Mr. Lewis, you are not out of the meeting just because we can't see your face. Open your laptop again, and join us.

RALPH. How--How is that even possible? Seriously? How?

DR. TURNER. If you don't show us your face within the next five seconds, I will assign you ten extra reading pages for homework.

Five...four...three...two...

RALPH. Ah, shit.

*(He opens the laptop again.)*

DR. TURNER. One. Ah, I see you made the right decision. Although, because you did swear after I explicitly told you not to, you're getting the ten extra reading pages. Actions do have consequences.

RALPH. I--Fine. Fine. Whatever. Go back to your lecture.

DR. TURNER. Five more pages of reading because of the attitude.

*(RALPH opens his mouth to speak.)*

DR. TURNER. I suggest you think about what you're going to say before the words leave your mouth.

*(RALPH hesitates before sighing and closing his mouth.)*

DR. TURNER. Good. I'm glad you came to your senses. Now, class, I apologize for the interruption. Where was I?...Ah, yes--

RALPH. Wait. Sorry. I'm sorry. What--What class is this? Like, what are you teaching? What is this?

DR. TURNER. I do hope you're joking, Mr. Lewis.

RALPH. I am not.

DR. TURNER. Alright, I need a break. Class, I'm going to put you in your breakout rooms so you can discuss your projects.

*(DR. TURNER hits a button, and all of a sudden, RALPH is in a group with three other students: SAWYER, HAILEY, and JAZ.)*

SAWYER. Hey, guys! So, uh, let's get started. Has everyone done their part of the project?

HAILEY. I did mine! My work is on the Google Drive.

JAZ. Same.

SAWYER. Great! Ralph, what about you?

RALPH. ... "What about me" what?

SAWYER. Did you do your part of the project?

RALPH. Do you want my honest answer or the answer you want to hear?

SAWYER. The answer I want to hear is your honest answer.

RALPH. Ah--Okay. Um, no, I did not do my part of the project. That...is...my answer.

HAILEY. Seriously, Ralph? It's due in the dropbox in five minutes.

RALPH. Look, I don't even know what this project *is* . I joined this class--I don't know what the class is about--two seconds ago! I have *zero* idea what's going on.

JAZ. Ralph, I don't know what kind of prank you're playing, but we're not bailing you out this time.

RALPH. "This time?" What does that mean, "this time?" I have never met any of you before now.

JAZ. Whatever, Ralph. We're just going to ask Dr. Turner to grade us individually instead of as a group.

HAILEY. Good idea, Jaz.

SAWYER. Yeah, I think that would be best. That way we don't suffer because you didn't do the work.

RALPH. That's not very good sportsmanship.

HAILEY. Sportsmanship is when someone tackles you in a football game but you still shake their hand and say, "Good game." It's not when you're lazy and forgetful but still get graded the same as everyone else. We all just want As in the class.

JAZ. What she said.

SAWYER. Alright, so it's decided? Ralph gets left out?

HAILEY/JAZ. Agreed.

SAWYER. Cool. I'll go ahead and finish putting everything together real quick...and...done!

Okay, I'm putting it in the dropbox.

HAILEY. I'm emailing Dr. Turner about changing our grade for the project.

SAWYER. Everything is good to go now.

HAILEY. Email sent!

JAZ. Good work, everyone! Except Ralph, obviously. Oh, I think we're about to be taken out of the breakout rooms.

*(Suddenly, the whole class is on the call again.)*

DR. TURNER. Alright, everyone, how did the last group meeting go? I'm getting the email notifications that everyone submitted their projects, so I'm guessing everything went well. Would anyone like to share with the class how their group work went? How the work was split, how everyone kept in touch?

*(After a few moments of silence, DR. TURNER sighs.)*

DR. TURNER. I guess I'll randomly choose a student, then. Let's see...

*(His computer makes a notification sound.)*

DR. TURNER. What do we have here? Ah, it looks like I won't have to choose someone to share since I just received an email from Ms. Floyd.

RALPH. Who--

DR. TURNER. Mr. Lewis, would you like to read the email for the class?

RALPH. Why me?

DR. TURNER. Well, it's about *you*. Here, let me share my screen.

*(DR. TURNER's screen appears, the email pulled up.)*

DR. TURNER. Go ahead.

RALPH. I--Okay. Sure *(Reading:)* "Dr. Turner, While discussing our project, it has come to our attention that Ralph Lewis did not do his share of the work. As the rest of us worked hard for a good grade, we were wondering if you could grade us individually rather than as a group. This would be much appreciated, since we don't want our grades to drop because of another student's irresponsibility. Thanks, Hailey Floyd."

DR. TURNER. Do you have anything you'd like to say in response, Mr. Lewis?

RALPH. No. No, I don't. Because...

DR. TURNER. Because...what?

RALPH. Because this is *bullshit*.

DR. TURNER. I beg your pardon?

RALPH. Good! Beg! This is absolutely ridiculous. *Ridiculous*. I have been here for maybe five minutes? Just over five minutes?

And you have embarrassed me at least that many times since.

What...is your *problem*? Who hurt you to make you the stone-cold son-of-a-bitch that you are? When I was alive, none of my professors were as shitty as you have been so far! And that was when I actually *could* skip. What do you say to that? Are you going to assign me more work? Are you going to give me a lecture on manners, or both? Please, enlighten me.

(DR. TURNER stares at him, deep in thought. After a moment, he answers.)

DR. TURNER. I think...due to the magnitude of how you decided to express yourself just now...I'm not going to punish you.

RALPH. What?

DR. TURNER. You heard me, Mr. Lewis. I'm not going to punish you.

RALPH. Why not?

DR. TURNER. I'm going to punish the entire class, instead.

RALPH. What does that mean?

DR. TURNER. It means this: Class, effective immediately, all of you are receiving failing grades on the projects you submitted just now. If you have something to say on the matter, please direct your comments to Mr. Lewis in the chat box.

(Immediately, messages begin flooding RALPH's chat box.)

DR. TURNER. Do you see what you have done, Mr. Lewis? As I stated earlier, actions do have consequences. This is the consequence for your actions. You yelled at your professor, swore multiple times, and didn't do your work. Now you have to face multiple angry classmates. Is this what you wanted?

RALPH. Unbelievable. *Unbelievable*. What university is this.

What's the school's website? I'm going to file a complaint against you *immediately*.

DR. TURNER. Really? Good luck with that, sir.

RALPH. I'm serious. What's the name of this school?

DR. TURNER. If you have forgotten the name of the university you attend, you are the one at fault. You know, I think what you should be doing is responding to all those angry messages.

RALPH. No, you know what? No. (*To everyone:*) Guys, you should not be mad at me! I am not the one who gave you all failing grades, Dr. Turner is! Spam *his* chat box. I got here less than ten minutes ago, you all don't even know me! This is completely unwarranted.

DR. TURNER. I have an idea.

RALPH. What now?

DR. TURNER. Class, while I am still failing all your projects, I'm going to do you a favor, as well. All of you are free to leave class.

early.

RALPH. ...Including me, hopefully?

DR. TURNER. You wish. No, Mr. Lewis, you will be staying on the call. As for the rest of you, I will see you tomorrow at noon sharp.

*(Everyone logs off except for RALPH and DR. TURNER.)*

RALPH. Why did you do that?

DR. TURNER. You seem abundantly unaware that you have crossed multiple lines. Now get out your textbook.

RALPH. My textbook? I don't have a textbook. I still have no clue what this class even is.

DR. TURNER. *(Sighing.)* Of course you don't. Fine. Instead of doing what I had in mind for you, you're going to write an essay.

RALPH. *(Sarcastically.)* Oh, excellent. What kind?

DR. TURNER. MLA style, twenty pages--

RALPH. *Twenty pages?*

DR. TURNER. Yes. Don't cut me off. This is going to be your prompt: "Name every single element on the periodic table and explain what each of them can be used for." I am going to sit here and watch you do it. You're going to type the essay in the chat box. You can start right now.

And no, there is no way out of this assignment. If you try and leave, I'll have you expelled.

*(The lights fade out as RALPH shakes his head and starts to write the essay.)*

**SCENE FIVE: STREET PARKING**

*(As soon as HELEN and DREW step out of the conference room, they find themselves inside a moving car, with HELEN in the driver's seat and DREW in the passenger seat. The car itself is being driven on a street with other cars lined up in parallel parking spots, that in turn, are parked in front of houses of all different colors. It is extremely sunny outside. Another thing: there is a second car behind the couple.)*

HELEN. Lord! How did we get in here?

DREW. Keep your hands on the wheel, darlin'!

HELEN. What's happened, dear, why's our torture inside a car?

DREW. I'm not sure, Helen. Let's find a parking spot and pull over so we can explore.

HELEN. I don't see any parking around here...

DREW. I'm sure we'll find parking *somewhere*.

HELEN. I hope so, Drew.

*(They drive in silence for a few minutes.)*

HELEN. Drew, could you please turn the radio on?

DREW. Are there radio stations in...H-E-double hockey sticks?

HELEN. Are you five years old, Drew? Spell it out like a normal person.

DREW. Alright, alright. Are there radio stations in H-E-L-L?

HELEN. I'm not sure, just turn it on and see.

DREW. Fine.

*(DREW turns on the radio and modern pop music blasts from the speakers.)*

HELEN. Jesus, Drew, turn that down!

DREW. I got it, I got it!

*(He adjusts the volume until it's no longer migraine-inducing.)*

DREW. Is that better, dear?

HELEN. Yes. Just change the station. This music is garbage.

DREW. Agreed. Let's see what else is on...

*(He changes the radio station and heavy metal rock plays.)*

HELEN. Oh good God, this is even worse. Can't you do anything right?

DREW. Don't get your panties in a twist, Helen. I'll change it again.

*(He tries to change the station again, but the same pop music as before plays.)*

HELEN. What did I just say? Do you ever listen to me?

DREW. Will you shut up for a second?

HELEN. Do you want me to crash this car, Drew? I'll do it. Right now.

DREW. Whatever.

*(He makes a fourth attempt to change the radio station, but the heavy metal rock plays.)*

HELEN. Drew, I swear to the Lord himself, I'm going to bash your head in if you don't find some different music!

DREW. I wouldn't have to change the radio station if you'd find an empty parking spot!

HELEN. There are *zero* empty parking spots! Don't yell at me.

DREW. I ain't yellin'! Stop raising your damn voice.

HELEN. I'm not!

DREW. You are!

HELEN. Let's just sit in silence, dammit!

*(They don't speak as HELEN continues driving down the street. After some time:)*

DREW. Are there any traffic lights 'round here? We haven't stopped once.

*(HELEN ignores him.)*

DREW. This is boring.

*(HELEN continues to ignore him.)*

DREW. I wonder--

HELEN. What, Drew? You wonder what? Why are you talkin'?

DREW. *(Screaming.)* Woman, what is your problem with me today?

HELEN. I don't! I just--I don't.

DREW. Really? Sure seems like you do. Out with it.

HELEN. No.

DREW. Helen--

HELEN. I said *No!* Stop pressurin' me!

DREW. If we're going to be in this car forever, you're going to have to *communicate*! Can you do that, Helen? Can you communicate with me?

HELEN. (*Mumbling.*) Fine.

DREW. What'd you say?

HELEN. I. Said. *Fine!* I'll talk. I don't mean to be short with you, but--we're in H-E--we're in *Hell* for God's sake! Who'd ever think we'd end up here? We did our part to be good Christians.

Went to church every Sunday. Went 'round the neighborhood tryna convert the Jews and Atheists. I just--I don't know where we went wrong. Do you?

DREW. I don't. I'm just as in the dark as you, Helen.

HELEN. That man who claims to be genderless said our behavior was atrocious. What do you think that meant?

DREW. Not sure.

HELEN. Do you know *anything*?

DREW. Don't start that nonsense.

HELEN. What nonsense?

DREW. Don't start screamin' again.

HELEN. I'm not--Okay. Whatever you say. Do you have a guess at what we did to get here?

DREW. Not a one. Did we not--I don't even want to say this--did we not love Jesus enough?

HELEN. You're crazy! 'Course we loved him enough. If anything, we loved him *too* much.

DREW. Amen.

HELEN. What else could it be? Is it 'cause I got pregnant with Holly before we officially got married, or--

DREW. What?

HELEN. What?

DREW. What did you just say?

HELEN. I asked if it was 'cause I got pregnant with Holly before we got married.

DREW. How would that be possible? We didn't have coitus until after we got married.

HELEN. You must be mistaken, sir, 'cause--Oh.

DREW. Did you do somethin', Helen?

HELEN. Yes. A long time ago.

DREW. Pull over and tell me. I don't wanna be inside a movin' car if I'm going to get mad.

HELEN. I--I can't, there's--

DREW. *Pull over! Now!*

HELEN. I can't, Drew, there are no empty spaces! There hasn't been a single empty spot since we left that damn conference room!

DREW. Then say what needs to be said, lady!

HELEN. I don't want to.

DREW. Tell me.

HELEN. *No!*

DREW. *TELL ME THIS INSTANT!*

HELEN. Screw you, Andrew!

DREW. *NOW!*

HELEN. Fine!

*(HELEN slows the car to a stop. The car behind them honks obnoxiously.)*

DREW. Keep goin'.

HELEN. Are you sure?

DREW. Yeah, I'm sure. Keep going, but tell me what you did.

*(HELEN starts the car and starts driving again.)*

HELEN. I cheated on you.

DREW. You didn't.

HELEN. I did. With Benjamin, one of your groomsmen. The day of our rehearsal dinner. Holly...isn't yours.

DREW. Oh.

HELEN. Yeah. We--We're here 'cause of me. I did this.

DREW. I deserve to be here, too.

HELEN. What? Why you?

DREW. Because I did this.

HELEN. Did wha--

*(DREW strikes her across the face, and HELEN nearly crashes the car but recovers quickly. She looks over at her husband.)*

HELEN. How dare you? How *dare* you! You, my friend, are *awful*. *Awful!*

DREW. Says the woman who not only cheated on me, but lied to me for twenty-three years! You have *no* right to ask me "How

dare you?" How dare *you*!

HELEN. You know what? I'm glad I cheated on you!

DREW. Oh, you're glad?

HELEN. Yes, I'm glad, because I want no child of mine to be associated with the likes of you!

DREW. Too bad, 'cause I was the one who provided the food and money in the house! *I'm* the one who was referred to as her father!

HELEN. And I always considered you as such, too, until this very moment.

DREW. This "very moment" means nothin' now! We're *dead*, Helen. It only matters what we did when we were *alive*.

HELEN. I am acutely aware of that, thank you very much. Thank you for your meaningless, dumbass observations!

DREW. My observations are meaningless? Really? Here's one: You're an ugly, old bat of a woman. You look better with your damn clown makeup on!

HELEN. You bastard! You...you shut your damn mouth. You shut your *damn mouth*, dammit. You look better without all that hair on your back, hands, and feet.

DREW. Pull over. I'm getting out.

HELEN. You moron, haven't you been paying attention? I *cannot* pull over. *Anywhere!*

DREW. Fine with me, I'll just jump out of this car while it's moving.

HELEN. You're going to jump out of this car while it's moving, are you? Good luck with that, Andrew. I sincerely hope you hurt yourself.

DREW. Well I hope that you rot .

*(DREW attempts to open the car door, but it's locked.)*

DREW. It's locked.

HELEN. The door?

DREW. No, Helen, not the door. My penis is locked.

HELEN. Don't sass me, mister! Let me try and unlock it.

*(She tries to unlock the car doors from her side, but fails.)*

HELEN. Nothin's working. Looks like you're stuck here with me. And I'm stuck here with you.

DREW. That's just swell, ain't it?

HELEN. Yeah, swell as can be.

DREW. I don't--If I'm gonna be trapped here with you, I don't want us talkin'.

HELEN. Perfect.

DREW. Perfect.

*(They sit in silence while the heavy metal rock plays. Eventually, DREW looks at HELEN.)*

DREW. Why did you do it? Why were you unfaithful to me?

HELEN. I don't know.

DREW. Helen.

HELEN. Alright, I'll talk.

DREW. Thank you.

HELEN. During our engagement I--I was insecure. I didn't think I deserved to be married to a man as handsome as you. You were just...so good to me throughout the entirety of our relationship up until that point. You bought me presents, picked me up from work when I was too tired to walk, and even cooked for me on some occasions. You were an astounding lover, and I basically considered you to be my best friend. During our rehearsal dinner, I...snapped, I suppose. You'd given so much, but I didn't think I would ever be able to return the favor. Benjamin and I got to talking, and I realized that if you n' I ever split, I'd need a good reason to leave. I mean, who says they're gonna break up with someone because they were treated too good? So I made Benjamin my reason. And...I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry.

DREW. Okay.

HELEN. ...Is that all you have to say to me?

*(DREW doesn't respond.)*

*HELEN. Okay.*

*(They continue driving around the block, no parking spots to be found.)*

DREW. "Hell is other people."

HELEN. What?

DREW. "Hell is other people." It's a quote from a play I read in college. Jean Paul Sarte.

HELEN. What does it mean?

DREW. Exactly how it sounds. People torture other people. You were torturing yourself with insecurity, and now we're torturin' each other. And I don't think we'll ever stop.

HELEN. Don't say that.

DREW. I already did. There's no fixin'...whatever we've become.

HELEN. How can you be so sure, Drew?

DREW. Even if we make amends, I will always be stuck with the knowledge that you cheated.

Always. No going back.

HELEN. Drew--

DREW. Don't. Stop. Just...keep driving. Keep driving until the tires go flat--or, or until the gas runs out, or whichever comes first. If any of them come.

HELEN. Alright.

*(Suddenly, the music stops.)*

DEVON. *(Over the radio:)* Hello, hello, hello! How are the two of you doing on this fine, disgusting day in Hell? So, listen. I know you two think you're here because of all your marital issues, but there's more. To get a better understanding of your presence here, here's a playlist of everything you've ever said to minimum-wage retail workers. Enjoy!

*(As we hear HELEN and DREW screaming obscenities on the radio, the lights fade to black.)*

## SCENE SIX: SICK DAY

*(The lights come up on the conference room. NATALIE, a twenty to thirty-year-old used-to-be mother of three and germaphobe and CODY, a thirty to forty-year-old ex-telemarketer, are the only ones at the doors. DEVON looks bored at their podium.)*

DEVON. You guys know the drill. Enter your rooms.

*(NATALIE and CODY stare at him.)*

CODY. Are...you going to tell us what we did wrong? You did for the others.

DEVON. What, you want me to? Fine. But I have another group coming in in five minutes. They're *all* from Florida. It's gonna be great.

CODY. Okay, boss.

DEVON. "Boss." I like that. I like "boss." I'm gonna make everyone call me that now. Thank you for that.

CODY. Dude--

DEVON. Ah, ah, ah! Not a dude. But yes, you're right, I need to move on. Ah, let's see...Natalie, you prioritized your job over your children, and you suck. Open your door.

*(She does.)*

DEVON. Cody, you used to be a telemarketer. I don't have to elaborate on that. Open your door.

*(He does.)*

DEVON. Great. Now enter your torture chambers.

*(NATALIE and CODY step into their respective doors. When NATALIE enters her "torture chamber" she finds herself in a hospital waiting room. The only door is the one she comes through, but there are ten chairs--of which nine are occupied--and a shielded check-in desk. A nurse is sitting behind the desk.)*

NATALIE. Wha--

*(A few of the patients begin coughing and hacking.)*

NATALIE. Oh. Oh no. Oh *no*. Absolutely not. *Absolutely not*.

*(She begins banging on the door.)*

NATALIE. Get me out! Get me out of here! I refuse to be stuck with--with sick people! I hate sick people! Sick people are--are disgusting, and gross, and I refuse to be stuck with them. Open this

door, you non-binary son of a bitch!

NURSE. Ma'am. Ma'am! Come here. Now.

*(NATALIE turns to look at the nurse, and slowly walks over to the desk.)*

NURSE. Are you on drugs? Is that why you're here?

NATALIE. N-No...

NURSE. Are you sure?

NATALIE. Yes. Yeah, I'm sure. I just--Is there another door in this waiting room?

NURSE. No, why?

NATALIE. Are there any air ducts I can escape through, or--

NURSE. Ma'am--

NATALIE. Because I really don't want to be here and--

NURSE. Ma'am!

NATALIE. Yeah?

NURSE. I suggest you calm down for a minute. What's your name?

NATALIE. Natalie.

NURSE. Natalie what?

NATALIE. Natalie Sweeper.

NURSE. Great. We're getting somewhere. Let me get your files.

NATALIE. My files?

NURSE. Yes. Your files. You made an appointment. So I'm getting your files.

*(The NURSE disappears for a moment and comes back with a manila folder and documents.)*

NURSE. Okay. Here we go. Can I read to you why you're here? Did you forget?

NATALIE. Just read it.

NURSE. Good girl. It says here...that you're healthy.

NATALIE. Oh. Oh! That's good. Great. So does that mean I can leave?

NURSE. Ah--No.

NATALIE. What? Why not?

NURSE. You really don't want to know.

*(NATALIE narrows her eyes, suspicious.)*

NATALIE. Why? Why don't I want to know?

NURSE. You...

NATALIE. Yeah?

NURSE. Are...

NATALIE. What? I'm what?

NURSE. Being quarantined. Two patients have measles, two others have the chicken pox, three patients have walking pneumonia and the ninth patient has this new disease called COVID-19.

They're all extremely contagious.

NATALIE. I--What? Sorry, say that again.

NURSE. You're...being...quarantined...because you're in a room full of sick people.

NATALIE. Hand sanitizer.

NURSE. Pardon?

NATALIE. Hand sanitizer, now. Give me. Give it to me.

NURSE. Mrs. Sweeper, I--

NATALIE. Now!

*(NATALIE rips off the plastic desk shielding and leaps over it to tackle the NURSE. The NURSE blows a whistle repeatedly, and two GUARDS run over and detach NATALIE from the NURSE.)*

NATALIE. Give me some motherfu--

NURSE. Hey! You listen here, little lady. That was uncalled for, and *beyond* unnecessary. I hope you know that if we weren't in quarantine at this moment, I would have a few nurses throw you into solitary confinement at the drop of a dime. Sit down in the waiting room.

NATALIE. I am not sitting down in a room full of awful, gross, disgusting, gross, germ-filled, gross--

NURSE. Sit. Down. Now. I will not repeat myself.

*(The NURSE and NATALIE have somewhat of a staring contest. The NURSE's stare gets so intense that NATALIE finally backs down.)*

NATALIE. Fine. But if I get sick, I'm suing your ass. Not the hospital, just *you*.

NURSE. Oh, really? I would like to see you try, missy.

NATALIE. Suck my toes.

*(NATALIE sits down just as the two patients on either side of her begin coughing and hacking.)*

*NATALIE puts her hands on their heads and turns them so they're both looking at her.)*

NATALIE. See, if you were my children, I would simply put you in time-out for giving me your germs. However, you are not my children, and this is Hell. Therefore, if either of you cough *one* more time, even just *one* more time I will *kill* you. I will kill you dead. Do we have an understanding?

*(They both nod, and NATALIE lets them go.)*

NATALIE. *(Mumbling.)* Morons. *(To the NURSE.)* Hey, nurse, where are the magazines?

NURSE. *(Indifferent.)* There are no magazines.

NATALIE. You're joking.

NURSE. I'm not, actually. We have no magazines.

NATALIE. Wow. That is...that's *ass*. Tell me this: Is there a bathroom in here, at least? Is there a bathroom that I can go into and scream my head off in?

NURSE. No.

NATALIE. Wow. Not even a *bathroom*. That's awful. How am I supposed to go to the bathroom, exactly?

NURSE. You're in Hell, there's no need to go.

NATALIE. What? Where--where's the logic in that? Did my bladder stop working when I died, or something? Like--

NURSE. I'll blow my whistle again if you keep moving that mouth. I'm serious.

*(NATALIE pauses, hesitant to make a move, and stands.)*

NURSE. What are you doing?

*(NATALIE walks up to the desk again. The NURSE pulls out her whistle.)*

NATALIE. I would like to ask you a question. I won't get violent again, just...answer me.

NURSE. Fine. What can I do for you?

NATALIE. If I get sick from one of these idiots, what's going to happen to me?

NURSE. You won't die, obviously, cuz you're already...y'know. However, you will be miserable.

You will become everything you despise and more. You will want to wish you never existed. That's as delicate as I can put it.

NATALIE. That's...Isn't that just the best news? Thank you for answering my question.

NURSE. Not a problem.

NATALIE. Sorry, um...Before I go, is there--are there *any* sources of entertainment in this dungeon?

NURSE. There are not. You can count the stains on the walls and ceiling, though, if you want.

NATALIE. I do not. Thanks, though.

*(NATALIE returns to her seat. The patient to her left has a painful look on their face, and NATALIE looks at them.)*

NATALIE. Go ahead and cough, jackass. Just--

*(The patient explodes into a coughing fit, but they can cough right on NATALIE.)*

NATALIE. --not. On. Me. Hey, what disease does this person have?

NURSE. Measles.

NATALIE. Fantastic. *(Pointing to the patient on her right:)* What about the other one?

NURSE. Uh...Walking pneumonia, I believe.

NATALIE. Awesome.

NURSE. Yep.

NATALIE. Another thing: Is it possible to have more than one disease at once?

NURSE. Yeah. You're special, though. According to the file I *just* received from my boss, you specifically are going to rotate through them one at a time. However, it's a lottery, meaning we don't choose which disease you get first.

NATALIE. That--I--That's--

NURSE. Are you having a seizure?

NATALIE. N--no. I--I'm not. I just, um, what--who--who's in charge?

NURSE. Boss.

NATALIE. Who's your boss?

NURSE. I told you.

NATALIE. No. No, you did not. You said "boss." That doesn't tell me anything.

NURSE. Their name is Boss.

NATALIE. That doesn't make any...Ah. Oh, no, yeah, I see. It's Devon. The dude who stuck me here, right? It's him?

NURSE. Them, and yes.

*(NATALIE returns to the desk.)*

NATALIE. Can you give...them...a message for me?

NURSE. Sure.

NATALIE. Okay, are you ready? To write this down?

NURSE. Yeah, go ahead.

NATALIE. Tell him to--

*(Feedback rings throughout the room. DEVON's voice blasts from the speakers.)*

DEVON. Attention, patients: It appears that all the paperwork filed under your names was misplaced. Please head to the front desk to re-fill out your forms within the next five seconds. If you don't do it immediately, your visit will not be covered by your health insurance.

NATALIE. What--

*(All of a sudden, the nine sick patients, all displaying different symptoms of the four sicknesses mentioned, run up to the desk, spreading their germs all over NATALIE. She starts to scream.)*

NATALIE. No! God, no! Son of a bitch! All of you need to get the f--Get off of me. Men, I am not afraid to kick you in the nuts, and females, I will elbow your boobs so hard! I'm not kidding.

I swear, I am not kidding, I--

*(They all go back to their chairs with their forms in hand, and NATALIE gasps for air. The NURSE hands NATALIE the paperwork.)*

NURSE. Do you still wanna give Devon a message?

NATALIE. No. I don't. I think I'm just going to...go back to my seat and wait for the sickness to settle in.

*(She returns to her chair, and crosses her arms.)*

NATALIE. Did I really put my job before my children? I mean, sure I'd usually go to work events over parent-teacher conferences, and drink with coworkers instead of read them a story before bed, but--I was trying to move up at work. Butter up my manager so I could get promotions. I guess that didn't mean anything in the long run, though. I got so paranoid about getting sick from the kids that

I started to *avoid* them. Yet I'm about to get sick anyways. How ironic.

*(She begins to tear up.)*

NATALIE. What? I may be depressed, but I'm not *sad*. Why--

NURSE. I guess we know which disease found you first.

NATALIE. What? What does that mean?

NURSE. Measles. Watery eyes are a symptom.

NATALIE. I didn't think--

NURSE. That you'd get sick and show symptoms that quickly?

Young lady, these diseases are advanced down here. They'll attack everything you've got as quickly as they can. I suggest that you sit back and succumb to the illnesses.

*(NATALIE proceeds to sneeze five times in a row.)*

NURSE. There's the sneezing. Yeah, there's nothing you can do about it now.

*(NATALIE slowly closes her eyes and slides down in her seat, twisting and groaning pathetically. She struggles to stay awake.)*

NURSE. Strap in your seatbelt. It's going to be a looong ride.

NATALIE. I'm not...I'm not ready.

*(NATALIE's eyes fully close, and the lights fade to black.)*

**SCENE SEVEN: CAR PROBLEMS**

*(When CODY enters the room, he finds himself in a parking garage with three evenly-spaced cars in front of him. The car in the middle is the one he owned when he was alive on Earth. After noticing his car, he turns around to see if there's anyone around. He hesitates before moving to his car.)*

CODY. What do we have here? Why would my torture involve my old car?

*(Suddenly, a cell phone starts ringing. CODY fishes out a phone from his pants pocket.)*

CODY. Hm, I guess we're just jumping right in. *(Into the phone:)* Hello?

*(A very perky woman is on the other line.)*

VOICE. Do you have trouble getting erections?

CODY. I'm sorry, who is this?

VOICE. There comes a time when a man has trouble satisfying his lover in bed! Luckily, I have the perfect solution! Buy Erectiva now! "Don't keep it down, or your lover will frown!" By the way, you should get to work before the boss gets *really* angry. Have a great day! *(They hang up the phone.)*

CODY. What the hell was that? I don't even know--I don't know where I'm going? *(A notification pops up.)*

CODY. Oh. *(Reading the notification:)* Reminder: Go to work. Address: 666 Westbury St. Well, that's convenient. Where are my keys, though...?

*(He searches his other pockets and finds the keys.)*

CODY. Nice.

*(He unlocks the car and climbs into the driver's seat. He then proceeds to turn the key in the ignition. However, the car doesn't start. He tries again, but no luck. CODY gets out of the car.)*

CODY. That's interesting. The battery must be dead.

*(His cell phone rings again. This time, a perky male voice is on the line.)*

VOICE. Do you need a break from your family! Sedate them for a weekend with ComaNow to have the most peaceful weekend possible! Two pills can knock out your most annoying sibling for up to three days! Also, you should get to work before you're fired.

or worse! Smell ya later! *(They hang up.)*

CODY. Damn. Uh, maybe there are jumper cables in the trunk.

*(CODY moves to the trunk and opens it up. Victoriously, he pulls out some jumper cables. He proceeds to pop the hood of the car before realizing.)*

CODY. Oh. I need another car to hook up to, don't I. *(He sighs.)*  
Superb.

*(He closes the hood and throws the jumper cables back into the car.)*

CODY. See, this wouldn't be that bad if they hadn't said, "Fire you *or worse.*" I really don't want to be around to see "or worse." Okay, what can I do, what to do...Car's dead, and I can't revive it. What--

*(All of a sudden, the car auto-locks.)*

CODY. What...No. No.

*(CODY moves to the car door and starts pulling on the door, not succeeding to open it.)*

CODY. Wow. Woow. That's...truly, that's amazing. The car auto-locked with the keys inside. Is there a AAA in Hell? I wouldn't think so. Ah...

*(A woman roughly in her twenties or thirties, FRAN, enters. She's very clearly a businesswoman by the way she's dressed and how she carries herself. She walks over the car on the left of CODY's, and unlocks it. She notices CODY's distress.)*

FRAN. Everything alright, bud?

CODY. No, everythi--Bud? Really? I'm definitely older than you. If anything, I should be--be calling you bud.

FRAN. Yeah, okay. So you need help, or what?

CODY. Yes.

FRAN. Yes...?

CODY. Please. Yes, please.

FRAN. Great. Get the jumper cables out.

CODY. I cannot.

FRAN. Locked out of your car?

CODY. Yeah.

FRAN. I see. Do you need a ride, then? Do you want me to give you a ride? I'm heading to a meeting with a client, but I have some time to spare.

CODY. Actually, that--

(His phone starts ringing for the third time.)

CODY. One second. (*Into the phone:*) Cody Greer, what's up?

VOICE. Are you bored of your red-brown kidneys? Shake things up with Color Me Kidney!

CODY. Wait, what?

VOICE. Take one pill every four days for a month and your kidneys will turn any color from hot pink to charcoal black! All your other organs are sure to be jealous! Also, you better get your ass to work soon or your life will be in danger!

CODY. Look, I'm getting a ride. I'll be there soon, promise. Also, aren't I already dead? How--

(*They hang up.*)

FRAN. That your boss?

CODY. I think so...

FRAN. You think so?

CODY. Yeah, I--You know what, never mind. A ride would actually be great. Thank you.

FRAN. No problem. Get in.

(*They both get into the car, and FRAN starts it. For a moment, the car starts, but the engine sputters out.*)

CODY. Is something wrong?

FRAN. I think--I think I'm out of gas. That's so *weird*. I thought I filled my tank this morning.

CODY. Well, this sucks.

FRAN. No kidding. I need to call my client.

(*She gets out of the car and pulls out her phone. She dials a number, and the phone rings for a moment.*)

FRAN. Hey, Mr. Elkor, I can't meet you anymore. My car's out of gas. Is there any chance you can come to my office so we can still meet? We could also reschedule if you want...No? We can meet in my office? Great, I'll see you soon. Bye. (*She hangs up and sits*

*back in the car.)*

FRAN. Good news.

CODY. For you or for me?

FRAN. For me, duh. My client's coming here, so I'm not in hot water anymore.

CODY. Nice.

FRAN. Yeah.

*(Pause.)*

CODY. Hey, sorry, what's your name?

FRAN. Oh. Um, Fran. Fran Kleinman. You?

CODY. Cody Greer.

FRAN. I'm really sorry I have to say this, but that's the name of a douchebag.

CODY. I'm--I *was*--a telemarketer, so I guess the bill fits.

FRAN. You were a *telemarketer*. That's--that's bad. *Really* bad.

You guys are basically the scum of the earth. Do you know how many of your numbers I have blocked on my phone? I'd have to look it up, because--

*(Suddenly there's a knock on a window. CODY and FRAN jump. FRAN rolls down the window to see a man the same age as them, HOWARD.)*

FRAN. Dude, you scared us. What's your problem?

HOWARD. You guys need help, right? Two people wouldn't be sitting in the same car for more than a minute without going anywhere if they didn't need help.

CODY. Huh. You're smart. Yeah, we do need help. My car's locked with the battery dead, and Fran here? Her car needs gas.

HOWARD. That's not good. Do you want me to break into your car and help you restart it?

CODY. That'd be amazing. What's your name?

HOWARD. Howard! Oh, I also have a gas container in my car, so Fran, I can fill you up.

FRAN. Oh, awesome. Thanks so much.

HOWARD. You're both welcome. Now get out so I can do my thing.

*(CODY and FRAN get out of FRAN's car, and HOWARD goes over to his. He opens the trunk and pulls out a duffel bag. He pulls out a long metal*

*stick that used to be a hanger and an ice-scraper.)*

HOWARD. Let's do this.

*(He raises the ice-scraper to wedge it into the car door, but CODY stops him.)*

CODY. Hi, sorry. Um, I have a question.

HOWARD. Yeah?

CODY. Why...do you...have all this equipment?

FRAN. Follow-up question: Why do you also know how to break into a car?

HOWARD. I do it all the time.

CODY. You...You do know that that makes you sound creepy, right? I--

*(CODY's phone begins to ring. He rolls his eyes and answers.)*

CODY. Yeah?

VOICE. Are you sick of your belly button being rough, smelly, and gross? Try *Smelly Button No More!* This new ointment will give you a nice, smooth, pina colada-smelling belly button inside! You've never seen the inside of a belly button be so clean! Warning: Product may cause sneezing, itching, cravings--have fun with Howard!--internal bleeding, and death!

CODY. I, um...I'm going to go now.

*(He hangs up the phone.)*

HOWARD. Everything good?

CODY. Yeah. Totally. Definitely. One-hundred percent.

HOWARD. Are you sure?

CODY. Mhm.

*(FRAN pulls CODY aside.)*

FRAN. You're acting weird. What's the problem?

CODY. I'm pretty sure my manager is secretly a mob boss or something.

FRAN. Okay.

CODY. And because I'm late, he sent someone to--to kill me, maybe?

FRAN. What's the cherry on top?

CODY. That someone is Howard. I'm pretty sure Howard's a hit-man.

FRAN. Ah.

CODY. So I need to get my car working before Howard sticks that metal thing down my throat or up my butt.

FRAN. Are you into...?

CODY. No. Stop. Don't finish that sentence. Let's just...get out of here.

FRAN. Yeah, sounds good.

HOWARD. Are you guys doing alright?

CODY. We are--We're perfect. Thanks for asking! Also, um, you don't have to restart our cars anymore.

HOWARD. Oh? How come?

CODY. We--

FRAN. We're going to go to my office and wait for a mechanic.

CODY. What she said.

HOWARD. A mechanic could take hours! I could do it in minutes right now.

FRAN. Really, we're fine.

*(Growing suspicious, HOWARD takes a step towards them. Skittish, they back up.)*

HOWARD. Are you two scared of something? What has you so jumpy?

CODY. *(Clearly lying.)* Um...I learned not to trust people at a young age because my parents abandoned me.

FRAN. So did mine...?

*(Suddenly, two phones ring: FRAN and HOWARD's. They lock eyes and answer.)*

FRAN. Hello?

*(Because of CODY's closeness to FRAN, he can hear the conversation. On the lines is a deep, distorted, angry voice.)*

VOICE. Have you done it yet?

HOWARD. No, sir--

FRAN. Howard, shut up!

VOICE. Did Howard say *no*?

FRAN. No! No, he said "noser." Like "brown-noser." He was asking me what it means after I called him one.

VOICE. Francine, if you're going to lie to me, do it with more subtlety. Now, both of you are on thin ice. Bring him to me *soon*.

He let me down and he needs to learn what that means in the tele-marketing business. Don't be like him. Got it?

FRAN/HOWARD. Yes, sir.

VOICE. Bye.

FRAN/HOWARD. Bye.

*(They hang up their phones to find that, throughout the call, CODY has backed away from the both of them. His face is as white as a sheet.)*

CODY. *(Nervously.)* So, Fran, what was that call about?

FRAN. Nothing.

CODY. Howard?

HOWARD. Nothing.

CODY. Really? Because--

FRAN. Cody, don't make this harder than it needs to be. Let's just let Howard fix our cars so--

CODY. No. No. You know I'm not stupid, right? You were just saying you didn't trust him!

FRAN. That was before our covers were so obviously blown.

*(Out of nowhere, HOWARD grabs CODY from behind.)*

HOWARD. Ideally, we wanted this to be a slow burn, but this works too.

CODY. Let go of me!

HOWARD. Pass. Fran, start the car. The car problems and paranoia were fun, but it's time for the real stuff. *(CODY is tossed into the trunk and shut in.)* Let's do this.

*(HOWARD hops into the passenger seat, and FRAN starts the car.)*

*(Blackout.)*

## SCENE EIGHT: FINALE

*(The lights come up on the conference room. DEVON, bored, is playing on a smartphone at their podium. Unlike before, though, they're wearing a headset. The headset beeps, and DEVON clicks a button.)*

DEVON. Their tortures are all secured? Great. Send in the next group.

*(A group of six people wearing exactly what the last group wore walks into the conference room. They all sit down.)*

DEVON. Welcome, welcome! A couple things I ask of you: No talking over me, no talking without permission, no--Well, really, I just don't want you guys talking at all. The only sounds I want coming out of your mouths are the cries of agony and the screams of misery from when you're being tortured. How does that sound to everyone? *(No one answers.)*

DEVON. Excellent. You all passed my test. Had one of you failed, I would've sent you straight into a pit of lava! Anyways, here's what's gonna happen:

*(As DEVON begins ad-libbing their speech, the lights fade to black. End of show.)*



# FORMAL ESSAYS

## FIRST PLACE

### “Less Equal Than Could Be Wished:” Austen Versus the World

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Jane Austen’s novels invariably end in felicitous marriages that fall into place with almost mechanical ease, creating a sense of a sealed narrative world with a fixed, definite ending. However, Austen’s authorial voice, even if it lies dormant for the majority of the novel, often emerges in these final chapters, as if to draw the curtain shut. This manifestation of Austen within the text and her express guidance of our attention point to endings that are thematically or morally less sealed than they might on the surface appear. In taking care to mediate her readers’ transition from the world of her novel and back to actuality, Austen reveals that she expects the ramifications of her work to extend far beyond the seeming permanence of her happy endings.

In a 1972 paper, Joseph Kestner III posits that Austen’s “I” persona is a three-pronged instrument, consisting of her voice *in propria persona*, which appears rarely and is concerned primarily with the world beyond her novels, her voice *in auctoris persona*, which concerns itself with self-aware manipulation of the plot and moral addresses to the audience, and her voice *in propria persona et in auctoris persona*, in which she invokes the reality of the outside world to support the reality of her novel (6, 7). He argues that Austen uses these three modes of voice to bring the disparate elements of plot and reality into a unified whole. What Kestner fails to note is that nearly every instance of these voices occurs within the final acts of the novel. Save for *Northanger Abbey*, in which the narrator’s voice is prominent throughout, Austen’s

interventions into her own text consistently appear only as it ends, with moments such as “My Fanny” (Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 428) and “I wish I could say for the sake of [Mrs. Bennet’s] family...” taking place in the last chapter of their respective books (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 263). It appears then, that Austen feels it most incumbent upon herself to take a direct role in her reader’s understanding of the novel as it draws to a close.

Lloyd W. Brown makes the case that the conclusions of Austen’s novels are essentially parodic, undercutting the literary notion of a happy ending even as they bring one into being. By drawing implicit parallels between her own work, and, as Brown calls it, “inferior fiction,” she frames fiction as subordinate to reality and uses her conclusion to summarize the moral themes of her work, emphasizing the realistic, rather than just, endings that many of her characters receive (1582). Brown cites the comparatively comfortable lives of Lucy Steele and Mr. Willoughby as evidence of Austen taking a satirical approach to poetic justice, allowing the events to take a course dictated by reality rather than morality (1584). However, just as Kestner neglects the role of the novel’s conclusion in his analysis of Austen’s “I” persona, Brown fails to examine the role of Austen’s voice in creating the satirical jabs that he finds to be the hallmark of her happy endings. Both scholars, however, home in on the fact that Austen’s endings and her “I” persona both devote themselves to mediating the gap between the world of the novel and the world of the reader, either by arming the reader with morals to apply to their own life upon the conclusion of the book or by highlighting the ways in which the book itself springs from the conflict between life and genre convention.

Perhaps the clearest starting point for an examination of Jane Austen’s mediation of the literary and the mundane is the conclusion of *Northanger Abbey*, her most explicitly satirical and self-referential novel and also her first, which lays out some tacit structural rules that continue to govern narratives across her opus. As she drives her protagonists toward “perfect felicity,” Austen takes a moment to use her “I” persona *in propria persona et in auctoris persona*, the form most oriented toward bridging the gap between the fictional world of her novel and actuality (211). After observing that Henry Tilney’s affection for Catherine has arisen

largely from his knowledge of her preference for him, Austen writes, “It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine’s dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own” (205). Austen executes a complicated dance between genre and actuality in this sentence, drawing parallels back to Catherine Morland’s own blurring of the literary with her experiences. The adjective “new” provides the hinge of this contrast, and we know that Austen’s portrayal of the relationship was, indeed, “a new circumstance in romance,” as it was considered “dreadfully derogatory of an heroine’s dignity” (note the overwrought, facetious alliteration) for a woman to express love before a man (205). However, Austen then flips the sentence from the world of genre to actuality, challenging the reader to wonder if the circumstance is “as new in common life,” using the authentic, life-like quality of her literature to force the reader to contemplate the strictures of their own world (205). This second half of the sentence turns the audience outward, urging them to contemplate their own experience and consider whether the source of Henry’s love is rooted in realism or Austen’s “wild imagination” (205). Austen’s wry tone leaves us in no doubt that she expects the audience to find the former, which suggests that while her conclusion is “new” in fiction, the norms governing that fiction have no basis in reality and are unjust expectations for the behavior of actual women (205). We thus see Austen, underneath her message entreating readers not to mimic Catherine’s folly and take novels too seriously, using her own work of fiction to nudge the reader toward applying that work as an interpretive lens, just as Catherine does with her Gothic literature.

However, Austen does not use her narrative voice solely to turn her readers out into the real world but also to extend the sense of community between narrator, reader, and character that marks much of her fiction. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen observes that “The marriage of Eleanor Tilney... is an event which I expect to give general satisfaction among all her acquaintance. My own joy on the occasion is very sincere” (211). As the novel closes, Austen lets her readers into the joke that is her twofold joy. As the author, she has full control over Eleanor’s happy marriage, making her declaration rather tongue-in-cheek, and yet, as Kestner observes,

Austen's characters sustained a "perpetual living quality... for her, long after the reader's gratification had been terminated" (7). Austen's joy truly *is* sincere. Indeed, like her protagonist Emma, she may hold some pride in having arranged the match herself. In framing the audience as Eleanor's "acquaintance," she presents her characters as part of a social unit which also includes both herself, as the maker of introductions, and the reader (*Northanger Abbey*, 211). However, I take issue with Kestner's assumption that Austen intended for the "perpetual living quality" of her characters to be for herself alone (7). Rather, it seems likely, given her fiction's preoccupation with the relationship between story and reality, that Austen is striving to prevent the "reader's gratification" from being harshly "terminated" after the turn of the final page (Kestner 7). Indeed, we see that Austen's creation of a social circle through her narrative voice is not a phenomenon confined to the satirical *Northanger Abbey*.

In the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen observes of Mrs. Bennet, "I wish I could say, for the sake of her family" that happiness had reformed her character for the better (263). Again, she frames herself as an interlocutor, relaying to the reader the circumstances of their now beloved acquaintances, hinting at lives that will continue to unfold beyond the page, all while giving those lives such an appearance of happiness as to leave the reader content. Indeed, the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* functions almost as a letter from a mutual friend, allotting one paragraph each to the new conditions of the characters. In essence, Austen steps forward at the end of her novels to formalize the social circle that she has spent hundreds of pages bringing into being. Thus, she seems to create a tacit agreement with the reader that the acquaintance should continue, turning the characters loose, in a sense, and allowing the reader to carry on a correspondence with them, to resist the "termination" of the novel's influence in their lives (Kestner 7).

However, even as Austen works to further the reader's connection with the characters beyond the book, she also throws into even sharper relief the fact that these new acquaintances are the product of her pen and imagination alone.

*Mansfield Park* contains the most striking example of this version of Austen's voice, its final chapter beginning,

“Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.

My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing” (428).

There is much to unpack in these three sentences, all of it shedding light upon Austen's attitude toward both her characters and reader. The notion of “other pens” at first continues the implicit correspondent metaphor begun in *Pride and Prejudice* but also presents one of the only occasions on which Austen draws attention to the physical act of writing, allowing the reader to, almost literally, see her hand at work in the every event that follows (*Mansfield Park*, 428). While her tone is still that of a tired correspondent, she also reveals an omnipotence that she has left largely concealed since *Northanger Abbey*. Her emotions, namely “impatience,” wield great power over the ultimate fates of the characters as she either “restore[s]” or “ha[s] done” with them (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 428). As with the marriage of Eleanor Tilney, Austen claims a winking “satisfaction” in Fanny's joy, even as she speaks it into being (*Mansfield Park* 428). In drawing this subtle parallel between her most somber novel and her most satirical one, Austen reveals that the same principles that created the latter are still at work in the former and that while her literary sleight of hand and its tendency toward happy resolution have remained concealed in this book, they have been active the entire time.

Further, this is one of the only instances in which Austen, speaking as the creator of the narrative, puts forth a moral stance, her goal to “restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves,

to tolerable comfort” (*Mansfield Park* 428). The question then logically arises: what actions, for Austen, move a character out of the ranks of those “not greatly in fault,” and what can they tell us about her outlook on morality (*Mansfield Park* 428)? As Brown observes, the endings of Austen’s novels, and their requisite distribution of the characters’ ultimate fates, allows for an opportunity to gain insight into Austen’s morality, specifically, which actions deserve to be punished, which actions society *will* punish, and the frequent disparity between the two, thus allowing for a tacit critique of society and a gentle mockery of the concept of poetic justice (1587). Perhaps one of the most illuminating phrases in Austen’s work is her expression of a desire to “have done” with the wrongdoers (*Mansfield Park* 428). Her interest is not in the punishment of the guilty, but in the results that would ensue were she to remove her authorial power over them and fling them out into the world. With the phrase “have done,” she implies that the characters who are “greatly in fault” are not her responsibility, but the world’s and, in the case of *Mansfield Park*, she then goes on to assess how well society bears that responsibility (428).

The most telling aspect of that assessment arrives when Austen reveals the ultimate fate of Henry Crawford and observes “That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend *his* share of the offence, is, we know, not one of the barriers, which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished” (*Mansfield Park* 435). Kestner seems to panic while reviewing this pronouncement, hastening to clarify that we must not read Austen as being a “prude” in this appearance *in propria persona*, and then bypassing it altogether (9). This outburst is, in fact quite the reverse of what Kestner fears it to be. It acts as an appeal to actuality not unlike the one we see justifying Catherine’s clear attraction to Henry Tilney, and serves, in fact, a similar function. It urges the reader to search their own experience of the world and draw a conclusion that, once again, indicts society for its unequal punishment of the desires of men and women. The lens that Austen tacitly encourages her reader to cultivate at the end of *Northanger Abbey* now takes on an even sharper focus. These moments

of comparison between morality, actuality, and genre encourage us not only to examine our books for places in which they fail to adhere to the plausible but also to turn this look of scrutiny to our society, to observe the places where our social conventions, like the arbitrary tropes governing our novels, fail to account for observable human behavior. In places where these conventions diverge from people's true experiences, as in Catherine's case, or from the desserts of their conduct, as in Henry Crawford's, Austen intervenes to highlight the injustice, to turn her readers outward and undermine their faith in the unjust principle.

If moments such as these reveal that Austen does feel the world to be unjust, the merited happiness that she extends to all her beloved protagonists must carry its own actuality-defying significance. Austen declaring that she prefers to "have done" with her unsympathetic characters, allowing them either to rise high like the self-interested Lucy Steele or crash into iniquity like Mrs. Rushworth according to the principles of society as she sees it, implies that she still exerts some form of authorial protection over those characters who fall into her good graces (*Mansfield Park* 428). Indeed, in the very next sentence, Austen refers to her protagonist as "My Fanny," (*Mansfield Park* 428) a label that Kestner characterizes as "maternal" (7). Indeed, he notes that while this moment is the only time in her books in which Austen takes such overt charge of a protagonist, her letters contain such effusions as her reference to Elizabeth Bennet as "my own darling child" (Kestner 7). In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen frequently makes reference to Catherine as "my heroine" (212). These moments of possession create a sense of personal attachment and protection between Austen and the characters she has created, and it is in the context of this attachment that we can come to understand the almost clockwork way in which Austen draws her novels to a happy close.

While Austen reveals her machinations most clearly in

bringing *Northanger Abbey* to completion, the parallels she draws are mainly between her own plot and the literary conventions of her time. *Mansfield Park* provides, perhaps, a more fraught and revealing starting point, as Austen's voice appears suddenly in the final chapter, drawing moral conclusions about the world at large and forcibly creating order from the chaos of Mrs. Rushworth's ruin and Edmund's despair. In bringing about the desired union between Edmund and Fanny, Austen declares, "I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire" (*Mansfield Park* 436). Brown reads this final chapter as a parody of a happy ending, designed not to reward Fanny's merits but to balance her idealism against the "defects of reality" which, I note, Austen uses her "I" persona to highlight (1585). To bring about her most difficult happy ending, she expressly appeals to the social bond between herself and her readership, demanding a suspension of disbelief from them while at the same time puncturing it by revealing her hand in the matter. The ending thus becomes something of an inside joke, shared between the author and audience, but unknown to the characters.

Further, Austen asks that we believe the transfer of Edmund's affections take place at the time we believe to be "quite natural," again entreating her audience to consult the outside world and, in this case, layer it into the book, lining it with a realism that she cannot attain alone (*Mansfield Park* 436). This is, incidentally, the exact same technique that Austen uses to smooth over the most troublesome plot point in *Northanger Abbey*, namely, Eleanor Tilney's supremely advantageous marriage. Austen wryly refuses to describe Eleanor's husband, noting that "Any further definition of his merits must be unnecessary; the most charming young man in the world is instantly before the imagination of us all" (212). The subtle difference between the two instances is striking. Although Austen, in both cases, appeals to the manufactured community of her readers in order to fill in an elision that she has deemed necessary, she asks them to fill one with the products of their romantic imaginations and the other with their

genuine opinions about the nature of human emotion. This difference is in keeping with the tones of the two books and their differing concerns with fiction and morality, and they thus create different thematic textures even as they both further happy endings. Austen does not simply find fault between the disparity between the real and the fictional; rather, she uses it to her advantage.

Perhaps, however, the most intriguing facet of this phenomenon in *Mansfield Park* is Austen's motive for going to such pains to create this happy ending, even at the cost of the unyielding realism that has governed the rest of the volume. The sentence ends, "as Fanny herself could desire," and here we see the driving force behind Austen's happy endings: the desires of women (*Mansfield Park* 436). The audience's mental labor furthers the cause of bringing joy to a character for whom Austen demonstrates affection, and, notably, it functions not to forward Fanny's timid, principled merits, but to obtain one of the only things throughout the novel that she has desperately wanted for herself and clung to even in the face of Henry Crawford's assiduous wooing and manipulation. While Austen briefly floats the notion of Henry Crawford making Fanny his "reward" through persistence, she lets the idea sink just as quickly (*Mansfield Park* 434), and Brown argues that she does so because Henry Crawford becoming reformed would present an unrealistic inconsistency of character of the sort which Austen steadily resists (Brown 1585, 1586). However, given the closing primacy of Fanny's "desire" in Austen's conclusion, I feel that Austen has another motive for dismissing Henry Crawford and enlisting the audience in bringing Edmund to Fanny's side (*Mansfield Park* 434). In constructing the scenario in which Henry wins Fanny, Austen turns Fanny from the subject of the sentence into the object of it—"Fanny must have been his reward"—implying that a marriage to Henry would have represented a complete conquest of Fanny's autonomy (*Mansfield Park* 434). Meanwhile, in describing

Edmund's change of affections, she turns Fanny from the object into a subject, "Edmund... became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 436). Austen flatly refuses to sacrifice her protagonist's agency in order to further the growth of one of the male characters. Rather than allowing Fanny to fall for Henry, as Austen suggests would have been inevitable had not the disaster between him and Mrs. Rushworth had taken place, Austen constructs the plot such that Henry becomes irredeemable and calls upon the audience to bring Edmund into line with Fanny's desires. Austen deploys every possible narrative technique at her disposal to prevent the seemingly inevitable victory of Henry's desires over Fanny's, thus both securing her heroine the happy ending she desires and highlighting the unjust world that, without Austen's intervention, would have consigned Fanny to surrendering all her principles and personal wants. Austen takes the unjust morality of the real world and deliberately tips it, with the audience's full attention, in favor of the desires of women rather than men.

One of the easiest ways to bring this technique of Austen's into relief is to examine one of her endings in which it proves unnecessary. Austen's "I" persona makes only one brief, comic appearance in the ending of *Pride and Prejudice*, in the aforementioned critique of Mrs. Bennet. Unlike in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, the "I" persona does not have a strong role in bringing about the conclusion or laying bare the moral stance of the work. Rather, as Brown notes, she leaves that task to her characters in a light-hearted exchange between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in which the two speculate as to the moral of their happy union (1584). Elizabeth jokingly frets that their union may be immoral because it has arisen from a breach of promise, but Mr. Darcy assures her that their marriage, the result of Lizzy's resistance to Lady Catherine's unjust interference, will be a fitting punishment for his overbearing aunt, only for Lizzy, of course, to throw in the sort of wry moral reversal we usually see from Austen's "I" persona by observing that Lady Catherine must have been happy to be of use (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 261). Brown argues that this scene represents further evidence for Austen's

satiric attitude toward the notions of reward and punishment and her tendency to subordinate both to the dictates of reality (1584). However, while Austen often states these attitudes herself while smoothing the way to an inexorable happy ending for her characters, here she entrusts them to the characters themselves, leaving them unsupervised, as it were. Lizzy and Mr. Darcy, characters constructed from the very beginning to lend themselves to tête-à-têtes, arrive at their own satirical conclusions. Because the plot's main focus has been these two characters and their changing relationship to one another, no last-minute rearrangements are required of Austen, and she remains behind the curtain, allowing the figures onstage to state themes that she would, in the case of the more timid Fanny, have to state for herself. Fanny, in a more vulnerable position than Elizabeth, with a more pliable temper, requires more of Austen's authorial aid to avoid being ground down by reality, whereas the sportive, outspoken Elizabeth does not seem to require an outside hand to tip the scales in her favor.

Indeed, the most outlandish facet of Lizzy's ending arises not from any sudden alterations of circumstance that Austen uses to bring it about but simply from how wildly advantageous Lizzy's marriage to Darcy is. Mr. Darcy's ten thousand pounds a year is an outrageous fortune, and paired with Lizzy's genuine love for him, it produces such an unalloyed positive outcome that the reader experiences a moment of pause. While Austen never manifests clearly at the novel's end to forcibly direct all the characters into their desired endings, we begin to see that she has allowed Lizzy to have the same power over the end of the narrative that the "I" persona usually possesses. Her status as a studier of character makes her both a part of the narrative and someone capable of commenting upon it, as she does in drawing Mr. Darcy into meditating on the morals of their courtship. Moreover, when she asks Mr. Darcy why he first admired her, she expands upon his short answer, observing, "you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious

attention” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 260). Instead of to Austen’s voice, it falls to Lizzy to, after her errors in the first half of the book, correctly account for people’s characters and motives. Austen, however, is present all the same, vouchsafing the wellbeing of her “darling child” (Kestner 7) by crafting an environment that will favor Lizzy and a wealthy love interest who has reasonable motives for adoring a character who resists the dictates “of civility, of deference, of officious attention” (*Pride and Prejudice*, 260). Notably, Austen’s narrative voice is clearest in the book’s epigrammatic opening sentence, suggesting that her method of securing Elizabeth’s happiness in the novel lies in shifting the playing field in her favor from the outset of the plot and then sitting back and relaying the triumphs for which she has, invisibly, prepared our lively young acquaintance.

Indeed, Austen’s primary role in the book’s ending is relating the characters’ new circumstances to the audience, providing glimpses into their households via a letter-like format that conveys the reactions of the reader’s full fictional acquaintance to the match. Chronologically, *Pride and Prejudice* advances the farthest beyond the actual weddings of any Austen novel, allowing the reader to see the dynamics of the characters’ marriages, which improve upon those of the previous generation. In the section dedicated to Georgiana’s perspective, Austen notes that Lizzy’s lively and teasing address of Darcy continues and that he welcomes it, a happy reversal of the Bennet marriage, in which Mr. Bennet’s only amusement is making jokes at the expense of his irritable wife who has never been his intellectual equal. Austen charts a clear and happy course for the newly wedded Darcys, and it seems to lead into a future of perfect contentment, creating both a sense that their lives will be ongoing and that their story is wholly finished. Austen’s method of describing the household that results from the final match of *Mansfield Park*, however, is far different. “With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be,” Austen declares (*Mansfield Park* 439). However, this seemingly absolute statement quickly reveals itself to be riddled with qualifiers; while their happiness

“appears” secure, Austen does not go so far as to say that it is such, and the further disclaimer “as earthly happiness can be” throws their future into even greater doubt, for the book has spent much of its time dwelling on the social cataclysms that can fling a family into disarray (*Mansfield Park* 439). Brown argues that Austen’s reference to the clichéd trope of “true love” (*Mansfield Park* 439) serves as another clue that the ending of *Mansfield Park* is not a straightforward “happily ever after” but a study in contradictions and extremes in which the cousins’ happiness serves as a comic counterpoint to the misery of those around them (Brown 1585). It was the reader’s agency that set the hour at which Edmund came to love Fanny, and Austen, in turn, allows that agency to continue, leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions about how Fanny and Edmund’s marriage will proceed.

Austen employs a similar tactic in the final sentence of *Northanger Abbey*, quipping, “I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience” (213). Again, the phrase “whomsoever it may concern” recalls the earlier reference to the audience as Eleanor Tilney’s “acquaintance,” invoking a sense of social, written correspondence, while taking a playful jab at the notion that the actions in the novel can imply broad, sweeping morals out of context (Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 213, 212). Austen’s “I” persona, in both *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, goes to great lengths to secure the protagonists’ longed-for marriages, yet it takes an equal amount of care to leave the implications of those matches to the reader’s judgment. Austen safeguards her protagonists’ happiness by all the means at her disposal, but she leaves the world that makes that happiness so precarious, and so contingent on romantic love, open to the reader’s criticism. These two ideas may seem antithetical, given that one hinges on wish fulfillment and the other on cynicism and social critique, but it is, in fact, the interaction of

these two forces, both manufactured by the “I” persona, that gives the Austen conclusion its particular power.

By drawing our eyes to the injustices of her society, particularly in its treatment of women, and then to the many narrative mechanisms, within both the beginnings and ends of her stories, which she uses to consistently ensure happiness and equality for her heroines, Austen draws an implicit contrast between actuality’s judgment of women and her own. Though Austen’s protagonists vary widely, Catherine naïve, Elinor pragmatic, Elizabeth bold, Fanny timid, they all find happiness and, perhaps more importantly, are all portrayed as deserving it. Austen uses the conventional marriage plot as a pretense to spend her novels exploring the intelligence, concerns, and forced dependency of women within her society. The happy wedding, the patriarchal closing structure that the form of the time mandates, becomes, in her hands, a true fulfillment of the wishes of her protagonists, often, as in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, with the addition of unlooked-for monetary reward, a safeguard against the dependence that has dogged the protagonist throughout the novel. Her “I” persona, however, reveals just how much authorial meddling must contribute to these happy endings, how much they are mechanized products of a limiting form that Austen has hijacked in order to fulfill the desires of the characters that she deeply loves as well as those of the reading public.

In visibly extending her authorial protection to those characters whom she believes are deserving of joy, Austen leads her reader to question a society in which that joy requires such safeguarding by an outside, omnipotent source. After all, the unhappy, existing marriages that lie on the periphery of the novels, like those of the Bennets and the Grants, suggest that the heroines’ ability to escape from both economic dependence *and* unequal, degrading matches is a rare circumstance indeed. Thus, in the moment of ultimate happiness, the fulfillment of the marriage plot, Austen intervenes to turn her readers out into the world, to ask them to see the strictures and injustices that she has circumvented with such care. While she may cultivate narratives that reward Elizabeth’s wry nature and Fanny’s quiet determination

through marriage and economic stability, the only two rewards that her time considered respectable, Austen allows her voice—the voice of a woman who never married and who penned novels—to pierce those very notions of rigid respectability. Through the camaraderie she builds with her readers, Austen orients them to their world in new ways, encouraging them to see cracks, places where their societal dictates deviate from justice and the reality of human behavior, and in the face of these faults, the complete fulfillment her protagonists' desires seems an even greater triumph.

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## SECOND PLACE

A Striking Resemblance: Portraiture in the Novels of Jane Austen

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In 1816, Jane Austen's nephew, James Edward Austen, lost two chapters of the novel he was currently writing. In a letter denying that she pilfered his work, Austen describes the difference in their respective writing styles, suggesting...

I do not think however that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow? – How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour? (Austen *Jane Austen's Letter's* 232)

Here, Austen compares her writing process to the painting of a miniature portrait. While this comparison attests to the small social spheres and realistic, perhaps mimetic, characters featured in her novels, the metaphor also exemplifies Austen's understanding that portraiture and written language can function as complimentary modes of delivering meaning. This awareness manifests clearly within her novels – particularly *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility* – in which the language of visual representation provides Austen an alternative method of illuminating characterization.

Though Elizabeth Bennett determines to hate Fitzwilliam Darcy from their first interaction in *Pride and Prejudice*, she finds herself unable to reconcile the unstable, contradictory elements of his personhood. Juxtaposing his acerbic remarks and general incivility with his positive reputation and friendship with the amiable Mr. Bingley, she struggles to stitch together his true nature. This uncertainty lingers with Elizabeth for most of the novel. During their first dance, Elizabeth asks Darcy about his proclivity for both

forgiveness and resentment, in an attempt to distinguish “the illustrations of [his] character” (Austen 66). When he inquires as to the success of her investigation, she laments that he continues to puzzle her exceedingly. And it is not until visiting Pemberley towards the novel’s end that Elizabeth finally gains the understanding she so fervently desires.

While at Pemberley, Elizabeth encounters two different portraits of Mr. Darcy, one miniature and one large rendering. Miniatures – comprised of watercolor on ivory, usually two to three inches wide – function as what Jeffrey A Nigro calls an “ostentatious display of intimacy.” Because being the subject of a portrait required having enough money to commission an artist, displaying any form of portraiture, even a miniature, suggests wealth and a desire to display it, hence Nigro’s assertion of the ostentatious nature of portraiture. His assertion of intimacy stems from the personal, almost secret quality of miniatures, which were typically either set into jewelry and worn close to one’s body or locked within drawers and cabinets. When not worn as jewelry, miniatures were typically locked inside the most private rooms of the house, signifying the final step in a progression from the home’s most public space. Because the miniatures of Darcy, Wickham, and Georgia reside in the late Mr. Darcy’s favorite room, the reader can thus assume this is a relatively private space.

Formal life-sized portraits were created from oil on canvas, rather than watercolor on ivory, and typically measured eight feet high and five feet wide (Nigro). If miniature portraits were considered “objects of personal adornment and private emotions,” these larger renderings portraits were public assertions of a family’s high social standing (Nigro). Portraits of family members spanning generations often adorned the gallery of large estates to impress visitors with the family’s vast history and influence. The many paintings hanging at Pemberley thus attest to Mr. Darcy’s familial wealth. According to scholar Kazuko Hisamori, the portrait of Darcy was likely painted to celebrate his coming of age, around the age of 21 (Hisamori).

Antithetical to the traditional flow from public space to private space, Elizabeth enters this favorite room before the picture gallery and thus examines the miniatures before the larger

paintings. Interestingly, the first portrait she observes here is Wickham's, rather than Darcy's. While Elizabeth inspects his miniature, Mrs. Reynolds – Pemberley's housekeeper – tells Elizabeth that Wickham “turned out very wild” after the death of her late master (Austen 170). Upon the introduction of this information, Elizabeth, who previously held Wickham in a higher esteem than Darcy, begins to see Wickham for who he truly is: a deceitful man who disguises his manipulative tendencies and love of money behind a charismatic demeanor. The miniature, by concealing rather than exteriorizing Wickham's nature, thus allows Elizabeth to better perceive her misconfiguration of Wickham's character. By presenting the fundamental falseness of her knowledge as the viewer, the portrait communicates the inadequacies of initial impressions. This newfound conviction plays an essential role as Elizabeth shifts to gaze upon the portraits of Darcy. Confronted with the imperfection of her preconceptions, she gradually allows herself to set aside the prejudices which initially prevent her from understanding Darcy. When Mrs. Reynolds describes the consistency of his benevolence and altruism, Elizabeth does not impetuously attempt to refute these positive attributes. Instead, she determines that no praise can be more accurate or “valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant” (Austen 173).

The shift which occurs when examining these two miniatures provides an important basis for Elizabeth's reaction to the larger portraits hanging in the family gallery, softening her to any admirable representations of Darcy. While observing his miniature provides Elizabeth with a more accurate perception of Darcy within intimate settings – like as a brother, husband, or friend – observing his large-scale portrait provides her with a deeper understanding of his public duties and social position, as a master and landlord. Mrs. Reynolds again praises Darcy for his ability to effectively execute these duties, suggesting that none of his tenants or servants could

rightfully complain about his managerial style. Prompted by this compelling commendation of Darcy's character, Elizabeth's conception of him shifts dramatically and permanently. According to the narrator...

As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!-How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! How much of good or evil must be done by him! Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favorable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression. (Austen 173)

Contemplating this portrait allows Elizabeth to experience a greater appreciation for Darcy than she has ever felt when interacting with his physical self, even in their most intimate moments. She considers the many people who depend on him, whom he could devastate in a singular act of irresponsibility or malevolence. But he has never enacted this devastation; instead, he treats servants and tenants properly and equitably, thus earning their favor.

These reflections lead Elizabeth to reexamine Darcy's initial marriage proposal, now with a sense of gratitude and warmth. The "impropriety of expression" characterizing the profession of his love – especially his remarks on her familial inferiority and his fervent attempts to cease loving her – now seems insignificant when compared to the compliment of receiving such a great man's affection (Austen 173). Her newfound appreciation of his character retroactively ameliorates the insult of Darcy's first proposal, while opening her up to the possibility of a second. It is thus no surprise that Elizabeth and Darcy marry shortly after her visit to Pemberley; she finally finds a portrait with greater likeness than the one she has been creating in her mind. And she likes what she sees.

Ultimately, two things finally give Darcy's character unity in Elizabeth's mind: his letter – his own linguistic presentation of his character – and his portrait, a visual representation of it. The letter provides justifications for his past actions, highlighting the

inadequacy of Elizabeth's initial judgments. And the two portraits of Darcy require Elizabeth to confront the truth of Darcy's character. By combining the complimentary power of text and image, Austen allows both Elizabeth and the reader to new perceive Darcy as a virtuous man and potential husband. By using the word "expression," which could signify either a verbal statement or the facial countenance of an artistic subject, Austen further entwines these two modes of generating meaning and emphasizes the necessity of both in Elizabeth's change of heart.

The difficulty of judging character also constitutes a central anxiety within *Emma*. As critic Joseph Litvak notes in "Reading Characters: Self, Society, and Text in *Emma*," moments of misconception and misconstruing cause or exacerbate most major plot developments within the novel (Litvak 767). While Emma attempts to stimulate love between Harriet and Mr. Elton, she fails to recognize that Elton's attraction actually lies with herself. Later, Harriet misinterprets Mr. Knightley's kindness, especially after Elton disrespects her at the ball, as a form of romantic intention, though her ardency ultimately proves unreciprocated. And Emma accuses Jane Fairfax of tempting Mr. Dixon into adultery, when she is actually engaged to Frank Churchill (who Emma thinks is in love with both Harriet and she, though again, this proves untrue).

As in *Pride and Prejudice*, errors of interpretation in *Emma* are reflected within portraiture. And portraiture similarly illuminates the intricacies of the novel's many characters. However, these intricacies become encapsulated in both the act of painting and the observation of painting. While Elizabeth Bennett experiences a change of heart upon examining a portrait of Mr. Darcy created before the novel begins, Emma actively renders Harriet within the novel's first volume, in an attempt to augment the romantic interest of Mr. Elton. This intention of Emma's represents a fundamental

point of misconception within the text: with whom Mr. Elton's adoration truly lies. Believing that Mr. Elton is desperately in love with Harriet, Emma becomes confused by his fervent praise for her drawing, failing to see that it is her artistic prowess, rather than Harriet's represented beauty, that Mr. Elton proves eager to compliment. This tension highlights the delusion inherent within Emma's plan for Harriet's future, in which social origin becomes astoundingly insignificant. And it also brings these three characters together in one small sphere, isolated from the rest of their friends, thus providing an effective arena for highlighting the misdirected affections of each (Bray 13).

Though Emma originally plans to create a mimetic likeness of Harriet, after the first sketch she decides "to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance" (Austen *Emma* 55). She thus sacrifices true verisimilitude to achieve this desired effect, depicting a more visually perfect and interesting version of Harriet which may further recommend her beauty and poise to the onlooker. Emma's artistic interference attests to the obsessive control she maintains over others, in addition to the artful manipulation of their feelings that she continually enacts. Emma subtly recreates Harriet within the portrait, but actually begins recreating her before the painting is ever mentioned. By separating her from Mr. Martin and the customs of her social class, Emma gradually dismantles Harriet's identity and transforms her into an object of her own creation, on whom her influence is disguised, yet total. The portrait thus accurately symbolizes the growing disconnect between Harriet's true self and the alternate sense of self which Emma constructs for her. And it further symbolizes Emma's detachment from her own authentic feelings and self-perception, as she fails to reflect on the potential dangers of her both her artistic and lived intrusions. Emma's ability to visually manipulate her subject with no cognizance of danger or deceit suggests that she views relationships as pliable and constructed (Bray 11).

In fact, in both life and portrait, Mr. Knightley is the only onlooker who critiques Emma's acts of intrusion. From the initial signs of a developing friendship between Emma and Harriet, Knightley correctly predicts that the partnership will be deleterious

for both. He understands that Emma will feel no incentive to learn or grow if Harriet presents “such a delightful inferiority” (Austen *Emma* 49). He similarly recognizes that Harriet will grow to inhabit a liminal state between the two different social classes between which she splits her time. Her lack of wealth and lineage will prevent her from every being fully accepted by genteel society, but her increased sense of refinement will make her “uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her at home” (Austen *Emma* 49). Knightley’s criticism that Harriet’s portrait makes her appear too tall thus symbolizes the accuracy of his perception writ large, his propensity for observing – rather than ignoring – Emma’s flaws and pushing her to improve them while everyone else offers obsequious praise. In fact, his criticism of Emma’s treatment of Miss Bates at Box Hill, not only attests to his acumen, but also encourages the moments of self-reflection which radically alter Emma’s treatment of others, particularly Jane Fairfax, but the novel’s end.

By exposing Emma’s portrait to so many characters, Austen allows us to compare their reactions and thus their general natures. One of the most illuminating comparisons is between Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley, whose responses to the likeness are entirely contradictory. As previously discussed, Mr. Knightley proves capable of observing and articulating the solecism of Emma’s imprecise rendering. Yet Mr. Elton repeatedly emphasizes its likeness, descending into “continual raptures” as he ardently defends the portrait against any possible criticism (Austen *Emma* 55). When Mrs. Weston suggests that Emma has altered Harriet’s eyebrows and eyelashes to provide her with the only facets of beauty she does not possess, he immediately claims the portrait is a perfect resemblance of Harriet, with the effects of light and shadow preventing Mrs. Weston from conceptualizing its accuracy. And when Mr. Woodhouse expresses anxious dismay that Harriet sits outdoors in the portrait – where she risks catching

a cold – Mr. Elton immediately claims that the background landscape beautifully captures the “inimitable spirit” of their trees and the naïveté of Harriet’s manners (Austen *Emma* 56).

Mr. Elton even directly refutes Mr. Knightley’s assertion that Emma has made Harriet too tall, attributing his erroneous claim to Harriet’s seated position and Emma’s brilliant use of foreshortening. Through the introduction of portraiture, Austen thus brings Emma’s two eventual suitors into stark contrast, suggesting that either Mr. Elton does not have Knightley’s capacity to recognize Emma’s imperfections, or that he does not care enough about her to correct them. If solely the former is true, Austen presents Mr. Elton as an inadequate match for Emma, one incapable of encouraging her betterment and thus her happiness. While Knightley’s criticisms ultimately allow Emma to reconstruct her relationships – replacing their initial distanced and hierarchical quality with an increasing sense empathy and intimacy – Elton’s incontrovertible affirmation would leave Emma stagnant and isolated. However, if his refutation of Knightley’s rightful criticism indicates an unrestricted apathy towards Emma’s development – rather than a merely subconscious deferral of it – Austen uses portraiture to suggest that Mr. Elton desires, not Emma, but her fortune. He has no incentive to augment her morality and well-being if his affection lies solely with the increased income marrying her would provide. Elton’s indifference to Emma’s individuality may be reflected in his looming surveillance while she paints Harriet’s likeness, as (unbeknownst to Emma) he positions himself to “gaze and gaze again” upon her without detection (Austen *Emma* 55). Lingered behind Emma, Mr. Elton enacts a version of the male gaze, observing her without truly seeing her. Unconcerned with her interiority and subjectivity, he diminishes Emma to merely an emblem of enlarged fortune.

Ultimately, while *Pride and Prejudice* examines the effect of portraiture upon its viewer – augmenting a fundamental shift in the manner Elizabeth Bennett views Mr. Darcy – *Emma* examines how portraits locate the entwining subjectivities of its subject, artist, and viewers. When Emma ironically asserts that Mr. Elton’s “admiration made him discern a likeness” which does not objectively exist, she incorrectly assumes with whom his admiration

lies (Austen *Emma* 55). Yet she correctly discerns that his romantic partiality inevitably alters his view of the portrait, just as Mrs. Weston's appreciation for the friendship between Emma and Harriet allows her to see Emma's artistic modifications as a justifiable act of benevolence. Yet Mr. Knightley, who recognizes the unreciprocated control Emma exercises in their friendship, sees these changes as an act of intrusion. Harriet's likeness thus illustrates how illusory the very concept of likeness is, detected and interpreted uniquely by each of its viewers. And in addition to highlighting the characterization and partialities of each person within Emma, Harriet's portrait further presents the strengths or failures of their various relationships, especially between Emma, Harriet, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Knightley. This singular scene of portrait painting thus functions as a microcosm of the novel in its entirety, accurately encapsulating the personalities, desires, and misinterpretations of each character.

In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, portraiture leads to an illumination of character. Mr. Darcy's two portraits allow Elizabeth to finally stitch together his true character, an act she unsuccessfully attempts from their initial meeting. And reactions to Harriet's likeness communicate to Emma's readers the various desires and relationships of each observer, while Emma's role as the artist presents the intricacies of her own personhood. In *Sense and Sensibility*, however, portraiture functions as a series of false signs. As scholar Kristin Miller Zohn suggests in "Tokens of Imperfect Affection: Portrait Miniatures and Hairwork in *Sense and Sensibility*," before broken promises and secrets are ultimately revealed, privately worn and publicly shown objects help to "obscure the imperfect nature of several relationships" (Miller Zohn).

Perhaps the most obvious representation of this idea comes with the revelation of Lucy Steele's secret engagement to Edward Ferrars. When Lucy first discloses their

partnership, Elinor does not believe that the two could be engaged, assuming “there must be some mistake of person or name” within Lucy’s disclosure (*Austen Sense and Sensibility* 99). But to verify the identity of her fiancé, Lucy presents a miniature painted in Edward’s likeness, knowing Elinor could not possibly “be deceived as to the person it was drew for” (*Austen Sense and Sensibility* 99). According to social convention, it would be nearly impossible for Lucy to possess such a portrait if an intimate relationship did not exist between herself and Edward, as miniatures were typically commissioned to highlight the love and affection existing between two people (Nigro). Thus, though Elinor is perplexed and disheartened that a relationship exists between her two acquaintances, she regards the miniature as incontrovertible proof of Edward and Lucy’s engagement. Returning the portrait to its owner, Elinor is forced to acknowledge Lucy’s possession of Edward; she possesses him both emotionally, in the form of romance, and physically, in the tangible attestation to his affection represented via the miniature.

In this scene, Lucy’s choice to show Elinor the miniature of Edward is “an act of [false] intimacy twice over” (Miller Zohn). Lucy claims that confiding in Elinor allows her the advantage of a trusted companion, someone with whom she may speak of a secret long repressed. Forced to conceal her passion for Edward from all but her sister, she complains of a constrained ardency, constantly awaiting articulation. And because Edward holds such a high opinion of Elinor and her family, thinking of them “quite as his own sisters,” Lucy expresses a unique comfort in entrusting Elinor with her secret (*Austen Sense and Sensibility* 98).

The true intentions behind Lucy’s divulgence, however, are significantly more opportunistic than innocuous. Recognizing Elinor Dashwood’s competing affection for Edward – a cognizance at least partially prompted by the incessant teasing of Mrs. Jennings and Sir John Middleton – Lucy attempts to extinguish Elinor’s love for her fiancé. Understanding that her future financial security relies on marrying a man with a larger fortune than her meager one, Lucy weaponizes Elinor’s unswerving dedication to propriety to neutralize the threat she poses. And because a genuine affection lies between Elinor and Edward, she understands the

intensified necessity of interfering. Accordingly, Lucy tries to manipulate Elinor into believing that her own devotion is built on love, rather than economic necessity. She additionally attempts to convince Elinor that Edward views her merely as a sister, as opposed to a potential wife, to thus prevent Elinor from clinging to any hope of him reciprocating her romantic intentions.

This deceit is rendered possible by Lucy's possession of the miniature; showing it to Elinor allows Lucy to enact the manipulation detailed above, without arising enduring suspicion from Elinor. But as Miller Zohn suggests, the falseness of this intimate act, this manipulation of portraiture, is twofold. Lucy likely received this miniature of Edward at the high of their intimacy, when both characters were young and in love, unaware that their adoration would pass with time. Yet because the miniature cannot portray the ephemeral quality of their romance, because its style and subject remain constant, Elinor fails to discern the etiolated quality of Lucy and Edward's partnership. Instead, this image of Edward – one which rejects the very possibility of his emotional capriciousness – obscures the imperfection of his engagement, even as Elinor actively seeks proof of deficiency.

While Lucy's miniature of Edward functions as a vehicle for communicating one of *Sense and Sensibility's* central conflicts – and concealing one of its greatest secrets – visuality scholar Jessica Volz suggests that the absence of portraiture presents the reality of disguised characterization and intentionality. Lucy expresses vexation at never providing Edward with a picture of herself, even though “he has been always so anxious” to receive one (Austen *Sense and Sensibility* 100). As Volz suggests within *Visuality in the Novels of Austen, Radcliffe, Edgeworth, and Burney*, the absence of a reciprocated miniature highlights the precariousness of the couple's engagement (Volz 59). That only Edward has presented Lucy with a portrait suggests he takes their engagement more

seriously than Lucy ever did. Even though Edward has fallen out of love, he still aspires to treat Lucy honorably and attempts to repress his love for Elinor until after Lucy breaks their engagement. But Lucy – who only values Edward for his ability to augment her wealth – actively seeks out the affection of his older brother and ultimately chooses to marry Robert Ferrars instead.

Volz further suggests that Lucy's decision not to provide Edward with a likeness of herself indicates her overarching inability to satisfy him (Volz 60). In a material sense, her meager fortune will do nothing to increase his own, and she possess no valuable property or other useful appurtenances. And perhaps more significantly, Lucy does not possess the immaterial traits necessary to ensure Edward's happiness. Her "romantic apathy and insincere determination," discussed above, would prevent the reformation of his genuine adoration (Volz 62). And especially when compared to Elinor's good-hearted nature and strong sense, Lucy's coldness and artifice – disguised behind a beautiful exterior, constructed to please – could never placate Edward's longing for another. Perhaps the true symbolic reason that Lucy's likeness cannot be taken is that her true character remains a secret. Hidden behind layers of artifice, not artist could accurately discern and depict the person whom Lucy truly is.

Ultimately, although miniatures were used to celebrate love and affection in the lives of Austen's family and her readers, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the author defies our expectations for their tender functions (Miller Zohn). A significant portion of the novel's plot depends upon deception enacted through portraiture, as characters construct false conclusions or discover that their trust has been manipulated. And it is only once these portraits prove untrustworthy, once circumstances prove that – at least in the case of Edward Ferrars – a likeness cannot adequately stand in for the person it depicts, that Edward can finally express his adoration for Elinor and begin one of *Sense and Sensibility's* many second loves.

Though the particular utilization of portraiture differs slightly within *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, in each novel it communicates the intricacies of character to the audience, to the heroine, and to her peers. By concealing or

highlighting elements of the self only subtly presented through direct linguistic analysis, Austen combines the language of visual representation with her literary medium to convey a broader truth. In *Emma*, this new meaning allows the viewer a clearer interpretative gaze upon the novel's relationships. In *Sense and Sensibility*, this meaning initiates one of the novel's most significant romantic conflicts. In *Pride and Prejudice*, portraiture functions in the opposite way, proving powerful enough to resolve a conflict long plaguing the text.

In each instance, portraiture constitutes a powerful element of constructing understanding, particularly because it allows women to engage with their subjects in a more egalitarian, open way than would be otherwise acceptable. In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey coined the term "male gaze" when analyzing the role of female characters in film. She aims to identify the central difference between a woman catering to the male gaze and a woman existing in her own right, and ultimately suggests that the former is a merely objectified image, while the latter is an active viewing subject (Mulvey 16). Within this theory, looking is not a passive process, but an active one, as the meaning drawn from observation relies extensively on both general cultural expectations and the unique subjectivity of the viewer. Though this concept originated as an interpretative lens for film, the phrase now shapes conversations across multiple disciplines, including art and literature. The art historical tradition relies on men painting for the pleasure of a male viewer, while women – devoid of interiority – inhabit the flesh and become an object of erotic fascination. And in many classic literary works, from Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale*, male characters gaze upon an artistic rendering of a woman, imbuing her with their own gendered projections.

Austen's use of portraiture stands in stark contrast to

this exhaustive tradition. While Darcy, in both of his portraits, remains fixed and observable, Elizabeth – as the viewer – may look at him and draw her own conclusions about his character. Because the representational facets of Darcy’s portraits can convey some but not all of his personhood, she must gaze upon him and subjectively interpret or project meaning. Similarly, Lucy Steele and Elinor Dashwood gaze upon an image of Edward Ferrar, which Lucy utilizes for her own manipulative ends and Elinor uses to determine Edward’s romantic intentionality. Both of these instances reverse the traditional gender distribution of subject and viewer, as Darcy and Edward become the male subject of a female gaze. And though the portrait created within *Emma* does not have a male subject, the artist who gazes upon its female subject is similarly female. Even Mr. Elton, the only man actively involved with the painting’s creation never actively looks at Harriet. Though he gazes directly at the painting, he examines Emma’s technique more than Harriet’s physicality (must to Emma’s dismay).

Austen’s inclusion of portraiture thus exemplifies her proclivity for subverting gender roles within her novels. Yet she balances these subversive elements by acknowledging the reality of widespread female oppression. Though Harriet becomes the subject of a female gaze, rather than a male one, Emma still forces particular standards of femininity upon her by adjusting her likeness to encompass idealized beauty standards. Instead of seeing Harriet for who she is, Emma sees all the elements of Harriet which deviate from gendered cultural expectations and steps in to improve them, both in the portrait and in their lived friendship. This observation, when combined with a knowledge of the masculinization of Emma throughout the text, makes Harriet standing before Emma seem less subversive. The intersectional subjugation enacted by Harriet’s gender and lower social class prevent her from experiencing the privilege afforded to other women in Austen’s novels. Further, Elizabeth, Lucy, and Elinor are only able to meaningfully interact with Edward and Mr. Darcy in their absence. Had the men been present, these women would have been unable to attain the privilege of viewing and viewing extensively. As Miller Zohn suggests, portraiture allows each woman to engage with her romantic interest “in a way that would be improper if the

real man were present” (Miller Zohn). If one reads the relationship between Harriet and Emma as queer, this same restriction holds true; the pair, deviated from expectations of heterosexual relationships – may only gaze at each other through the disguise of creating a portrait.

Ultimately, this mixture of subversive and realistic plot elements is an important facet of Austen’s work, as is her tendency to merge the vocabularies of artistic and literary expression. Through the use of portraiture – including both miniatures and larger renderings – Austen highlights the key intricacies of her characters, in addition to the intricacies of her own writing style. Perhaps this is another reason Austen compares her writing process to the creation of a miniature: because there is always more than initially meets the eye.

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## THIRD PLACE

Green Lights and Violent Delights: Visual Storytelling in Baz Luhrmann's The Great Gatsby and Romeo + Juliet

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Baz Luhrmann, the director of only five full length films, has nonetheless made a name for himself in the film industry. In a film review of *The Great Gatsby*, Thomas Doherty said, "Who better than a specialist in garish excess to conjure the decade that Fitzgerald called 'the greatest, gaudiest spree in history'" (Doherty 45). Garish is the appropriate word to describe both productions, and even Luhrmann's particular style. However, his style of directing is exemplary for the convection of unspoken themes and nonverbal communication. Baz Luhrmann's use of niche visual effects and storytelling brings the echoed theme of violence bred of love to audiences with the movie adaptations of two tragic classics, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Great Gatsby*.

Luhrmann's use of movement in crowd scenes leaves the viewer feeling as confused as Romeo Montague and Nick Carraway in their respective movies. In stage productions as well as in this film, Romeo Montague enters the house of the Capulets, an outsider in the home of his enemy. However, in this film, Luhrmann uses the intoxicating power of bright lights, loud music, and drugs to pull Romeo and the audience into an unfamiliar, confusing setting. The nearly frightening nature of it throws into sharp relief the bathroom scene, where he submerges his face in water, brings it up, and sees Juliet. She is an angel, a bit of serenity in a den of chaos and iniquity. Suddenly, Romeo's words from the play, which are echoed in the movie, become apt and abundantly clear: "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er

saw true beauty till this night” (I.v.50-51). What does not matter in this moment is that Romeo was, earlier in the day, in love with another person. Romeo is definitely flighty, but his desire for stability, even while high, is illustrated in the chaotic scene presented by Luhrmann. Juliet represented that stability, just as the water in the basin and the fish tank represent calm. With *Gatsby*, the first party scene throws the audience into the fray, along with a very disgruntled Nick. Nick decides to get drunk, and the party gets more intense the longer he drinks. “If Daisy is Gatsby’s dream figure, Gatsby is Nick’s, and ours, but the star of the show – the man whispered about by the partygoers, the host who is never seen – is held back” (Doherty 46). In the moment he is revealed, the world stops spinning. Like Juliet, Gatsby is untouched by and separated from the mayhem. When the camera finally lands on him, he is young, attractive, and completely devoid of the glitter and confetti that covers everyone else at the party. It is this element that continues to be brought into the movie, and more in line with the violent story, Gatsby gets more and more touched and corrupted by the parties and the other people. He progressively gets ruffled. The danger grows. After meeting Juliet, the daughter of his father’s sworn enemy, Romeo’s true problems begin. Though to him, Juliet seems like the eye of the storm, she is not. When Gatsby finally gets in contact with Daisy again, after five years, it starts the clock ticking on Gatsby’s life. It is not the fault of the women; it is the nature of love. The frantic energy of the crowd scenes with fast-paced dancing and addictive substances gives the viewer the sense that not all is right and not all is real. It is the false sense of security that is the ultimate demonstration of the idea that love is violent and breeds violence.

Luhrmann’s addition and embellishment of water motifs in both *Romeo + Juliet* and *The Great Gatsby* are symbolic to the viewer, signifying life changing events. As mentioned before, the water in both is incredibly prevalent and meaningful. In *Romeo + Juliet*, instead of the famous scene happening on the balcony, the scene happens in and around the swimming pool. “Such immersions in water are not without meaning at embedded levels of signification – cleansing, baptism, depth of love, dissolution of conventional discourse, and so forth” (Johae 110). Juliet pulls

Romeo into the swimming pool, ostensibly to hide him from her nurse, but what she also does is submerge him in her world, force him to live for her. She also discourages his unusual conventions regarding women by doing this, according to Downing (129). This moment is symbolic, and it is not the only one in this movie that has to do with water. Verona was situated directly on a beach; the movie called it “Verona Beach.” The events of the story unfold unpredictably, just as the tide is unpredictable. Romeo and Juliet both have premonitions in the play and movie, and any person can reasonably see that change is coming. However, what is less evident is how the tide will crash upon the shore, and so how the events of the near future will affect the lives of everyone in Verona Beach. Both the play and the movie opened with the prince (or Captain Prince) telling everyone that change must come to Verona, because their violence is tasteless and intolerable. Similarly, *The Great Gatsby* began with Nick Carraway, the storyteller, at a sanatorium. He was embittered and hurt, and he was disgusted with what the world was becoming around him. Indeed, he realized that he and the world needed to change too. The only man he was not angry with when he left New York was Gatsby. Jay Gatsby was killed by the desire to keep life the same; he was killed by his own desire to change things. When they were in the hotel at the end of the movie, Gatsby claimed that, because he then had money, he was equal to Tom Buchanan, the wife of Gatsby’s love. Tom replied, “Oh, no, no, we’re different; I am, they are, she is; we’re all different from you – we were born different, it’s in our blood, and nothing you do, or say, or steal or dream up, can ever change that” (*Gatsby* Luhrmann 108). That moment reflects the tone of the whole movie, and after everything, Jay Gatsby is still really James Gatz, the poor son of a poor farmer. At the beginning of that scene, a servant broke a block of ice with an ice pick, and though the world was on fire around them, the people in the room were growing steadily icier.

Anywhere water is, in both films, a life-changing event is about to occur. In the most similar death scenes of the movies, *Tybalt* and *Gatsby*, the water motif is perhaps the most prevalent. When Romeo shot Tybalt, it was raining; rain is the life-giving and life-affirming gift from the heavens, but it is also a universal signifier of sorrow, thematically. Romeo is crying; tears are indicative of an overbearing sense of emotion. Finally, Tybalt, when shot, falls into a pool of water. He, like Gatsby, is left to drift, dead. His blood mingles with the water, leaving it grotesque and red. Gatsby's death in the book is much the same. As Fitzgerald wrote in the water angle, it was natural for the movie and therefore, Gatsby's death, to utilize it to the fullest extent. "A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of a compass, a thin red circle in the water" (Fitzgerald 173). Though in the book, Gatsby falls onto a mattress, Luhrmann had him fall straight into the water, adrift, while the blood escaped in copious amounts from the two bullet holes. The red stain in the water was more pronounced. Jay Gatsby could have never been a part of the life he wanted to be, all the way down to the fact that he lived in "West Egg," as opposed to "East Egg," two halves of Long Island separated by an expanse of water. Just as the water separated him from his ultimate goal, to escape from the realm of his parents and enter that of wealth and comfort, with Daisy, the water in the pool separated Gatsby from the living. Because Gatsby could never enter the world of "old money," he could never truly enter the world of Daisy. Despite his wealth and lavish parties, he was still an outsider, "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (*Gatsby* Luhrmann 102). It was his attempt at crossing the line, becoming finally equal, that resulted in his death. For the love of Daisy, he crossed the water only once. They could cross into his world, but he could not cross into theirs. He was shot by Wilson, a man whose wife was cheating on him with Daisy's husband, Tom. Tom Buchanan led Wilson to believe that it was, in fact, Gatsby who pulled away his wife's attentions. Wilson loved his wife, and when he became aware of what he believed to be his wife's lover, the man he also believed killed her, he snapped. He shot both himself and Gatsby. This is perhaps the

most indicative moment of violence bred by love, and it is set on the water. Wilson loved his wife so violently that her death sent him into a spiral of bad decisions, and instead of looking at the evidence, he took Tom's word for it. The water as the backdrop, being the catalyst and indicator of change, is perfect because across the bay, Daisy is trying to call Gatsby. Across the bay, the light at the end of her dock is burning, and it is slipping through his fingers. He is back to where he began, and then, he is dead. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 193).

Luhrmann's fast-paced, intoxicated scenes are visually grotesque but tell the viewer about the character of not only the people, but also the setting. For example, the scene where Romeo shoots Tybalt was not only chaotic, but it was also very raw. There was a car accident; the characters were all covered in blood, and Romeo shot Tybalt repeatedly. When Romeo repeated, "Either thou, or I, or both must go with him," he held Tybalt's gun to his own head (*Romeo Luhrmann*). He was sobbing. The camera work in this scene is choppy, leaving the audience feeling disoriented. This is an impressive storytelling technique because it brought the audience into the feelings and the lives of the characters. It forced the audience to simultaneously root for and fear Romeo and his capabilities. It also caused an overwhelming reaction of sympathy for Tybalt, even though he had been working against the movie's two main characters from the beginning and was then a murderer. Tybalt's death is another example of love bringing forth violence and death. "The slow-motion device creates a world where love is possible amid the threat of death and violence," and it also signifies here how intertwined the two ideas are with each other (Lindroth 63). It was Tybalt's love for his family, and specifically Juliet, that caused him to seek out Romeo. He challenged Romeo because he perceived his flightiness and feared for his cousin's

heart and his family's name and honor. "Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford no better term than this: thou art a villain" (III.i.60-61). Out of love for Juliet, Romeo refused to fight Tybalt, because he could not hate a Capulet, as he was married to one. Mercutio saw Romeo getting attacked and not establishing a fight, and Mercutio, out of love for Romeo, stepped in. (It is also worth noting that Mercutio was seeing Romeo's lack of will to fight for his own honor as a disgrace.) Mercutio died, as Romeo tried to save him. In his grief, Romeo fights and kills Tybalt. This is one of the fastest-paced scenes in the movie, and even when the movement is lessened, Luhrmann's rapid camera changes keeps the viewer enraptured. It also brings the viewer in, as though he or she is there, as the camera moves like it is a person. This causes some of the visuals to be slightly nauseating, as the eyes cannot move fast enough to keep up. The whole purpose is to give the scene a more dangerous feel. The acting is spectacular in these scenes, and the transition from the beach where Mercutio dies, to Juliet's room where she revels in her love, and then to the car chase sharply contrasts the two overwhelming feelings: hope and despair. Juliet's excitement for her newfound marriage to Romeo, a good man, is bookended by Romeo participating in the murder of two people. Though Romeo was not directly responsible for killing Mercutio, who was a family friend of both the Capulets and the Montagues, he was directly responsible for Tybalt's death. Luhrmann uses this juxtaposition to love as a way to show how violent love is and how dangerous letting love lead can be: Romeo and Juliet had been married only that day. The nature of this and the opening scene lead the viewer to the conclusion that not only is love dangerous, but also that Verona Beach is incredibly and inherently violent. The scene that opens the movie is the scene that opens the play, but it takes place at a gas station. There is gun fire, quick-tempered words, injuries, and explosions, framed all by affected camera speed and angles. Furthermore, gas stations are notoriously filthy, and no one stays at a gas station for long. They are a place of stopping off and leaving again in a hurry, and for a gas station to be the carrier of the opening turmoil of the play, it says something about the fleeting nature of both love and hate, as well as life in and of itself, and the meaninglessness of fighting. So, too, is the gas/

service station in *The Great Gatsby* very prominent and important to the plot. While this is in the book by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Luhrmann utilizes these trends to visually entrance and, simultaneously, disgust the viewer. Wilson, the owner and proprietor of the service station, was always dirty, a sharp contrast between him and Tom Buchanan, who stopped at Wilson's because Tom was having an affair with Wilson's wife. Myrtle, too, was different from her husband. She wore bright and gaudy clothes. She appeared on the outset to be living beyond her means, while her husband was busy and toiled all day. Furthermore, the station was set in the Valley of Ashes, "a grotesque place, New York's dumping ground, half way between West Egg and the city, where the burnt out coal that powered the booming, golden city was discarded by men who moved dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (*Gatsby* Luhrmann 17-18). She was untouched by the grime of her disgusting life, but like Gatsby could never be a part of Daisy's world; Myrtle could also never have risen above her station. Though Wilson's did not establish the film, it proved to be a most important meeting place, for to go anywhere, the characters had to drive by Wilson's, through the Valley of Ashes. This becomes important towards the end of the book/movie because, on the way back home, Daisy hit and killed Myrtle after she ran into the street shouting for Tom. Everyone assumed it was Gatsby driving, and he let them. Tom's affair with and affection for Myrtle was the reason she died. She ran out to him because she was being abused by her husband, but it was not the man she truly loved, but his wife whom she met. Myrtle was killed by her love for her killer's husband, and therefore, she died in the very place she was trying to escape. The violent nature of both Verona Beach and the Valley of Ashes plays heavily into the theme that love breeds violence, and it supports it by placing said theme on the perfect platform.

Luhrmann's use of color builds on information given

by the literary sources to convey the deeper meanings lost in translation from paper to screen. In *Romeo + Juliet*, the color schemes of the costumes are indicative of the characters. Juliet Capulet is young, sweet. When Romeo first saw her, she was dressed as an angel, in white. This theme is seen throughout the entire movie, giving her an overall cast of innocence. Her funeral bed is white, she is surrounded by white candles, and her dress is long, modest, and white. As white is also the symbol of purity, it was doubly interesting because she was no longer a virgin, and therefore, her worth as a bride was diminished. Though she was married at the time of her first, supposed death, her parents and fiancé had no way of knowing. On the other side of the coin, Romeo's costuming did not differ color-wise from his peers. What did differ and was far more indicative of the contrast between the other Montague boys and Romeo was the color of their cars. The other men around Romeo's age drove blue, yellow, and red vehicles; all were very flashy sport cars. Romeo's car was silver, which indicated his difference and supported Lord Capulet's claim to Tybalt after Romeo snuck into the Capulets' party with his friends. "Content thee, gentle coz. Let him alone. He bears him like a portly gentleman, and, to say truth, Verona brags of him to be a virtuous and well-governed youth" (I.v.74-77). Also, he was dressed as a knight, a traditionally virtuous and well-meaning position. Though he is, canonically, dramatic, he was also naturally sweeter than those he was with. Mercutio, in Luhrmann's film, was in drag, and he and the others completely expose themselves. Even though Romeo was given drugs before he entered the party, he still kept himself more composed. Throughout the movie, his car color was demonstrative of the very fact that he was less materialistic than the others. *The Great Gatsby* also has thematically significant cars. Tom Buchanan drives a navy blue car. Tom did not need to buy a wild and vibrant vehicle to know he was impressive. Having been born rich and of an old money family, Tom never once doubted his importance and neither did anyone else. Gatsby was born poor, and he second-guessed his importance and value every day. He bought a bright yellow car so everyone had to acknowledge it. When Tom drives his car to the hotel, he begins shaking Gatsby's confidence.

Everyone knew Gatsby by his car, and when he lost it to Tom, it was as though the first leg of the battle had already gone to Tom. It could have been a nobody driving the navy blue car, and Gatsby was afraid he would be a nobody. Tom never once thought he would be a nobody, which was why he was felt secure enough to cheat repeatedly on Daisy. Myrtle was vastly different from Daisy in every way. Daisy was light and mild, wearing exclusively muted tones and neutral colors with modest lines. Myrtle, however, wore bright colors with low necklines and high-cut slits. Her costumes were purposefully tighter and sexier. Her apartment that Tom kept for her had bright red walls and furniture. However, the Buchanan residence was mostly whites and other light-colored neutrals.

The staging in the films draws the audience's attention to the parallel struggles of love and violence. In *Romeo + Juliet*, two of the most iconic moments are visually paralleled. The morning after the wedding night, and the night Romeo killed Tybalt, Romeo and Juliet are seen lying side by side in bed. The camera pans down toward them from the ceiling until they wake to the sunlight and Romeo's banishment. At the end, after Romeo and Juliet have committed suicide, they lay in their death bed the same way they laid in their marriage bed. The camera, however, pans away from them, leaving them and drawing the viewer out of their story instead of pulling the viewer into their story. What is also paralleled in these moments is the song choice. Though the instrumentals differ slightly, they demonstrate the same tones with the same prominent instruments. The song that underscores with words is seen throughout the movie at romantic moments. By choosing to repeat songs, Luhrmann brought the movie together and tied each event to the next. Similarly, the music in *The Great Gatsby* is just as intentional. "Much of the instrumental scoring in Luhrmann's *Gatsby* functions to enable us to interpret Gatsby's character, as perceived by Nick, and ultimately portrays Gatsby as mysterious yet purely

hopeful” (MacLean 129). There are also scenes that use parallel imagery to mark a change or important moments in the story line. The first time Nick Carraway saw Gatsby, it was dark, and he, Gatsby, was standing at the end of his dock, reaching out for the green light at the end of the Buchanan’s dock (though Nick did not know that yet). The camera moved forward toward the light. At the end, when Gatsby was shot, he looked out across the expanse of water that forever separated him from Daisy, and he saw the green light. As he dies, the camera moves away from the light, furthering signifying that Gatsby, “was the single most hopeful person [Nick had] ever met,” and that that hope was dying, unfulfilled (*Gatsby* Luhrmann 2). Gatsby had touched his dream, and then it had moved out of his reach. This is an important visual for the last sentiments of the book and movie: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald 193). The idea that the most hopeful character can die before ever reaching what he desired is inherently hopeless, but the viewer leaves the movie understanding that hope and feeling it, too. Gatsby knew love was dangerous, and yet, he pursued it relentlessly anyway.

Baz Luhrmann understood the nuances and dangers of love and the violence that it breeds and used visual storytelling to promote that theme. Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Great Gatsby* are devastatingly sad stories, and these movies, if anything, enhance that. Romeo longs for Juliet, and right after he has her, he loses her. Gatsby longs for Daisy, and right after he has her, he loses her. Luhrmann’s attention to the staging, color schemes, fast-paced camera work, water motifs, and crowd scenes and how the audience would perceive them in both films caused these movies to capture much of what could not have been said, but what was necessary to completely understand the plots. The visual aspects of these films are why they are worth watching and appreciating as appropriate adaptations of two of the most classic and well-known stories in literature.

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