

A Guide to the Gaps

By

Taylor B. Ulm

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the
University Honors Program
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

May 5, 2016

Thesis Director: Heather Jones, M.F.A.
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences

University Honors Program
University of South Florida
St. Petersburg, Florida

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Honors Thesis

This is to certify that the Honors Thesis of

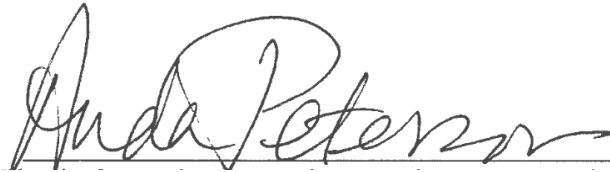
Taylor B. Ulm

has been approved by the Examining Committee
on May 3, 2016
as satisfying the thesis requirement
of the University Honors Program

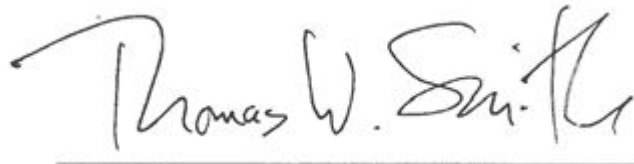
Examining Committee:



Thesis Director: Heather Jones, M.F.A.
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences



Thesis Committee Member: Anda Peterson, M.F.A.
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences



Thesis Committee Member: Thomas Smith, Ph.D.
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences

A Guide to the Gaps

– This book is dedicated to somebody who will probably never read it. –

The Gaps

Imagine this.
You stand on the edge of a riverbank,
And everything you're familiar with surrounds you,
The people you know,
The things you hold dear.
But everything is gray,
Black and white is all.
Your world is a colorless landscape.
Now imagine you look across that river.
On the other side is everything that you feel familiar with,
The people you know,
The things you hold dear.
But is it really so familiar,
If it's all in color?
That's the only difference between this world and that.
It matters not which colors you imagine,
Simply imagine the colors that appeal to you.
Ah, now wouldn't you rather be over there in the world of color,
Instead of this drab grayscale realm?
Well, look, there it is!
So close,
And yet, what divides you?
This river!
Quite the tyrant.
It crashes on the edges of the bank,
Tears away the earth in large clumps.
It flows east,
And right over the side of a terrible fall,
A cascade of water with no visible bottom.
The mist surrounding the falls,
Leaves you wondering what lies at the end of that drop.
But surely there is no net to catch you,
Once you've gone over the edge,
Only calamity.
But would it be worth it,
Just to jump in to find out?
The unknown,
It grips your curiosity, doesn't it?
But if you dive in,
You'll never know what it is like,
To have foothold on that colorful bank just across from you.
That's right, your real goal is over there,
Just opposite you.

*Color.
Fulfillment.
Satisfaction.
Happiness.*

*But even if you tried to swim through those rapids,
They would surely drag you east,
And over the falls.
Ah, but upon closer inspection...
A path of stepping stones,
Laid out before you!
But they look somewhat jagged,
Unstable really.
Those waters assault the rocks,
Smashing against the side and reaching up over,
To leave a wet, slippery film atop.
Not to mention those gaps!
Oh, the gaps between the stones!
So far the gaps seem to stretch,
That distance between each.
A step is a leap!
A real test of mettle.
Mettle that you surely do not have.
People much stronger than you have fallen victim to the river below.
You know.
You've seen it.
Friends,
Enemies,
It matters not who.
They all end up in the river,
And over the edge.
Some that you've seen,
Tried to sit on the edge of the bank and dip their feet in,
To test the waters.
But as they become complacent and unaware,
One wave proves strong enough to knock them in.
And they go over.
Some that you've seen,
Let that curiosity take over.
"What's over that edge?" they ask,
Just before they dive in.
And they go over.
You've also seen the ones that go for the gold.
They attempt the only path with a haven on the other side.
And, oh, those gaps,
So far between,
Only a few,*

*But vicious.
The most terrible trial of any they seem.
As you watch them try,
You might grimace in fear,
Or cheer them on,
But they always give up,
Tired and weary.
Or else they grow weak,
About halfway through,
And they stumble,
They fall,
Crying,
One moment there,
The next moment gone.
It's no task you wish to undertake.
You are so young,
And so uncertain.
But that other side!
Those colors,
That scheme.
It calls out to you,
You hear it.
It's just like this side, right?
That simple touch of color,
It does not change a thing.
At least, that is what you tell yourself.
But that's rather uncertain.
Why else would it beckon?
You know deep down that it is where you wish to be,
But with the monster before you,
You could end up in there or you could stay on your side forever.
Those seem like the only options.
If you try to make it across,
Sure, the rewards may seem sweet,
But that beast of a stream before you,
Does not plan on letting you taste them.
Paradise,
Or death.
Time to try and make it.
Where you stand is only the beginning,
Not a place for lively men.
So you decide to step forward,
Out onto the rocks.
This is your life,
You've chosen.
You'll make the journey.*

*But beware those unknowns,
Those gaps in between.*

This is a guide to the gaps.

Water, heat, and forgiveness: these are the purifying elements. Water and heat each have the ability to cleanse the flesh, but forgiveness is the only thing that will clear the mind of its ailments. A person seldom meets Death without having sinned, and to sin is to give up on guiltless life. There are some who have longed to maintain lives of perfection, but rare is a person who neither crosses paths with their shortcomings nor breaks under pressure. Guilt so easily invades the mind that is free of regret, and once it has, the expulsion of that guilt becomes such a feat. One cannot rid themselves of the destructive feeling inside, and they also remain unable to accept this feeling as an inspiration for self-betterment. Once it settles in the mind, guilt becomes the plague that defines the sinful.

One cannot cure guilt, but two can. So long the guilty may wait, and so broken they may become, but they always do so alone. The only relief is forgiveness, but forgiveness is a product of two, not one. It requires the will of a second, the one who suffers because of what the guilty party has done to them. Guilt manifests a dependency on another. The guiltless have full ownership of their own lives, but the life of the guilty is in the hands of someone else. And so the guilty puts forth an effort to make amends with the one that they have hurt. They plead, and they beg, and they try to show who it is that they've become, how different they really are, and how unnecessary it is to hold that guilt over them. And on occasion, the other will offer that purifying element, but just as often, the forgiveness is withheld, and instead the guilty is faced with insult, scoff, scorn, or even dreadful reminders of that sin which they already dwell on every day.

These are the thoughts I had as I lay in bed that night, only half a year since the incident. I had no sense of being awake, but there was no way that I could have fallen asleep. Pain weighed heavy on my heart as I considered the lengths that I would go to in order to receive my own forgiveness. But I had been dead for a half year, and I was certain that I would never be forgiven. For as dead as I was, so too was the one that I was dependent on, the one that I could not save. When the breath left his person, stability left my conscience. I pondered which one was worse: the death of my mind or the death of his body. And as I finally drifted off into a slumber not quite painless, a glow made its way into my room.

I had been driving around in circles as I had a tendency to do. A short trip in the car most often proved the only escape I had from all of the raging elements of my reality. I took it some distance away from all of the people I barely knew and the dormitory that I lived in. I had experienced a broken heart, and I had experienced anxiety over what the future held for me, but no matter how bad I felt, there seemed to be no condition that could not be eclipsed by a relatable and soothing song. Soft rock prevailed as the only comfort I had, and I burned a mix of personal favorites onto CDs so that I might always have those tracks on hand. On that night, though neither heartbroken nor anxious, I still turned to that same combination of acoustic guitar and mellow lyrics to remind me that things weren't so bad, that I would make it through. It seemed like even the sense of loneliness that had struck me that afternoon had not enough time to chip at my peace before soft rock appeared to obliterate the painful emotions and set my mind at ease.

Each time that I hopped in my car, I headed for some unexplored section of town. I had only been attending the university for maybe three weeks at that point. I remained largely unfamiliar with the city. And that was good. Exploring new areas, seeing new things, whether

the grandiose mansions in the rich neighborhoods or abandoned warehouses near downtown's older areas, always aided the distraction from misery. There just existed so many unique places in the world to pique my interest. Curiosity was one of my guiding traits. My adventurous soul wanted to experience the world in the future, see bizarre landmarks, eat foreign meals, and meet people unlike myself. The simple expeditions within the city acted simply as practice for a much larger exploration mission. It seemed unnaturally often that I would let myself get down on life, but I knew just how much life had to offer. The world around me seemed such a beautiful and fascinating place. Living was such a complex journey and yet it inspired such a simple appreciation.

But that love for life can be ripped away quickly. All of our dreams and desires are so fragile. What agent could possibly preserve them when so many demons wish to devour them?

Maybe ten miles away from my school, on the edge of a subtle neighborhood patterned with small and humble homes, I came across a park. Trudging over to a bench near a tiny pond, I noticed that the water glowed green, illuminated by a solitary lamppost. It was about one o'clock in the morning when I laid my body down on the bench, nobody else around. For minutes, I tried to absorb the surrounding setting. Parks were meant to be a calm in the storm, a place to relax even if the city all around demanded too much from you. All I wanted was for my heart to feel settled, to breathe the fresh air and listen to the crickets sounding.

But the gentle tone of nature didn't seem to ease any suffering. I understood the beauties of nature, but for once, I felt too apart from it. *Nature does not have the capacity to care*, I thought. In this one instance where loneliness had crippled me, it seemed that I could not turn to nature to be my friend. I felt so disconnected from what nature was. I usually felt like humanity and nature were one and the same.

But then, no. Nature neither worried nor loved. It neither imagined nor dreamed. It did not have the ability to desire. It did not have intention, and it did not have the capacity to reflect on its actions. It did not learn from its history. It did not feel happiness, anger, or sorrow, but it also didn't experience numbness. It knew nothing and made no choices. It had no soul.

Somehow, though, it had forsaken me. Perhaps that was all nature was capable of: leaving its children out to dry. It could not possibly understand my agony. And I realized, suddenly, that I was drowning in self-pity. And even self-disdain. A cold breeze caught me lost. It slid underneath my collar and seemed to attempt a choking assault. But then I realized that I was the one straining my own throat. Mucus caught in the back of my mouth as a few wet streaks made their way down my face. The position I was in made it hard to swallow. Breathing had also become a task as my throat and nose stuffed up. Coughing, I got up from the bench and headed toward my car. That expedition had been a failure. My body agreed, sneezing. I wiped the tears from my eyes.

Nobody had watched me cry, but I had felt humiliated and especially defeated. I had stayed in that park all of five minutes when I made the choice to leave. Perhaps soft rock was really all that could make me feel better. Knowing that somebody somewhere felt the same way I did, that was perhaps the only comfort I had. And all the while, even as I woke my car up and adjusted the volume on the stereo system and even as I longed for a friend who could understand the feeling, I had forgotten about him.

I had forgotten about the one person who had actually experienced what I had experienced. There was one person who I could relate to, better than any recorded musical artist singing his heart out in a studio somewhere perhaps decades before I had even heard of them. He was my best friend in the whole world, but on that night, I was so caught up in self-

commiseration that I had left even him out of my thoughts. I had been so foolish in letting myself forget, crueler than even the monsters who had amplified that loneliness inside of me. I wasn't the only person who had to deal with that pain, and yet I granted the other not even a thought. I had made it all about me and forgotten completely about him, my best friend.

And the only thing that reminded me...

The call from Wayne himself. And the threat of suicide.

Such ill thoughts had never bombarded my brain so quickly in my life. As I fumbled through the glove compartment, I could only imagine the scene. *How could I be so stupid?* I thought. *How, this one night, even with all of the adversity that we've made it through together, did I misplace the thought of him? How could I have left him alone after what had happened? What in the hell is wrong with me!?* Tears blurred my vision, and when I had finally found my GPS and situated it on the dashboard, I attempted to clear my eyes. The tears kept coming. But I didn't have time to try and calm myself down. Every step after that was interrupted by fear. Intense nervousness and deathly anticipation caught me confused as I tried to figure out where exactly I needed to go. I found the university's address that had been saved on my GPS, and headed back toward campus. Had I remained on campus that night, I would have been able to make a straight shot toward the bridge. Instead, since I had so stupidly chosen to visit a territory unknown late at night, I had no clue as to how to make it to my destination.

I remember noticing, only a few minutes after I had started on my way, that my stereo had still been on. The same soft rock soundtrack that had helped to comfort me only an hour earlier now prompted only dread. But it was an unexpected kind of dread. When I first noticed it playing, my first impulse was to turn it up, and so I did. But I quickly turned it off. The music

didn't bother me. In fact, I enjoyed it. A little too much, I thought. I noticed that I might have been allowing that melody to put me at ease. But how could I be at ease? My best friend was out there somewhere contemplating his own death! If not already dead! And in those same moments when I was certain the impending doom was filling his mind with fear and misery, I had been dedicating a portion of my mental capacity to deciding whether or not the background music fit my drive!

What kind of monster am I? I thought.

And so the music died. Everything became silent. Except for my car's engine. And the rough sound of tires on old and worn asphalt. And the chaos of the renegade radios playing through the rolled-down windows of other vehicles. I needed to think. Why did everything have to be so damn loud?

Why won't you let me think!?

The world didn't stop for me or my problems. It had no sympathy to give.

During my rush toward the bridge, anxiety took over my mind. Hardly focused on the streets around me, I messed up at one point, turning at a signal in front of another vehicle when they had the right of way. I didn't accelerate quickly enough to avoid contact, and they scraped along my rear bumper a bit. I stopped momentarily, as did the other car, but I hadn't the time for confrontations, and I dashed off once again. This time, someone followed me, though. The driver I had made contact with pursued; I was certain that they wouldn't let it go as they ran a stop sign to keep on my tail. Still my tiny accident remained the least of my worries. Nothing else would keep me from helping my friend.

I arrived at the bridge where Wayne told me he'd be.

Or at least where he was when he called, I thought. No, he is still here.

I parked on a patch of grass off to the roadside not far from where the street lifted over the water. As I stepped out of my vehicle, two close headlights pulled in behind me. The persistent driver I had made contact with earlier chased me all the way there and brought his car to a halt behind mine. I darted off toward the bridge before he could get out.

A sidewalk ran along the edge of the bridge. I followed it up at top speed, all the while growing more nervous each second that Wayne didn't appear. Wind picked up, and a violent tempest threw my hair away from my shoulders and all about. I grabbed it to contain as much of it as possible, but free hairs still whipped against my face, hindering vision. I took one of the rubber bands that I kept around my wrist and tied as much of my hair back as possible to restore my sight of the scene.

As the highest point of the bridge became closer, I looked over the edge and feared the worst. The expanse of water below was a black abyss. A hefty guardrail was the only buffer between the bridge and the fall, the final protection between continued life and the plummet toward death. Hopefully, Wayne saw that rail as a guardian in the same way that I did rather than as an obstacle to overcome. I didn't want to be the final measure standing between him and his demise.

But I attempted to come to terms with the fact that such might be the case.

Luckily, whoever had followed me in their car hadn't followed me on foot. *You chased me this far, I thought. Is the bridge too spooky for you?* I paused momentarily. *What if he puts a hurting on my car, though? No, that's the least of my worries.* I continued.

When I finally spotted Wayne, to my great relief, we were the only ones there. Vehicles zoomed by occasionally, but as far as I was concerned, it was only us two. Wayne stood in all

black, the relentless gales tugging at the jacket he wore, the same one he had been wearing when he was attacked earlier that very day. I remembered the sight of bloody stains on that jacket, and my gut hurt just thinking about what had happened. There in the dark night, though, any blood on his black apparel was invisible. He stood in a space between the street lights. I wondered if Wayne had been invisible to those who drove past him, but it really didn't matter at that point. I had arrived, and I saw my best friend as clear as day, for who he was.

Wayne stood on the bridge's pedestrian pathway, just as I did, but he leaned casually forward, his arms resting on the guardrail, and looked out over the expanse. He must have heard me approaching, as he turned to look at me instead. His expression surprised me.

A smile.

Only moments before, I had convinced myself to assume a face of gravity, determined to stop any crying before it started, focused solely on getting Wayne out of there. That wide smile caught me off guard, though, and my façade crumbled. Confusion and concern took hold of me once more.

“Greetings, brother!” Wayne bellowed unexpectedly. “I knew you would make it!”

It took me a few seconds before I was able to put his words together.

“Greetings, brother,” I replied, much less enthusiastically.

That was our typical greeting, the one that displayed the mutual compassion between us, a love like that between siblings. For a few moments, the out of place smile and friendly salutation put me at a strange ease. It made no sense at all, but there Wayne was grinning and talking to me in his jolly way just as I was used to.

Who smiles before death? I wondered, looking on at him. *Was he already about to come down? Had he already decided against this drastic course of action?* I tried to make sense of

those actions. *Perhaps he didn't even need me to be here. Maybe this is all just an elaborate joke, a horribly cruel joke that I'm going to make him feel extremely sorry for later.*

Wayne and I continued to stare at each other. I noticed serious bruises around his left eye and fresh scarring across his forehead and nose.

And I knew that he was serious. *He wouldn't be standing here if it wasn't.*

I stepped forward, taking a deep breath. I once again donned the face of determination to save a life. I smiled back at Wayne.

“What are you doing all the way up here?” I asked as I continued toward him. I grabbed onto the guardrail just next to him and leaned on it just as he did.

The wind picked up again, animating his jacket. He turned his head back toward the water over which the bridge stood. I also looked out over the edge. Fog rose up in all directions, making even the nearby land hard to see, but the towers of downtown still emerged over it, though the height at which we stood was in competition with their rooftops. The drop down was enormous. Taking the plunge would mean the end.

“It's a pleasant view, wouldn't you say?” Wayne asked without turning back to me.

“It is rather nice.”

If we had been up there for any other reason, I'm certain that it would have been. Wayne and I were used to visiting places like that, beautiful places. Places high, places low, places where we were alone with nothing but a lovely world and ourselves. There were so many wondrous sights to appeal to our adventurous natures. Wayne and I had only passed over that bridge together in my car before, never on foot, but views like the one from the top of that bridge especially piqued my interest; I found the vastness enveloping. I'm sure it would have been for Wayne as well. Perhaps it was. I was distracted by my worries, but he seemed satisfied. I thought

so, at least until I saw his hands gripping tight onto the guardrail and his arms shaking in fear. Still he maintained his smile, and I'm certain that both his kind face and shaky grip told honest stories about how he felt.

"I'm sorry that I called you out all the way up here this late at night."

I bit down hard on my lip so as to prevent myself from tearing up.

"I'm glad you told me," I mustered, though I'm sure I could have choked on such simple words.

"And I'm sorry..."

He paused. I turned my head to look at him and watched tears streaming down across that smiling face. He still managed to keep himself from stuttering.

"I think that this is the last view we'll ever share together."

My body began shaking as soon as the words left his mouth. I forgot to breathe for a few moments while I watched his eyes. He didn't even blink.

"Don't say things like that to me," I managed. "This isn't the finale."

I knocked on the guardrail softly but restlessly. My mind raced. *Think of something to say!* I pleaded with myself. When I noticed my fist rapping on, I stopped it.

"We're going to walk right on down this path together back toward my car," I told him, "and I'm going to drive you home. And then our real lives are going to begin. Forget rooftops and dinky bridges. We've got a whole world to take in! Deserts, valleys, canyons, oceans, mountains! We've only scratched the surface! Imagine what the world looks like from the Great Wall, the top of the Eiffel Tower! This view is nothing more than practice!"

I swung my arms out and toward the sky. My words had escalated to powerful shouting. I took a number of deep breaths. Then I glanced at Wayne to see how he reacted to my roars. His eyes were on me and his smile showed even brighter.

That's right, I thought, you just look at me.

"You're right," he said.

I returned his smile, still breathing heavily through my nose. A long pause followed while we shared each other's gazes. I wanted Wayne to see a fire in my eyes, a passion for life that he could latch onto. I tried to think up the next words to say. *I have to keep this going.* But Wayne spoke first.

"You know how we always go to the beach and look up at the stars?" he asked.

I nodded, curious as to where he was going.

"One time you told me this: that you didn't understand how anybody could look up at the night sky and all those stars and not feel incredibly small."

I just looked at him as he continued.

"I look up at those same stars every night and sometimes wonder the distance between them and me. And how many mes could fit within that space between."

"I'm not sure that I underst-"

"Thank you," he said suddenly.

"What for?" I asked.

"For what you did earlier today."

Wayne touched the fingers of one hand to a deep gash on his forehead. My heart sank.

"For protecting me," he added. "When those guys started beating on me, I was certain that it would be quick and the pain would pass, just like usual. But then they just kept going and

going, and suddenly I wasn't certain that they would stop at all. They knocked me down at one point, and I looked up at the sky. And I knew that, even though the sun was shining and I couldn't see them, those same stars were up there somewhere in the sky, looming over this world, and watching me get bloodied, and not caring in the slightest. And that's when I felt the smallest I've ever felt. Truly insignificant."

"Wayne, I'm so sorry that I couldn't stop them," I murmured. "I tried, but I couldn't protect you-"

"Roland, stop."

He put his hand up.

"I'm not blaming you. I'm thanking you. For coming to my protection. For being there. Because even when the stars just watched, even when the universe didn't care about me, I know that you did. And even now, you've come here. You really are my best friend."

"And you're mine."

His smile had softened up over the course of his words, and I hoped that would be the end of it, that we could return home.

"And I know that you would continue to come to my aid no matter how many times I found myself in a position like that, but we can't win that war."

No, I thought, that's the wrong response.

"I very much enjoy having serious conversations with you," he continued, "but too often we come to that mutual conclusion that neither of us is ever going to be truly accepted by this world around us, that nobody has the capacity to really understand us. We just don't fit in here."

It's true that I had, in the same way he had, come to treat that notion as fact.

“Yeah, Wayne, but even without a whole world to understand us, there’s still you and me. I still get you. I need you to get me. And I need you to get that this isn’t the end of things.”

I extended a hand toward Wayne’s shoulder, but he turned away, back towards the abyss and gripped with both hands onto the guardrail once more.

“That’s true. You get me, and in theory, that’s a good starting place. Maybe I’m wrong.”

He paused momentarily, but not long enough for me to think up the words to fix things.

“In theory, it’s a good starting place, but in reality that’s not enough. My happiness can’t come from you. My happiness has to come from me.”

He lifted a leg, still gripping tight onto the rail with his hands. He stepped precisely onto the metal barrier, the clang it made woke me up from my paralyzing shock, and I moved to try and grab him. He saw me coming and swatted me away. I froze momentarily, fearful, as his body shook back and forth, not entirely balanced.

“Wayne, you haven’t thought this through well enough. There’s still more to live for.”

“There’s still more to live for, but the world in which we live is too unforgiving.”

His other foot landed on the rail. Wayne now crouched on top of the rail, seemingly ready to take the final dive. *If you make even the slightest move, I’m grabbing you*, I prepared myself. I rummaged for things to convince him to stop this.

“What about your family? What am I supposed to tell them?”

He slowly shifted up toward a standing position. I could see that the entirety of his balance wasn’t there. He looked over at me.

“You can just tell them the truth. That I wasn’t prepared for what this world-”

A bright light appeared across Wayne's face. It shook back and forth and the spotlight crawled across his body. I turned around to see where it was coming from and noticed a silhouette approaching us, still a fair distance away. *It must be that guy whose car I hit*, I thought.

I dropped my guard for only that second, but then the sound of the metal rail snapped me back into reality. *Wayne!* I spun around quickly, with an arm out ready to grab him and pull him down, but that arm was my greatest mistake. I slapped the back of Wayne's leg, causing him to shake atop the rail. He hadn't made a move to jump, but he began to fall.

"Wayne!" I yelled.

I slammed against the rail, as he went over the edge, though he had tried to pivot around to regain balance. I reached for him, but merely pulled his jacket as it slipped from my grasp. And Wayne faced up towards me while I faced down toward him. I cried out for him as he hurtled down faster.

I watched his face as he fell, and he must have noticed the painful agony on my face, as I saw the intense fear on his and the regret in his eyes.

Then it was over. Wayne was gone.

Return

A half year had passed since Wayne's fall. One particular night, hours of taxing thoughts about the incident kept me awake for hours until sleep finally tore me away from that. Soon after, I awoke to brightness, but it wasn't the sun greeting me through the window as it did most weekend wakings. My eyes weren't prepared for the intensity. I covered my eyes with one hand to shield them from the burn. *A flashlight?* I wondered. *What kind of joke-?* I swatted at the light with one hand, but it dodged. Pulling away now, it seemed to float toward a corner of my bedroom, bouncing up and down as it went.

"What the hell?" I muttered.

I sat up, still not entirely awake. I could tell it was still night through my window. I rubbed my eyes, then pulled my sheets back. Not at all sure what the glow was, I cautiously stepped from my bed onto the cold tile. The mysterious glow continued to bounce but didn't come any closer. I kept my eyes on it as I shuffled backwards toward the light switch, though I almost fell over something along the way. When I touched the wall, I glanced back only a moment to make sure the door was still locked. It was. *No magicians in my room.* Turning back, I took a deep breath in preparation to cast the light on whatever had so rudely interrupted my sleep.

"Aha!" I exclaimed as I hit the switch.

To my surprise, I found that the strange light had no handle or strings attached, nothing to suspend it in the air. *A bug perhaps?* I thought, arming myself with a nearby gaming magazine. *Firefly?* I hadn't encountered a bug in the dorm before, and I especially didn't expect to find any on the fifth floor. I rolled up the magazine. I didn't have any intention of killing the creature, but I at least wanted to figure out what it was. I inched toward the corner where it continued to float,

ready to strike if it proved hostile, poisonous, ravenous, ugly, or covered in too many legs. I don't care for bugs.

The critter radiated a bright white against the green walls. I had never seen a firefly before, but I had never imagined them to be so candescent. No matter how close I got to it, I couldn't locate the body. The light just created an impenetrable barrier around its source.

"Okay, little buddy," I told it, "time to go."

I slowly moved the magazine toward it, hoping to scare it away from the far corner, but it refused to leave. I tried to softly budge it, but the magazine seemed to just pass through the ball of light. Slightly confused, I tried again, but the same thing happened.

"An optical illusion?" I wondered aloud, examining it from a few different directions.

"You can really see me?" a voice came.

I jumped back from the light as I heard it. I took a few violent swats at the glow, with no results. Then I furiously scanned the room in fear. *Bugs don't talk.*

"Who the hell's there?" I asked.

"You can hear me?" the same voice returned.

"Yeah, I can hear you," I responded irritated, continuing to search any possible hiding place, though my room had very few. "Now come out here."

Nobody appeared to me, but the firefly flew out directly in front of my face. I freaked out and stumbled back against my bed. Attempting to grab the bedframe for balance, I missed and fell, managing to knock my head against the edge on my way down. As I landed on the floor, I grimaced in pain and dropped the magazine to hold my head instead.

"Oh no, are you okay?"

I looked above me where the light floated. I kept clutching my pounding head. The voice seemed familiar, but I couldn't figure out where I knew it from.

"I didn't plan on putting you in a cast the moment I returned," the voice sounded worried.

This voice couldn't be...

"What the hell are you?" I asked, specifically addressing the glimmering orb now. Still tired and now in pain, I lazily accepted that the intrusive orb was the source of the voice.

"Roland, it's me," the voice answered. "Wayne."

I closed my eyes, and slowly picked myself up from the floor. I then silently turned from the light, checking the closet and behind my desk to make sure everything was as usual. I opened the door. Nobody was out there. I locked it once more, turned the lights off, and finally crawled back onto my bed, attempting to ignore the glow and the painful memories that it had brought.

"What are you doing?"

It sounded just like him.

"Roland?"

"I'm going back to sleep," I replied, settling back in.

"Why?"

"Because I'm tired of these nightmares," I answered.

"You don't think I'm real?" it asked.

"It wouldn't be the weirdest thing I've seen at this time of the night."

"What would be?" it chuckled.

The laugh was a perfect match. It gave me chills. I gritted my teeth and didn't respond, shutting my eyes even tighter and pulling a pillow over my head.

I didn't hear anything else.

After a few minutes of not being able to fall asleep, I lifted one edge of the pillow up only enough to peek out from underneath. At first, there was only darkness. Then I saw a faint white from the orb, still there. It flitted about in the air, moving back and forth across the room. I covered my eyes once more and tried not to think about it. It was difficult, but I eventually went back to sleep.

When I awoke in the morning, I was pleased to find the sun shining and no mystical orbs to disturb my peace. Instead, a headache tortured me in wakefulness. I rubbed the residue from my eyes. Grabbing my toothbrush and paste, I opened the door to meander off to the bathroom. Two steps out, though, I spotted something out of the corner of my eye that made me drop everything.

“Morning, Roland.”

That same luminescent ball from my dream whizzed toward me. With no time to question my own sanity, I tripped back into my room, slamming and locking the door as quickly as possible. I ripped the blanket off of my bed and shoved it in the space between the door and the tiles. I crumbled to the floor, breathing heavily, and watched. *I must be going insane*, I thought. My guilt had finally driven me up the wall. It took as long as a half year. Honestly I had expected to break much sooner.

“I hope you’re decent!” the phantom voice came.

Despite my best effort to keep it out, the light easily passed right through my door.

“For the love of God!” I barked, clutching my head and closing my eyes. “Why are you haunting me like this?”

“Haunting?”

The voice kept silent a moment before continuing.

“I’m not haunting you. I’m your best friend.”

Dark memories surfaced in my mind. That night, that phone call, that bridge.

“My best friend is dead,” I responded coldly.

Part of me wanted to believe this floating orb, but I couldn’t let that part command my reality. Wayne was dead. I was the sole witness to his fall. I was the one who pushed him over the edge.

“Roland, I know it’s been a while, but you’ve got to believe me.”

It took everything I had not to talk back. It kept going.

“Do you remember what you told me back on that bridge?”

I bit my lip. *I don’t want to remember.*

“That you and I still have a whole world to see together?”

Had.

“Well, I’ve returned to make that a reality!” the persistent voice escalated to fill my ears.

“Except you’re gone!” I shouted back.

I glared hatefully at the sadistic shard of light that brought such morbid thoughts to my mind. It got to me.

“It seems like the most unrealistic thing. It’s hard for even me to believe, but the truth is that I’m not as dead as I once was.”

“Why would you come back now? It’s been half a year.”

“I’m sorry that I took so long.”

I grabbed a book from the shelf next to me and threw it full force at the orb. It slammed loudly against the door. But the light remained in the air. So I threw another. And another. And another.

“Keep this up, and you’ll ruin your whole collection.”

I paused momentarily before throwing another.

“Roland, stop.”

“Leave me alone!” I yelled.

“I’m never going to leave you alone again,” it said. “And that’s a promise.”

My heart lurched. That’s exactly what I would have wanted him to say. I found myself really wanting to believe this ridiculous situation. But maybe if I suspended my disbelief for only a short period of time, I could...

I’m not entirely sure what I thought I could do.

I sat on the floor and thought for a long time, battling myself. *Don’t do it. Do it. Don’t do it. Do it. Don’t. Do it. Don’t.*

Do it.

“Prove it.”

“What?” it asked.

“Prove to me that you’re here. Your voice and your words tell me that you’re Wayne or at least how I’d imagine Wayne. But prove to me that you’re actually with me here in the present, that you’re an entity, not a construct of my psychosis.”

“Sure, but how should I do that?”

“Do something ghost-like,” I presented.

“Such as?”

I stood up, swiping a hand through the orb a few times. I had to think about it a few minutes, but I finally came up with something. I opened my door and stepped out into the hallway. A moment of silence passed before a faint chuckle resonated from my dorm mate's bedroom. His door was closed. I returned to my room.

"Can other people see you?" I asked.

"I doubt it," the light responded. "Nobody in the dorm hallways seemed to react to me."

"All right, I've got it," I whispered so that my neighbor couldn't hear. "Slide on through the wall here into my roommate Damien's room, and tell me exactly every article of clothing that he's wearing, and I'll confirm it myself."

"Really? That sounds like an invasion of privacy."

"Just do it," I demanded. I also had to ensure that this would stop once it came back wrong, so I added, "And if you give me the wrong information, you leave for good."

The glow hesitated before finally making its way through the wall. While it was gone, I reassured myself that I had no way of knowing what my roommate might have on. *Unless, of course, he's wearing the same clothes as yesterday.* The imaginary light reentered. I waited.

"He's wearing a red bandana, white sneakers, a black wristband, black jeans, and a shirt that says 'Damn, I love beer.'"

The same thing as yesterday. I should have known.

"Furthermore," it continued, "the girl in there with him has a pink tank-"

A girl in there with Damien? Oh, that's right! It must be his girlfriend!

"Wait," I stopped him mid-sentence, "start over with that one."

"Okay. She's wearing a pink tank top, black skinny jeans, a pink hairband, flip-flops, and a bit too much makeup. Oh, and have you checked the time yet?"

“Nope,” I answered.

“Well, your friend’s watch tells me that it’s 11:45 a.m.”

“He’s not my friend,” I corrected him as I went over the checklist in my head. “All right, I’ve got it.”

I stepped over to Damien’s door and rattled off three knocks. After some rustling, he opened up.

“Sup?” he greeted me, leaning against his doorframe. “You finished up with all your yelling?”

His breath smelled of cigarettes. I tried not to breathe in too many of his fumes.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I responded awkwardly. “So how’s it going?”

I looked him over while he was busy answering. *Red bandana. White sneakers. Black wristband. Black jeans. “Beer.” Check.* I shifted slightly to peer past his shoulder and into his room. Sure enough, there was his girlfriend, sitting in an extra chair from our living room, texting. *Pink tank. Black jeans. Hairband. Flip-flops. Cake face. Check.*

Damien leaned to intercept my stare. His eyebrow was furrowed, probably at my nosiness.

“Need something?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, smiling nervously. “Do you by any chance have the time?”

Suspicion remained in his eyes as he raised his wrist and checked his watch at my request.

“Bout a quarter to twelve.”

Just as I was told, I thought. Having finished up my inspection, I thanked him, and headed back into my room, closing the door behind me. The prophetic light bobbed up and down

in the air. It had gotten everything correct, but I still tried to rationalize obstinately against it. *He was just wearing the same clothes as yesterday, which I remembered. Yeah. And I've probably seen his girlfriend wearing that outfit before. That part may have been a lucky guess, but it's possible. And as far as the time goes, maybe when I woke up I had checked the clock and forgotten. My mind could have subconsciously calculated an estimate time based on that. Yeah, it must have. After all, my alarm clock is right next to my bed.* I glanced over to my nightstand to confirm. *Correct.*

It took me a moment to realize, but my alarm clock showed 12:30. I reached for my cellphone. It also said 12:30. I tried to figure it out in my head, but couldn't. *It's 12:30.* It was imperative that I understood this inconsistency, so I marched on back over to Damien's room and knocked once more. I think I heard a brief sigh before he opened the door again.

"Yeah?" he asked, clearly irritated.

"Sorry to bother you again," I began, "but could you tell me where you got your watch?"

"Ummm..." he said as he tried to recall. "Think I got it from a dollar store somewhere."

"Oh, I see."

A long moment of awkward silence.

"Could I look at it?" I finally asked.

His brow scrunched up once again, but he replied, "Sure."

He raised his wrist to me. The hands definitely indicated 11:45. And a few small dials at the bottom of the face showed the date: February 5th, 2015. Today. Then I realized the issue.

"Might want to get yourself a new battery," I told Damien. "Your second hand's stopped."

"Really?" he asked, pulling his watch back close to his own face.

Before he had the opportunity to say anything else, I had to bounce back to my bedroom. I resolutely closed the door this time as my eyes watered.

There's no way I could have known, I thought.

I gazed at the new form of my old friend. My first joyful tears in over five months distorted his light into long streaks.

“Wayne?” I managed.

He hovered toward me.

“Greetings, brother,” he said.

“Greetings, brother,” I returned.

“Perhaps you should sit down a moment,” he offered.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” I responded, noticing that my shock had glued my back to the door and my hand to the knob.

My heart beat quickly to accompany my amazement. I sat down in my desk chair slowly. My eyes remained stuck on Wayne the entire time. It was hard to figure out what to say next.

Wayne suggested, “I suppose we have a lot to talk about. Perhaps you’d like some coffee?”

Still disabled by awe, I simply responded “yes.”

“Well, then you’ll have to go make it yourself.”

I thought about it a moment, then smiled, amused.

The situation was unbelievable, and yet I did all I could to believe it. I had a plethora of questions for Wayne. I asked a lot of them over a cup of coffee that I had made for myself. I

offered Wayne a cup out of courtesy, but he assured me that he wouldn't be drinking any in his new state.

"What happened?" I first asked.

He started by guaranteeing that he had died. Then he went on to explain his journey from death back to life and eventually to my dorm room, at least to the best of his ability. In reality, his own memories of getting back to me were hazy. I tried to adequately understand, but this fact hindered that crystal comprehension and only led to more questions.

"What about God? Is there one?"

"Weird thing," he responded. "I'm not entirely sure. I don't remember a heaven or anything like that, not seeing or talking to anyone either."

"Well, there's got to be, right? What else could grant you second life?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

I suppose that I was making hasty assumptions about this peculiar episode that only he had experienced.

"What things *do* you know for certain?" I posed before taking a long sip from my mug.

"Well, if not anything else, I know what I'm here to do."

I raised my eyebrow, intrigued.

"When I fell that night, I realized on the way down that it really wasn't what I wanted."

A lump caught in my throat as I remembered all too vividly the look of despair that I had seen on Wayne's face only moments before his demise. Coffee went down the wrong way, and I began to cough repeatedly. As I tried to regain my composure, beating a fist against my chest, I wrestled with the idea of asking Wayne whether or not he blamed me for his death. I had

wondered about that for a long while, and I had been certain that I would never get the opportunity to ask. But I finally had a chance.

“Are you okay?” Wayne asked as my coughing spree died down.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I responded. “I, uh... yeah...”

I decided not to ask. I was afraid of the answer.

“As you were saying,” I urged him to continue.

“Right. Before I even made it the full way down, I realized that you were right. That there was still so much to do and see, that I was giving up a whole life because of a rough phase. I made it my resolve to continue living so that I wouldn’t miss out on those experiences. Whether it was a god who let me live again or sheer willpower that denied even total death, I’m certain that it was this resolution that pulled me through.”

“Was it dark?” I asked him.

“What?”

“Death. Was it dark?”

“Look,” he rebuked me, “I don’t know why you’re so concerned with death. You’re still alive. I’m still alive. Don’t you get that you’re part of the reason that I came back here?”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, Roland, I’m here to live it up and pursue my own happiness. The happiness that I was so closed to throwing away. In order to achieve that, though, I need you, my brother.”

I was confused.

I replied, “But you told me that your happiness couldn’t come from me.”

“And I still believe that,” he countered. “But that doesn’t mean that you can’t help me in my pursuits. You’re willing to help your friend, aren’t you?”

I nodded hesitantly.

“Right-o!” he said cheerfully. “And I’m going to help you pursue your happiness as well.”

“What,” I responded, “you think I’m unhappy?”

“Well, forgive me if I’m wrong, but while I was having to convince you of my legitimacy, you didn’t quite have the face of a happy man.”

My head slumped over.

“You may have even seemed a bit crazed,” he tacked on.

I smiled this time.

“And what do you suppose we do about these issues of ours?” I questioned.

“How about this?”

His glowing form floated over near my chest.

“Let me take up residence in your heart for now. It’s unlikely that I’ll ever exist to the rest of this world again, so the best chance I have at fulfillment is by living vicariously through you. Though I hope to be more involved than in recent times. This way, you can talk to me whenever you want, and I can see all of the things you see. Also, you can carry me with you, even if I’m asleep.”

“Is that a thing you do?” I asked.

“Sleep? Yeah, of course. Even God needed a rest on the seventh day. In fact, I think I might need to take a nap very soon. I was up all night exploring your digs.”

“You were in my stuff?” I asked apprehensively.

“I wasn’t *in* your stuff, but I was *around* a lot of it,” he explained.

I looked toward a heavy duty bin in the corner beneath my bed. Wayne must have noticed my concern.

“I didn’t actually check inside of anything,” he reassured me. “Everything that you’re able to see from here is all I’ve seen. That and the inside of your kitchen oven.”

I raised an eyebrow and asked, “Why were you in the oven?”

“I was looking for a warm place.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Well,” Wayne said, “I’m going to hit the hay.”

“Oh, okay,” I mumbled, still uncertain as to how this would work.

However, the small orb of light nonchalantly slipped into my chest cavity. It was a tad worrisome.

“How is it?” I asked.

“Warmer than the oven.”

I smiled. I had to wonder whether Wayne truly remembered what had happened in the moments just before his fall, how I had been the one to push him over the edge. In that moment, though, I was just glad that he had come back.

After Wayne’s return, I laughed for the first time in a long time, and over the course of the next two weeks, I enjoyed a lot more laughs. It had been half of a year since I had really come out of my room for anything other than school or food, almost forgetting what it felt like to really let myself go. My general education courses luckily hadn’t cursed me with much homework during those two weeks, so Wayne and I were able to cram the days with fun activities in order to make up for the time we had lost. I found a retro arcade downtown that held

our favorite first-person shooter. Wayne couldn't actually play, but I could tell he was having fun as he yelled along to some of the corny dialogue. I had a craving for ice cream at some point and decided to order a double scoop from a local parlor. Wayne tried to convince me that he could possess my tongue in order to taste the mint chocolate chip. I started to get worried only moments before he caved and admitted that it was impossible. We saw three new movies in those two weeks. I figured the theater would be a good choice as Wayne and I were equally powerless in controlling the outcome of movies.

On a few late nights, we escaped to the beach to gaze up at the stars, an established pastime of ours. However, unlike in days long passed, we openly mocked the stars for their incapacity to feel or show concern. We declared to them that we would eventually come to burn bigger and brighter than they ever had. I would look over at Wayne, the spark who had defeated even death, and think to myself that he probably had the most potential for that.

Eventually I had to explain to Wayne how I had spent my last several months without him, all the pain and depression that I had been unable to overcome since his death.

"I had really hoped that you would be able to move on," he told me.

"How could I?" I asked. "You were my best friend and the only one who had ever understood me."

Whereas Wayne couldn't remember much of the time since his death, I remembered it all too well. Loneliness latched on to my life and forced me to stay in bed through unhealthy hours. When I emerged from my room, I usually just needed food, though I'm not sure why I didn't just starve myself to death. I supposed human hunger too compelling to ignore. When I did come out, though, nobody ever talked to me. I just received odd glances from across rooms. I heard whispers every once in a while: some people deeming me depressed or mopey. Some knew that I

had lost a friend. I wondered how many were aware that I had watched him fall. Did other people think I was to blame? Did anyone think I was a murderer? It had been hard for me to pursue relationships, even before that dreadful night, due to my socially awkward nature. After, it was nearly impossible. I eventually accepted that I would never be able to associate again. I avoided people, and they avoided me. With this, I fell into social death and perpetual loneliness.

But Wayne had returned. Perhaps things could change...

Profession

I arrived to my chemistry class ten minutes early on the day of my first exam this semester so that I might do some last minute preparation. I studied for four hours the night before just so that I might stack up enough knowledge in my short-term memory for the test. Wayne talked to me to keep me awake. Most of the time I only studied near exam dates. I didn't resort much to studying in my free time which for me meant any time spent outside of class, and I never found myself bored enough to crack open a textbook for fun. When it came to examinations, I was highly dependent on temporary memorization of names, dates, mathematic equations, and scientific formulas. My powerful memory was one of the gifts granted to me by the gods that may or may not be, and it had yet to really let me down in a testing situation.

I had relied on temporary memory throughout middle and high school, and I continued to in college. I could not be certain that this method of mine would not one day fail me. This remained the sole reason for the tiniest bit of anxiety that would consistently emerge on each test day. However, this study tactic left me with lots of free time with which to do as I pleased. Was it really worth giving up? I doubted it. For the previous half year, free time had been anything but a blessing. It always allowed the painful thoughts to ravage my mind. In that period, any form of distraction became a blessing. Thanks to Wayne's return, though, I remembered that free time could actually be enjoyable.

"Are you sure you studied long enough?" Wayne asked as my pencil scratched fast across a sheet of practice questions.

"Not sure. Probably not. Let me focus. I'll be done soon."

I continued to review the items that caused me the most trouble. I had to work up through the last minute before testing. I was ready, and a few nerves came along with my excitement. A few students slid in just before the class period officially began.

The professor grabbed a stack of papers and spoke up, “Okay, you all know the drill. Everything off your desk except a pencil.”

I took one last look at the practice page, which had more markings than blank space. Then I closed my notebook and placed it under my seat. I continued to review the problems in my head as the professor passed out test sheets. The moment I stopped thinking about the problems, I was bound to forget them. I only had to make it through one period. I flipped my favorite pencil around in my right hand. I paused a moment and glanced at a pair of cartoony angry eyes that I had scratched into the soft wood near its eraser end. *Carry me through this*, I projected my thoughts to it.

Just as the professor got to my seat, the classroom door opened. I turned, curious as to who could be arriving late, but honestly I wasn't surprised. One scraggly-haired boy in a hoodie and baggy jeans tried to sneak in, but the loud jingling from his silver chain necklace disrupted his stealth. He scanned the room for a free seat, but there was only one. He met eyes with the professor, and she pointed a finger at the final open chair right next to me. His chain clashed against itself as he walked behind me and sat down on my right.

It's the same thing every day, I thought, used to this boy showing up late, usually just after the professor started lecturing. *I guess test days are no exception*. He pulled his chair out and sat down, his loose necklace clanging heavily against the desk in front of him. My eyes closed in irritated response to the obnoxious sound. The professor placed a test in front of him and then one in front of me. I opened my eyes as I heard the pages rustle in front of me, and I

looked over at my new neighbor briefly as he unzipped his hoodie to reveal a green shirt with a frog on it. *He wore that shirt two days ago*, I remembered, revolted. I wondered if he had taken a shower since then, but I assumed not. His head shifted in my direction, and I quickly faced forward. He began to forage through his backpack.

I gripped my pencil tightly and flipped through the test pages of my first chemistry test of the semester, searching for any questions that might cause me difficulty. It consisted of a few multiple choice questions, some identification of molecular formulas, and a page for drawing diagrams of structural formulas. It seemed perfectly easy, and I finished it in record time, at least for someone who hadn't studied for more than a total of four hours throughout the course so far. A couple of wordy multiple choice questions caused me minor concern, but they alone couldn't lock me in with a poor grade.

Other than that, my only concern came from the fellow sitting next to me. Now, I wasn't watching him, but to sit so close to someone and not notice any strange behavior out of the corner of my eye would be oddly unobservant of someone like me. He kept looking under the desk, and I'm certain that every once in a while his eyes shifted toward my test. Every time I even looked at him through my peripheral, though, he was facing forward or looking down at his form. I thought he was trying to cheat. A thought passed through my mind: *The sooner I finish up and turn this in, the less likely I am to be cheated by Mr. -*

My eyes flew over the top of his paper just to complete his name which at that time was otherwise unknown to me. But he had left the name space blank. I was bewildered. Did he forget to write it? No. My eyes ran wild for a matter of seconds over the rest of his test page, but there wasn't so much as chicken scratch anywhere. His head seemed to whip in my direction suddenly, and I turned back to look at my own test, a bit frightened. I didn't want to be the one accused of

cheating. He clearly hadn't studied for the test, and unless somebody allowed him an opening to steal answers, he wouldn't have any.

I straightened my test pages on my desk, refusing to give that delinquent any answers. I walked up to the front of the room and handed my form to the professor. Fourth or fifth finished, I felt satisfied with myself and decided to stop worrying about what some kid with tacky shirts, or rather one tacky shirt, did. I returned to my seat only to pack up my bag, and for a brief moment, I made awkward eye contact with the attempted cheater, but he looked away first. He still had yet to write anything. I didn't pay him much mind. I searched for my pencil but couldn't locate it on the desk, on the floor, or in my pockets. I shrugged and let it be.

For the last half day my mind had been weighed down with the stress of memorizing way too much in too short a time period, but that ended as soon as I finished the examination. I made a stride for the door, and as it closed behind me, the burden of all that science disappeared. I spent the weekend after that test relaxing and meeting new people, something I hadn't particularly cared to do ever since the incident half a year prior. Not even an hour was spent on schoolwork that weekend, and I enjoyed my spare time.

When I got into chemistry class the next week, the period ran normally. The Delinquent, the title I bestowed upon the frequent late arrival, wore the same hoodie as usual, but I made note that he had changed his shirt at least once since test day. I wrote down all things necessary from that period in preparation for my next exam cram session. As the class ended and everyone got up to leave, the professor made a surprise announcement.

“Troy and Roland, I need to see you two before you leave,” she demanded.

Uncertain as to what she might need, I gathered my belongings and met her at the front, as did the Delinquent. That's how I finally figured out his name, not that I planned on referring

to him as Troy from then out. The professor requested that we meet her at her office later that afternoon. She was certain that at least one of us had cheated on the previous exam. *You've got to be kidding*, I thought.

I shuffled down the hallway towards my chemistry professor's office and noticed Troy and her already talking as she unlocked her door. She let Troy in to sit down, but she must have seen me coming as she waited for me outside the door, her arms crossed. Being waited on gave me chills. As I drew closer, I raised a hand in greeting but said nothing. I wasn't sure if it would be appropriate to say anything upon being accused of cheating. Also, I feared that anything I might say could and would be used against me. She skipped the pleasantries.

"I'm going to talk to him first, and then I'll talk to you. Sit out here until I'm finished."

I nodded and sat down in a cushioned seat a short distance from her office as she closed the door. As I waited, sweat accumulated in crevices on my body.

"You don't have to look so on edge."

The light orb that had been dwelling in my chest appeared to try and comfort me.

"Did the nervous earthquake in my stomach wake you up?" I jested, my body shaking in anticipation. I didn't smile.

"You didn't cheat," Wayne said.

"Thanks, Wayne, I knew I could count on you to point out the obvious."

I'm certain that if he had had an expression to show, it would have conveyed dissatisfaction at my jab.

"Look," I explained, "if he lies and makes her think I was the one cheating, it's going to be really hard to convince her otherwise."

“If he lies,” Wayne rebutted, “then you just tell the truth. If it comes down to it, you could always prove that you understand the information.”

I scratched my head and replied, “I suppose. The only problem is... I’m not sure if I remember all of the information. When I cram, I don’t really retain the knowledge for very long. Mostly because I don’t care about any of it.”

“Well, you might want to start going over some of it in your head,” Wayne said. “The test was still recent. It should still all be fresh in your mind.”

“I suppose.”

I could hear muffled murmurs from behind my professor’s office door. The simple idea of getting in serious trouble over a cheating accusation scared me. I felt the sudden urge to use the bathroom. Looking down the hallway to where the bathroom was, I thought about taking a quick trip but hesitated. Even if my bladder were to explode, not being there when my professor called to interrogate me might have made me look even more suspicious. I sat still for another minute waiting patiently through the stressful compound of anticipation and a full bladder. Until I decided to get rid of at least one. I darted down the hallway toward the restroom.

While I did my business, I ran through the test questions I remembered. By visualizing the test pages, I was able to recall a great deal of the questions, at least to a reasonable degree. As I returned to where I had sat earlier, I noticed that the door to my professor’s office was open. *Could they have finished while I was gone?* I thought. I approached it just as it opened fully and my professor emerged.

“Oh, so you didn’t run away,” she said.

She maintained an unsettling poker face. I could not have known how the talk with the Delinquent had gone. He must have left while I was away.

“Sorry,” I responded, face towards the floor then, intimidated. “I had to use the restroom.”

“That’s fine. Come have a seat.”

“Hey, you punk!” I beckoned to the Delinquent.

I regretted shouting, though. Plenty of the students in the cafeteria turned to look at me. Troy wasn’t one of them. He just kept walking. I tried to hide my embarrassment as I chased after him and toward the back of the cafeteria. I tapped on his shoulder, and he finally acknowledged my presence, sliding his earphones down around his neck.

He only stared at me, his lunch in hand, so I spoke first, “Did you cheat off me on that test?”

The blank stare continued.

“No.”

Then he turned back around and sat down at a nearby seat while I stood dazed by his nonchalant denial. I slid into the seat opposite him.

“Did you tell the professor that I cheated on my exam?” I furthered my investigation, waiting for the truth.

“No.”

Just like the first one. He didn’t look at me.

“Don’t lie. I remember you acting really weird on test day. You were trying to look at my test, right?”

“No.”

I found myself about ready to throw something at him.

“Then why didn’t you write anything on your test?” I continued.

In his monotone voice: “Why were you looking at my test? Trying to cheat?”

Trying to turn this on me, huh? I thought, irritated.

“Is that what you told her?” I questioned. “That *I* was the one looking at *your* test?”

“Look,” he said, finally making eye contact, “I didn’t tell her anything. She asked me some stuff, but I answered honestly. Then I suggested that she give me a few problems like those that were on the test. She confirmed it herself that I wasn’t cheating.”

“That was *your* suggestion?” I asked, surprised.

When the teacher suggested that I proved my knowledge of the material, I assumed it to be her idea, not the Delinquent’s. I felt a twinge of anger at this. I had almost messed up that portion of the interrogation. Luckily, I scraped together just enough from my memory to accurately solve the problems posed. I still wasn’t sure it was enough to convince the professor, though. She refused to reveal her thoughts.

“I didn’t need your answers,” the Delinquent continued with the same monotone voice.

He reached into a pocket of his backpack, pulling out a familiar item, and rolling it across the table toward me.

“My pencil?” I asked as I picked it up.

There was no mistaking it. The eyes I had scratched onto the side stared angrily back at me.

“I realized I didn’t have one,” he explained, “so, sorry, but I took yours when you finished.”

So all of the suspicious activity wasn't an attempt at cheating but at procuring a pencil? Oddly enough, it made sense. That's why he hadn't written anything and why my pencil vanished the very moment I left my seat.

"Why didn't you just ask for an extra?" I asked, still trying to connect all of the dots in my head.

He shrugged in response. *All of this confusion over a pencil*, I thought, sighing. *Should have just come prepared, Delinquent.*

"Fine," I finally said, sitting back in my seat, "I believe you. But why exactly did she accuse us of cheating in the first place?"

"She told me that our tests were too similar. Which questions did you get wrong?" he asked.

"Uhhhh," the question caught me off guard, "just the second one she said. One of the multiple choice."

"Same," he said. "Our tests looked identical. We sat next to each other. She probably saw you acting weird."

"I wasn't acting weird. You were."

"Honestly," he ignored me, "it was probably just the question. It was poorly written and misleading."

"Which one was it?"

"The one about Leeuwenhoek and his contribution to atomic theory."

"Riiiiight," I said, "I kind of remember. What was wrong with it?"

He responded, "A bit. It suggests that Leeuwenhoek had a relationship to atoms, but he didn't really. The teacher seems to think there is, though. The question involves too much

speculation from her point of view. It's fine to have a theory but not to include it in a question on our test."

The Delinquent stuck a fork in the mashed potatoes I had been distracting him from. He seemed to know what he was talking about, the discrepancy between our professor's understanding and our own, the issue with the question. *Pretty smart*, I thought. *Better than I expected*.

"Did you tell her all that?" I asked.

"No."

He reverted to the simple response from before and continued eating.

"Why not?"

"I thought about it," he replied, "but I didn't feel like getting into it."

"But this could improve your grade," I said.

"I don't care that much. I'm fine with missing one."

"Okay," I said as I got up from the cafeteria seat. "But I'm getting accused of cheating, so I'm going to go talk to the professor. I was hoping you could come and help explain the situation. And the misleading question. You seem to understand it better than I do."

"That's okay," he responded. "You got it."

He flashed me a thumbs-up as he stuffed his face with pasta, his expression still blank. I'm sure he saw my disappointment as I walked away.

After a bit of discussion, I managed to convince the professor to acknowledge the fallibility of the test question. She agreed to change the grades of everyone who had gotten it wrong. As far as the cheating accusation went, she had already determined that Troy and I were

both innocent. I found Troy in the cafeteria around dinnertime, alone. I got some food and sat down across from him.

“Hey,” I said, raising a hand in greetings.

He looked up from his food, mouth full once again, and nodded in response.

“Things went well,” I told him. “She’s going to change the grades. And we’re clear.”

Another nod. I poked at my food momentarily while I thought about how to apologize.

“I’m sorry for calling you a delinquent.”

“What?” he suddenly said.

Then I realized that I had never actually said that out loud...

“For accusing you of cheating, I mean,” I recovered.

“Oh, that,” Troy said. “That’s okay. I’m sorry for taking your pencil.”

“Ah, it’s fine.”

He continued to eat. I ate as well. After not so long, I felt awkward.

“Maybe you should say something,” Wayne chimed in. “This is strange having to watch you approach him and then not speak. A little painful.”

I groaned in response, knowing that I shouldn’t need help with this type of thing. Troy actually looked up at this. I figured I should talk while I had his attention.

“So...”

And then I realized I had nothing good to say. Troy waited.

“You studied pretty hard, huh?” I finally asked.

Ridiculous question. Of course he did.

“I mean, do you like chemistry?” I added.

What kind of moron am I? Then I realized that it had been a long time since I had attempted conversing with another human being, this idiocy of mine being a side effect of an antisocial half year. Still, Troy responded.

“I don’t particularly care for chemistry,” he said, “but I know it will help me in biology.”

“Oh, yeah?”

I was somewhat surprised that he had even responded, but I followed up.

“Are you a biology major then?”

“Yeah, I’m going to be a biologist.”

Surprises left and right.

“Huh,” I said, “That’s not quite what I expected.”

“What *did* you expect?” he asked.

I wasn’t entirely sure what I expected. Based on his drab costuming and the unconcerned nature I had been exposed to previously, I probably expected him to be no more than a bum. In reality, though, he was clearly ambitious, competent in biology, and genuinely smart. How to respond then?

“Don’t know,” I answered. “Honestly, I’m not sure what I’m going to do with a degree in Visual Arts, so you’re ahead of me there.”

“Just do whatever you want with it,” Troy said.

Once again, he surprised me.

“Well, it’s pretty hard to get a job in art,” I explained, “or so I hear.”

“What kind of job would you want?”

“I’m not even sure if I want a professional career in art,” I admitted.

“You enjoy art, though?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“What is it that you want a professional career in then?” he asked.

There was that dreaded question, the one for which I had no acceptable answer. My family was especially fond of asking the same thing, but I’d never had a definite response to satisfy them. If I happened to tell them the truth, that I didn’t want a professional job or at least that I hadn’t put much thought into it, they always responded like I was either a joker or a disappointment. There were subjects that I enjoyed, but none that I had ever felt deserved a lifetime’s dedication. Many people would spend their lives in their career, and for what final purpose? Most people seemed to commit themselves to their career for the benefits of either a deep personal interest or money. The former: I wish I had something so driving. The latter: I liked to believe had no hold on me. Therefore, I didn’t find much interest in a professional pursuit. Besides, not everybody in the world has one, and it doesn’t seem logical to assume every person who lacks one is unhappy. So I told Troy the truth and awaited the inevitable criticism.

“I don’t think I really want one.”

He kept eating for a moment. I had put my food down momentarily.

“Then don’t get one,” he finally said.

“Wait, really?” I responded, perplexed. “You don’t think I need one?”

“Look,” Troy explained, “I want to be a biologist so that I can study the turtles in the gulf. If you want to be a biologist, be a biologist. If you want to be a historian, be a historian. If you want to be a salesman, be a salesman. If you don’t want a profession, then don’t get one. It’s not the job that should make you happy. It’s not money. It should be doing what you want that makes you happy. At least, that’s my input. I could be wrong, but I feel like life’s not so cookie cutter simple. Everybody finds their own way, they don’t all conform to the same mold. ”

This guy will catch you off guard at every turn.

“For my sake, let’s just assume you’re right,” I laughed, lifting a soda can toward him.

“Cheers?”

I couldn’t control my smile, and it seemed to throw Troy off a bit, as I saw his eyebrows furrow the slightest touch. Still, he clinked his can against mine. *Perhaps I should find a new title for this guy, I thought. He’s not so bad after all.*

With that simple conversation, I felt like Troy, at the time little more than a stranger to me, had pushed me toward my leap over the first gap toward contentment.

Live your life or save the world?

It had been bugging me since I sat down, but I didn't know exactly how to bring it up. I had seen Troy in the lunchroom and around campus before, but I never actually saw him with other people. *Does he have friends?* I pondered. *Is he lonely?* I knew that my first assumptions concerning him had been toxic and baseless, but I wouldn't have wished for him to experience the cold loneliness that Wayne and I had been exposed to. I placed a gentle hand on my chest and thought about just how far it had pushed Wayne. I wouldn't want anybody to go through that. So I decided to just ask.

"Hey," I started. "This might be an awkward thing to ask, but do you have friends here?"

"You're right," Troy replied after sinking half of a taco with one bite, "that is an awkward thing to ask."

I wasn't sure if he was joking or not. I looked down at my plate in embarrassment.

"But, yeah," he said, "I've got some."

"Some?" I asked. "Are you sure? I never see you talking to anyone."

"There just aren't very many," he explained. "And I work a lot. That's why I usually show up to class late. It doesn't leave me much time to hang out with people."

So that's why he always shows up late.

"Besides, lots of friends would be troublesome."

"Having lots of friends isn't troublesome," I retorted. "It just sounds to me like your excuse for not having any."

"Say what you will," he replied without even a hint of affliction at my comment. "What about you? I never see you talking to anybody."

Yeah, I thought. I guess I can't really talk when I've got none to speak of myself. Well, at the very least I have Wayne, and that's satisfactory.

"I've got enough," I said. "But I think you're an interesting fellow. I was wondering if we could be friends perhaps. Even if it's just talking every once in a while."

Do people usually have to ask to be friends? I wondered. Wayne and I had been friends for a very long time. I don't quite remember how we formed a bond, but I'm certain neither of us had to ask the other to agree.

In between a few munches of food, he said, "Sure. Whatever you want."

Considering Troy's face had prevailed expressionless and his voice emotionless throughout our few conversations, it was hard to tell if he might be upset or annoyed.

"Cool," I responded as I picked up my plate and stood. "I suppose I'll see you around then, maybe tomorrow. I'll be here at least twice a day for my fix."

Troy simply nodded as I walked away.

The next day, Troy found me in the cafeteria and presented a surprising opportunity.

"Wanna go to a theme park Saturday?" he asked, standing above me as I ate. "With my friends."

"Sure. Sounds cool."

"Okay. Be here around ten."

That was all he said before he walked away, leaving me confused. *Does that mean he actually does have friends?*

Sure enough, he met me in the cafeteria on Saturday morning, a couple of friends in tow. Two. I counted. Officially more friends than me. I sighed.

“How’s it going, mate?” a tall and muscly blonde guy greeted me, extending a hand. As I shook his hand, he said, “I’m Wallace. Roland, right?”

I nodded with my teeth clenched. He had gripped my hand with an uncalled for firmness that punished a few of my knuckles.

“Still coming with us to the theme park?” Wallace asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” I responded.

I honestly wasn’t sure if it was a good idea anymore. I knew about Wallace Kaiser, a rough-and-tumble sort of guy with a wealthy family and lots of friends, way more than I could ever imagine having. I had also heard rumors about his short temper around campus. I even bore witness once as he punched a guy into submission. I think it had something to do with Wallace’s girlfriend, but I never picked up on the full story. The trauma instilled in me was all I could be certain of. I hated the idea of incurring his wrath.

“Hi, Roland,” came a sweet voice.

In between Wallace and Troy stood Isabelle, a kind girl who had been in all of my college art courses up to that point. Despite this, I tended to avoid conversing with her, because, incidentally, Isabelle was Wallace’s girlfriend. Her gentle nature wouldn’t lead one to suspect.

“Hello, Isabelle,” I greeted her reluctantly.

“Well, gang’s all here!” Wallace bellowed. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

To anybody who turned to us as a reaction to Wallace’s shameless shouting, we probably seemed an odd gang. *Wallace the Brutal, Isabelle the Gracious, Troy the Chill, and wait, who’s that other guy? It would probably go something like that,* I thought. I smiled at the idea and shrugged it off as I headed towards Wallace’s car with the others.

It turned out that Wallace was employed at the theme park. We all received an impressive discount on entry.

“My gift to all of you!” he exclaimed with joy.

We all thanked him for his contribution. He probably saved my wallet.

I could tell that everyone was prepared to make the most of their day. Everyone except me, I suppose. The others each carried their school backpacks and a stock of water bottles. If I hadn't known any better, I'd have expected them to be going on a long hike. I felt unprepared.

“Next time,” Troy said, patting me on the back, “you'll know to pack heavy next time.”

“You could have just told me this time,” I replied.

He only laughed and began to walk ahead of me toward the other two. I pulled him back.

“So you actually get along with Wallace?” I asked him.

The idea of these two radically different characters hanging out together had been bothering me.

“Yeah, what's wrong with that?”

“Well, nothing I guess,” I said, hesitant.

I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to bring up, but I figured I should take care of it before I spent a whole day walking around a theme park with this new crew.

“I've just heard that he can be brutal.”

Troy didn't respond right away, so I continued.

“Plus, I watched him beat another guy to a pulp once.”

Then Troy asked, “Have you ever seen him beat a second guy to a pulp?”

I thought about it for a moment. *No, I haven't, but I don't see what you're getting at.*

“No,” I answered.

“Then don’t worry about it too much,” he suggested. “He’s not a bad guy, really. A little misinterpreted, but we all are.”

Was he including me in that statement?

“He’s a little rough and a little loud,” Troy continued, “but he’s actually a pretty warm guy. He paid a portion of your ticket price, and really it was his idea to invite you in the first place.”

“Wait, really?” I responded, shocked.

“I told him you were looking for friends.”

Embarrassment again. I hadn’t intended for that conversation in the cafeteria to make me seem like the needy one.

“I’ve got friends,” I mumbled.

“You do now,” he stated.

I looked ahead at Wallace and Isabelle, who had been walking and talking cheerfully. Laughter echoed in my mind. Wayne must have found Troy’s straightforwardness amusing.

“Making progress,” Wayne said. “Keep it up, Roland.”

I could hear the delight in his voice. It made me smile.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I suppose you’re right. I’m sorry to have said such a thing about him.”

“Don’t worry,” Troy responded. “People sometimes make hasty judgments about people.”

I guess I’ve been guilty of that a few times.

“It’s probably our worst sin,” he added.

“Whose?” I asked.

“Anyone’s. It’s just a cruel thing that people do, condemning one another before we even know each other.”

I really only noticed it in that moment, but it seemed that Troy had warmed up to me pretty fast. He had been talking a lot more than before.

“What if I told you,” I began, “that I was guilty of a sin worse than that?”

“Like what?” he asked coolly.

I don’t know what made me bring it up. Maybe because I finally had somebody other than Wayne to tell?

“I killed a person,” I declared emotionless.

Troy looked over at me with the same face as always but said nothing.

“And his soul continues to haunt my body.”

Did I mean it as a confession? Did I mean it to be a joke? I wasn’t sure how I wanted this to play out. What would Wayne think of that? I didn’t hear anything from him, and Troy just stared at me for another good twenty seconds before finally speaking up.

“You didn’t,” he said.

I took a little offense to how he shrugged off my admission to guilt.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked, a tad too enthusiastically.

“No. You don’t act like that type of person. The murderous kind, I mean.”

The whole conversation had me floundering, though my own fault. I let it go so that we could enjoy the park. He probably thought of me as a little crazy as. Perhaps a lot crazy.

I had accumulated a great deal of stress in that week leading up to our theme park getaway. I made it a point to have as much fun as possible with my new friends while we were

there. We spent the first half of the day on the water rides so that we could dry off by the end of the time we left. For the rest of it, we made the leaps from bumper cars to rollercoasters to the anti-gravity machine to carnival-style game stands to food carts and back to the coasters. We didn't miss a beat. At one point, we stumbled into an arcade with Wayne's and my favorite shooting game. Wayne resorted to shouting corny one-liners once again; the others must have been completely baffled when I started laughing hysterically. When it came to rollercoasters, it was a new experience for me. I hadn't been to an amusement park in over ten years, and as a little kid, I had been too short for all of them. I couldn't get enough of the gut-manipulating speed. I even heard a few excited hoots from Wayne, who I doubted had the sensation of gut-tugging but at least knew the blazing velocity.

At some point, the line for one particular rollercoaster reduced drastically. Wallace, Troy, and I found that we could actually exit the ride and run back around to the entrance fast enough to ride again directly afterwards.

"Back again, Wallace?" the operator would ask. "And again?"

"You can't stop us now!" Wallace hollered back at some point.

Eventually somebody turned the looping into a test of endurance to see who could hold out the longest without losing their lunch. It was about six rounds in when I had to finally sit out due to some queasiness, but I couldn't slow the other two animals down. While they rushed back around to the front, I approached Isabelle who had been avoiding rollercoasters all day. *Do they frighten her?* I wondered. *They frightened me before. Or perhaps they're just too wild for her gentle nature? Like a sheep in the jungle.* She had been sitting on a bench near the coaster, reading a book. I figured that making small talk with my upbeat blonde friend only made sense.

As long as I didn't overstep any boundaries. I remained cautious so as not to disrupt any good vibes with Wallace.

"Hello, Isabelle," I said with some injected pep. "How are you doing?"

She glanced up at me and stared into my eyes a short time. It was a somewhat unnerving look. *Did I frighten her? Did I ruin her reading maybe?* Suddenly she slammed her book closed. I jumped, startled by the reaction. She placed the book next to her.

"Oh, hi, Roland," she said with a relieving sweetness. "I'm doing swell, swell. And you?"

"I'm fine, I guess," I replied nervously.

"Oh no, are you sure, did Wallace say something he shouldn't have?"

"What, no, it's nothing like--"

She interjected, "You know you can just tell him to buzz off if he says anything weird.

"Shoo, Wallace, shoo!"

She flapped a reprimanding hand in front of her to demonstrate.

"Like that, see? I've seen his grandmother do it to him before."

"No, really, it's fine," I managed, though overwhelmed by her flurry of words.

"Okay then," she settled.

She swung her legs back and forth in front of her and began staring at me once again with wide brown eyes. I couldn't handle the intensity, though.

"Wh-what were you reading?" I rattled.

"Ooo, yay!" she exclaimed, picking up the book and shaking it in my face. "This is *Blue* by the author Early Grey. That's just a pseudonym, though. I don't know his real name."

"Oh, I see," I responded. "What's it about?"

“Okay, right, so it’s a fictional novel about this girl who has magical tears that can actually cure people’s wounds so she gets abducted by the government and transported to different places so that she can cure a bunch of people. It’s really really sad though because of all the people that she has to see suffering everywhere.”

“Wow, sounds intense,” I responded, curious. “How does that turn out for her in the end?”

“Don’t know yet,” she replied, bouncing up and down in her seat. “I haven’t finished it.”

“Tell me when you do, okay?” I requested.

She agreed.

“Do you know if she’s able to heal more than just physical wounds?” I asked. “Like wounds of the heart and stuff? A person’s scarred joy?”

“Hmmm...” she thought a moment than said, “Not sure. Doesn’t seem like it, though.”

“I see.”

Not even magical healing tears could do that, huh? I thought of Wayne. Then that same urge came to me for the second time that day. I’m not sure why.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I asked.

I’m not sure exactly why I felt the need to bring this up so suddenly. It had been just as seemingly out of the blue with Troy. But since Wayne had returned, his existence had felt like something I really needed to get off of my chest. And there accompanying me: the first individuals in a long time that I had felt I could open up to. Other than Wayne himself, that is. Did I think it entirely appropriate? No. I knew I could have been ruining my only chance to be friends with these people, but I realize that, at the time, I didn’t have much going for me. Nothing interesting to talk about. The dead spirit inside me happened to be one of the only

things. A stretch, sure, but I thought maybe others might find it interesting. Even as unfollowable chattering.

“Would you believe me if I said that I started harboring a ghost inside of me recently?” I asked.

“A ghost?” she repeated, tilting her head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Like a person who’s died and come back to haunt me,” I explained. “Though ‘haunt’ might not be the best word. More like ‘take up residence.’ He talks and stuff, really nice as well.”

I heard Wayne laugh, probably jollied by the compliment.

“Hmmm...” Isabelle pondered, but she didn’t respond.

Eventually, I decided that I could just give her evidence. I was especially desperate to convince somebody of this. I pulled her up from her seat so that we both stood. *You can’t even know if you should trust her with stuff like this*, I thought to myself. But I still couldn’t

“Here, I can prove it,” I claimed. “I can close my eyes and turn around...”

I did just that.

“...and then I can tell you anything you want to know about what’s behind me: what a sign says, which direction you’re pointing, which eye you have open, how many fingers you’re holding up. You name it. You ready, Wayne?”

“I am, indeed!” Wayne said peppily.

I never had any certainty that he would be okay with exposing him. I was glad to see him going along with it. Maybe he had completely handed the reigns over to me.

Isabelle still said nothing as I stood with my back to her.

The next voice I heard wasn’t Isabelle’s but Wallace’s.

“Come, mateys, or we’ll miss the ship ‘fore she hits the high waters!”

Wallace ran up alongside where Isabelle and I had been sitting and continued darting on across the park while he shouted. Troy followed close behind. Isabelle quickly grabbed her stuff off of the bench and hollered to me excitedly.

“Come on, Roland, let’s go get on the Ferris wheel!”

She dashed off after the other two.

“What about this, though?” I asked loudly.

She stood a distance away now, jogging in place and waving for me to follow her.

“Was she even paying attention?” I asked Wayne.

“She was watching,” he confirmed.

It wasn’t long before I gave in and followed. *They’re all going to think I’m a loon, I thought. I am, but still... Maybe I should stop trying to bring up Wayne.*

Apparently the sun had made a quick descent while I had been chatting with Isabelle. As she and I approached the Ferris wheel, Wallace and Troy were already getting into one of the baskets. The wheel sported a pirate theme; each basket was its own ship and the rest of the contraption saw skulls, parrots, and treasure chests scattered about.

“Wallace!” Isabelle whined, “Why didn’t you wait for us?”

“No treasure for ye late landlubbers!” Wallace roared.

Troy waved a curled finger around as if it were his hook.

“C’mon, Roland,” Isabelle said as we stepped up to the ride’s entry. “Let’s show these scallywags what’s for!”

“All aboard then,” I complied as the operator let us on to our own vessel.

Just as we climbed into the basket, the Ferris wheel lights turned on completely, awakening the bright neon gyre before us.

“Yaaaarr, just in time!” Wallace laughed.

As our basket climbed toward the top, I wondered if Wallace was truly comfortable leaving me alone with on the Ferris wheel. *Aren't these rides supposed to be sort of romantic?* I wondered. Then I wondered whether Wallace had a romantic side to him that would really sweep a girl off their feet. Or at least *had* swept this particular one off her feet. I tried not to look at Isabelle too much while we headed toward the apex.

When we reached the top, she asked, “It’s really beautiful, isn’t it?”

I agreed unenthusiastically, but it was true. The entire theme park had been lit up with vibrant colors that made it an entirely new place, an even more exciting place than it had been during the day. Unfortunately, I felt an uneasiness in my stomach as we reached over the top of the ride, but I wasn’t sure why at first.

“I don’t think I’m very fond of heights anymore,” Wayne spoke.

Suddenly, the whole landscape flickered in my mind, warping into that view from the top of the bridge from which Wayne had fallen. I suppose when I had been on the rollercoasters, I had been more focused on the speed than the height. There in the slow-rotating basket suspended above the ground, though, I couldn’t help but focus on the drop. I slid back toward the center of the seat and closed my eyes.

I don't think I'm fond of them either.

“Are you okay, Roland?” Isabelle asked from the seat opposite mine. “You’re all shaky.”

I looked down at my hands to see the sweat accumulating.

“It’s okay, sorry,” I assured her. “I’m just feeling a little sick all of a sudden.”

I tried to come up with a distracting conversation, but I couldn't think of many worthwhile discussions.

"So what's Troy usually like when he's around you guys?" I posed.

I realized that I knew so little about these people. And that I had so little to talk to them about because of that lack of knowledge.

"Troy?" she asked, leaning forward toward me. "Oh wow, why? Do you like him?"

It had been a weird thing for me to ask suddenly. Perhaps she wanted to use this discouraging backhanded question to make fun of my awkward conversational skills?

"Geez, no," I responded quickly, suddenly even more uncomfortable. "I was just wondering. I don't actually know much about him. He doesn't talk much."

"Well," she began, dropping her original hypothesis just as fast as she had picked it up, "Troy's really nice, even though he doesn't say much. He's usually pretty quiet around me and Wallace as well, but you know, if we ever need his opinion or something, he's usually pretty open about it. He's also really hardworking. With school stuff and home stuff."

Yeah, I had noticed his admirable work ethic.

"His mom's been pretty sick recently, so he had to pick up a job in order to take care of her, so he's always moving around a lot. But, you know, even with all of that, I don't think I've ever heard him complain."

"About what?" I asked.

"About anything, really. He's a great person. I know he gets a bad rap around school for his quietness or the way he dresses, but me and Wallace know that deep down, he's a really accepting person. I think that's all I've got... Does that sound about right to you?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sounds about right."

She smiled at me softly for a moment.

Then I added, "I've enjoyed hanging out with him, even if it hasn't been that long. The same goes for Wallace and you, as well."

"Awww, thanks, Roland," she replied. "We've all enjoyed having you around as well. Feel free to hang out with us nuts anytime you like."

I returned her smile. We didn't speak anymore while we waited for our pirate ship to touch down safely. I wanted to experience a bit more of the park at night, but Wallace had to get home so that he could go to sleep. He had to work in the morning.

I had been thinking about something, so I brought it up to Troy as we were exiting the amusement park.

"I honestly don't think I'd mind having a job at a theme park like this," I told him.

"Well, in that case," he responded, "why not just talk to Wallace about getting you a job? He *does* work here after all."

The idea hadn't struck me, but it did make sense. I pulled Wallace aside shortly after and talked it over with him.

"Perhaps I could pin something down for you," Wallace offered. "I'll talk to somebody in the morning. By the way, how tall are you exactly?"

I wasn't sure why he needed to know, but I told him, "Five-foot seven."

When I got back to the dorm that night, I pulled my painting materials onto my desk and tried to paint a Ferris wheel. When I finally finished the painting about a week later, I had impressed myself. I tried to come up with the best word to describe my representation. I think I would have called it "grandiose" or "magical." But probably not "beautiful."

Preservation of Character

Wallace did, in fact, manage to get me a job at the theme park, but I never would have imagined that the only open position was as a mascot. Apparently I happened to be a perfect fit for the panda bear costume that had been lying around. It hadn't seen the light of day in months, and I was reluctant to save it from the cramped deathtrap of a closet that Wallace requested I drag it out from. He called me a "truly daring hero" when I finally found my way out of that torture chamber about an hour later.

"I wouldn't have gone in there in a hundred years," he laughed, patting me hard on the back.

It had been hidden under piles of old promotional posters and maintenance equipment. When I finally located the panda outfit, its deathly stench burned my eyes. I just knew that it had to be carrying some sort of disease. An eye was missing from the head.

"Yikes!" Wallace yelped when I showed it to him. "I'll find a way to fix that in a bit. Perhaps for now, you should just try it on in the breakroom."

I spent the rest of the entire morning of my first day in the breakroom, walking back and forth in that smelly suit. Every once in a while, another employee would walk in to grab their lunch. Some jumped at the sight of a scraggly bear pacing, so I'd wave at them to affirm peace. Some simply laughed lightly. One requested a high-five, resulting in the conjuring of a dust cloud. Their reaction changed from a smirk to coughs. Eventually, I got bored and decided to take a seat in the corner. Luckily, Wallace arrived to save the sullen bear.

"Hey-o, try not to look so gloomy," he chuckled, throwing an eyepatch into my lap. "Try that on. It's from my usual getup, but I'm in concessions today."

I had found out only hours earlier that Wallace operated the Ferris wheel on most of his days. He usually covered himself in pirate garb to fit the theme, though nobody had ever asked him to. That day, however, he had to cover concessions for a sick worker, so he granted me permission to wear his signature patch. I'm not sure if it helped. Looking in the mirror, I still looked like a gloomy panda, just now with an old wound. I suppose it gave the suit some character, more than I could give it at least.

"It's weird enough that I'm a spirit inside of a man," Wayne snickered, "but now I'm a spirit inside of a man inside of a bear. It just gets weirder, doesn't it?"

Amused, I responded, "Just be happy that you don't have any sense of smell."

Wallace told me to walk around the park, greet people, and pose for any pictures they might request of me. My height must have been the one and only qualification for the job, I figure. My hesitancy to interact with people made it hard to approach anyone. Luckily, on the first day, most people seemed to avoid me. Parents visibly concerned with the decrepit status of my costume would drag their rambunctious kids in the opposite direction. I could only wave apologetically. The repellent nature of the suit saved me from a number of uncomfortable situations, but I feared how this performance as the zombie panda might affect my keeping the job. As Wallace drove me back to campus that night, though, he assured me that I couldn't be blamed for the state of the suit and that I had done a good job. I glanced over at the old panda suit which Wallace had insisted we bring with us. It stared at me, one-eyed.

When we arrived back on campus at about ten o'clock, I thanked Wallace for scoring me some work and for driving me both ways, but he parked and rolled out of the car along with me, saying that we had something to take care of before he would return home. He brought the ghastly suit with him.

“Come along, rookie.”

I followed him to my dorm building where we climbed the stairs to the third floor. He knocked on somebody’s door, and I stood behind him while we waited, unsure as to why he wanted me there. It’s not like I knew anybody in the dorms. In a matter of seconds, the door opened to reveal, to my surprise, Isabelle.

“What now, Wallace?” she greeted her boyfriend, smiling with the usual sweet curve to her lips, though her words seemed like they were meant to have bite.

I continued to hide behind Wallace’s broad figure, the fallen branch in the shadow of an oak tree. Luckily, she didn’t notice. Two weeks had passed since Isabelle and I rode the Ferris wheel together. Throughout that period of time, though, I had been avoiding her. It would seem that on that night, I had developed some unfortunate feelings for this girl.

Passionate feelings.

I knew that having lacked any real interaction with females for some time, it was only natural for me to develop said feelings despite her relationship with my friend. I knew that they were irrational and that they were soon to pass. Until they did, I had decided it best to avoid contact with Isabelle, so as to in turn avoid any flirtatious impulses and, in turn, any conflict with Wallace. I was a fool dancing around my own heart, but I wasn’t an idiot. The thought of Wallace turning on me to bash my head in was something that truly frightened me, even if I had come to befriend him. Friendships could always fall apart, especially new ones. I was honestly relieved to have Wallace standing between her and me, but I don’t know why he insisted I tag along with him in the first place.

“But don’t forget about this ugly duckling, too!” he laughed.

My eyes widened as he swung around, grabbing my shoulder painfully tight with his free hand, and pulled me out in front of Isabelle. *Wallace, why do you do these things to me?* I really wanted to ask. Perturbed, I could only stare at Isabelle, who stood directly in front of me with pajamas, wet hair, and a look of confusion that I found completely relatable. Then, as she came to understand, her face brightened.

“Oh, gosh!” she exclaimed. “Hi, Roland! What are you doing here?”

She jumped up and down joyfully. My heart jumped with her. She was too adorable.

“I’m not entirely certain,” I admitted, turning to Wallace.

Then I quickly turned to a wall. I didn’t want to show Wallace if I had started to blush.

“Feel free to come in, of course,” Isabelle offered.

“Thanks, Izz,” Wallace said, stepping inside her living room with me following. “I was actually wondering if you could do me a favor and patch this sad excuse for a theme park mascot?” He bobbed the bear’s head up and down in front of Isabelle as if it were speaking and added with a squeaky voice, “I’m old and ain’t got no bones.”

“I’m sorry,” Isabelle responded directly to the bear, “but I don’t got no bones for ya.”

“Aw, shucks,” Wallace replied. “How ‘bouts just a fixer-upper?”

“That I might be able to manage,” she said. “Come put him in my room, Wallace.”

I watched him wrap an arm around her securely as the two of them scuttled playfully over to her bedroom door. He continued to jiggle the panda head in front of her. I trudged after slowly, quiet.

“All right, ya lug,” Isabelle said, as she gently pushed the door in, “throw him in there.”

A pleasant smell like perfume emanated from the room. Isabelle and I watched as Wallace walked in and plopped the costume down on her bed. While he did that, my eyes were

drawn to a plastic painting easel in the corner of her room, a canvas set on it with a pencil sketch of what looked to be a face in progress. We were both in the same painting class this semester, and we had been in the same introductory painting class the semester prior. I tried to think back to the semester before, when the entire class had committed to painting with a self-chosen theme for the rest of that semester and the semester to come. *What was Isabelle's theme again?* I tried to recall, but it wouldn't come to me.

“Make sure to clean it out real good,” Wallace joked. “My boy Roland did a real doozy on it.”

“Oh, wow,” she giggled, “one day and you've already messed it up this bad, huh, Roland?”

“Oh, sorry, what?” I said, turning to her.

She looked disheartened that I hadn't been paying attention.

“Should I sew on a new eye?” she asked Wallace.

“Nah,” he responded, “I think Roland makes the eyepatch work, and that means I can add a bear to my pirate crew. Making it look nice and some patchwork should do. Thanks for the help, by the way,” he added, as he stepped to exit her room.

“Anytime, anytime,” she said, smiling again.

“Ya know, Isabelle,” Wallace began, “I think you should come over to my place sometime soon. My baby brother's been whining about how he hasn't got to play with you in a while.”

“Ah, oh no,” Isabelle responded, clutching her head, “I think I'm gonna cry. Tell Tyler I miss being around to entertain him as well. Classes have really gotten the best of me lately.”

“Isabelle...” I interrupted.

She turned, seemingly startled that I was speaking.

I pointed a finger at her sketch and asked, “Is that one of your pieces for Norman’s class?”

Her smile changed to shock as she stepped in front of me and reached to pull her door closed in front of us. Wallace and I jumped back.

“No,” she answered, curling her wet hair with a finger, looking down at the floor. “That’s something I’m working on in my personal time.”

The three of us stood silent until she finally looked back up and said, “Well, if you gentleman have nothing else you need, I should probably get to fixing this poor panda up.”

She smiled like usual, but this smile was made to hide an unusual tension. Wallace and I nodded awkwardly and headed for the door.

“Have a nice night, Isabelle,” Wallace threw behind him as we made our hasty exit.

Wallace, why did you bring me here? I cried in my mind

When Wallace handed me the mascot suit two days later, I was astonished at how noticeable the difference was. Fur had been installed in places where it had previously been missing, and a small stump of a tail had appeared where it had ceased to exist before. Only when I looked extremely close beneath the fur could I tell that the old fur and the new were fashioned from different materials. Unless you knew, you’d never be able to tell.

“She did a pretty good job, huh?” Wallace asked as he drove me to work. “She’s dang handy when it comes to stuff like this. Like crafty stuff.”

I nodded even though Wallace had his eyes on the road. I noticed that the eyepatch remained as part of the mascot ensemble.

When I slipped the panda head on later, I swear I could distinguish a scent just like that which had been in Isabelle's room. It pulled me in. I almost got lost in it. Wallace, however, wearing his favorite pirate hat and plastic hook, called me to action. Day two was very much unlike day one. Parents didn't frown upon my appearance, and children of all sizes appeared to me in droves, swarming like angry insects. I posed for more pictures in that one day than I had in my entire life. At first, I wasn't sure how to respond. Embarrassed, I would freeze up. Eventually, though, I realized that the only people who knew me to be the one in the costume were Wayne, Wallace, and the rest of the employees at the park. Upon realizing this, I quickly warmed up to my new job. Embracing my anonymity, I started dancing goofily across the park, greeting anyone and everyone I happened to come across.

"How ya holdin' up there, Roland?" Wallace shouted to me at one point from his post at the Ferris wheel, but I simply waved him away.

I developed a new security in my fresh position as theme park panda, and when I finally let myself go, I found myself really enjoying myself. The weirdest part to me was that this enjoyment I found derived itself from work. Over the course of the next couple weeks, I got around to meeting the rest of my coworkers. It wasn't long before I felt like I had a place alongside them.

Wallace and I, oddly enough, became real buddies. I never could have imagined that our personalities would even begin to mesh well together, but I think his silliness and friendliness eventually got through to me. I realized what Troy had tried to convince me of before: that Wallace meant well despite his roughness. We began to accompany one another during a shared lunch break. I made the most of my breaking opportunity and took my mask off. I was usually drenched in my own sweat, but Captain Wallace never seemed to mind, though he would

sometimes brag about how hot his costume wasn't. Over homemade lunches we would chat about the craziest thing we'd seen each day in the park. I usually won that contest as my job required the most park navigation. Every once in a while, though, Wallace would get to see some kid puking off the side of the Ferris wheel.

Three weeks in to my mascot job, I found myself weakened by a nagging concern. I had begun to see Wallace more at work than at school, usually working the Ferris wheel, the same Ferris wheel where I had first felt my heart leap at the thought of getting close to Isabelle. Whenever I saw Wallace there, my mind usually jumped to think of her, that softest of voices, that most enchanting of smiles.

I had, on multiple occasions, gotten the urge to tell Wayne about my uncanny feelings for Isabelle. First, it made sense because he had been my best friend for a long time and it wouldn't have been the first time we had shared our feelings about the women we liked. It made even more sense because he couldn't talk to anybody about it. The only one hundred percent safe bet that the beans would not be spilt to Wallace. I decided even against telling him. *Does having this emotion making me a bad person?* I wondered. *Then again, I guess there are other reasons that I'm already a bad person...* It bothered me deeply that the feeling had not yet disappeared. I needed to purge myself of that precarious emotion. *But how?* I pondered.

Somehow I determined procuring a girlfriend of my own to be the only viable option for ending the madness. I'm not sure how I expected such a forced mission to go over well, especially when I sat down with Wallace on our break one day to ask him for advice.

"Yar, ye want what now?" he asked, waving a plastic prop hook in my face.

I smacked it away and reiterated, "I want you to tell me how to get a girlfriend."

He looked at me, suspicion live in his gaze, leaned forward, and asked, “Do you like Isabelle?”

Chills shot down my spine at this accusation that I denied with not even a second to lose.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I fussed, wildly shaking my head.

He squinted at me.

“Why are you asking me?” he posed.

I hesitated momentarily as I thought of Isabelle.

“Because of your own girlfriend...” I murmured. “You should have advice on these things. For a friend.”

He sat quietly for a moment.

Then he viciously slammed his free hand on the table while he pointed an unthreatening hook threateningly at my face, roaring, “All right, bub, where’d you hear about her?!”

“Wha-What?” I shook in genuine fear.

“My girlfriend! Who told you about her?”

Is it supposed to be a secret? I wondered. *How the hell?*

“I-I don’t know!” I responded, waving my hands in front of me. “It was just something I overheard at school. A bunch of people know about you two!”

His anger melted away to reveal surprise.

“Really?” he asked as he fell back in his seat.

We both sat there for some time as I recovered from my panic and Wallace recovered from whatever had struck him.

“Are you sure?” he finally asked.

“What do you mean?” I returned.

He didn't respond, but he eventually sighed and mumbled, "I guess I never should have told Isabelle about that..."

We sat there again for another few minutes while I attempted to make sense of this last comment. *He shouldn't have told Isabelle?* I considered. *But Isabelle is his...* Eventually, I gave up and just asked.

"But isn't Isabelle your girlfriend?"

Wallace perked up frighteningly fast and stared at me incredulously. I could only stare back and anticipate his next words. He broke the silence with laughter. Through an uncontrollable rage of chuckles, he managed to squeeze out a "No, you fool!" I found myself unamused. *What is going on?*

"What did you say?" I asked.

Once Wallace regained his composure, he explained, "I'm not going out with Isabelle, you nitwit. My girlfriend lives in another city."

"But-" I began, but Wallace raised a hand to stop me.

"There are no 'but's for this," he said.

I swear I could feel my heart racing as I considered all of the signals involving Wallace and Isabelle that I had failed to interpret accurately. *Wait, does that mean I've been worrying all this time for nothing?* I suddenly wanted to slam my head against the table, so I did. Wallace snorted in amusement, no doubt understanding my turmoil.

"Okay," I said, my head still against the table, "so you two were never going out?"

"Weeeeell," he clarified, "we did go out in high school, but that's an entirely different story."

"Maybe I could hear about it?" I asked, trying to be sly.

I needed to know. I had misunderstood the relationship for months. Now I needed complete clarity.

“Fine, fine,” he surrendered, scratching his beard. “Just let me figure out how to explain this.”

I sat quietly with my arms crossed, contemplating the new doors that had just opened to me. Finally, Wallace leaned forward and started to explain himself.

“So I met Isabelle in high school,” he said, twiddling his thumbs, “and we got along extremely well. So well, in fact, that other people started asking why weren’t a couple already. I suppose we felt pressured enough at some point to actually oblige.”

“So you did go out,” I said, pointing a finger at him.

“Yes, well,” he replied, scratching his forehead, “I already mentioned that.”

I put my finger down, feeling like an idiot, and remained quiet.

“Anyway,” he continued, “we were going out when eventually I realized that a romantic relationship must not have been what I actually wanted with her. Unfortunately, being the imbecile that I was, I couldn’t bring myself to actually break up with her. Because I felt like it would be a horrible thing to do when I had been the one to ask her to go with me. And because she had always been the nicest of people.”

Wallace started to tap his foot nervously. I realized that talking about it really bothered him.

“And because I was afraid,” he added. “Eventually I couldn’t maintain the relationship anymore, and I started to neglect her. I saw how much it hurt her, but even then I couldn’t keep myself from saying some vicious things. One day, she finally decided that she had to be the one to end it, and I watched her walk away in tears while I stood there stunned. I knew that I had

been completely to blame, for asking her out at the suggestion of others, for not having the guts to talk things through. I wanted more than anything to apologize, but she actively avoided me for quite some time while I slunk around destroyed by guilt and down on life.”

I clutched my chest. *I know that feeling*, I thought.

“When the day came that she finally allowed me a chance to talk to her,” Wallace persisted, “I was the one to get tears in my eyes. I told her that I missed having her around, that I wanted more than anything to have her as a friend again. I said that if she’d just give me another chance to be her friend, I’d never do anything just because my peers wanted me to and that I’d always be open with her. Of course, I knew that I wasn’t quite deserving of her friendship. I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had denied my request.”

I looked Wallace in the eyes. He had been purposefully averting his eyes, something I had never seen him do with anyone.

“But she forgave you?” I questioned.

Wallace turned his eyes to meet mine and nodded, saying, “Yes. She forgave me. And along with forgiveness came all the shine of life once again. Our friendship seemed rocky at first while I attempted to prove to her that I would keep my promises, but eventually we fell back into our old buddy-buddy interactions, and I think we both turned out better for making it through that time. Now we have a stronger relationship as best friends than we ever had as boyfriend and girlfriend, and I wouldn’t give that up for anything.”

“Forgiveness, a purifying element...” I mumbled. Then I spoke up, “I never would have imagined that Isabelle and you had dealt with something like that.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well,” I explained, “you’re always so confident in everything that you do, and you’re really outgoing. It’s hard to imagine you at the mercy of gentle person like Isabelle. Neither of your faces or your words seem to suggest what you’ve been through.”

“Ya’ve heard not to judge a book by its cover, right?” Wallace asked.

“Right?” I replied, ready to eat my words.

“And that’s because no story worth telling could ever be summed up in a single picture.”

Wallace had surprised me with his reveal, his tale, and then his wisdom. It left me perplexed and quiet.

“Yeah,” he jested, “have fun chewing on them nuggets. It’d be silly to think anyone’s character was that simple.”

That reminds me... I thought. As Wallace finally got around to eating his lunch, I remembered a conversation that I had shared with Troy only days earlier.

“What is it about this game that fascinates you so much?” Troy asked.

The clattering of wooden pieces on the cafeteria table captured a few glances but no interest from others as I dumped my chess set out. Troy held his arms around the edge of the table to block a few renegade pieces from falling. I unfolded the board.

“What, you don’t want to play?” I returned.

“I didn’t say that. It’s just that ever since I told you that I knew how to play, you’ve been asking me non-stop.”

We began setting up the pieces, black on Troy’s side of the board, white on mine.

“It’s okay, you can ask me any time you want to play,” I chuckled.

“I don’t think I’d ever have any opportunity to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have this one friend who keeps dragging me off to do stuff with them.”

Another friend, huh? I tried to think of any other individuals that he associated with. *I never see Troy hanging out with anyone.*

“What kind of stuff?” I asked.

“Like playing chess for three hours at a time.”

He smiled without lifting his head. He finished setting up his pieces and sat down.

“Well, gee,” I responded with a laugh, “perhaps you should introduce me so that I can pester them instead of you.”

I hurried to finish preparing my own side and take my seat.

“To be honest, I’ve never found somebody else who knew how to play and actually wanted to. The score is twelve to eight in your favor,” I declared. Taking hold of one of my knights, I added, “And I will make the first move!”

After I went, Troy started by moving one of his pawns a single space, and then I called my other knight into action.

“Perhaps you should try a different starting tactic sometime,” Troy proposed. “If it’s even a tactic, that is.”

I threw my head back and laughed dramatically while Troy took his turn.

“My double-knight-initiative tactic has been proven to work nine out of twenty-one times! Oh, and what’s this? This is our twenty-first match? It would seem that I am destined for victory!”

“You know,” he said, refusing to return my bellowing, “these games probably wouldn’t last as long if you actually focused on moving instead of talking.”

“I can’t think and move at the same time. Besides, a short game with no talking makes for a dull affair.”

I looked over the board and tried to focus on making moves instead of performing, as Troy had suggested. We were only four moves into the match, but I was already uncertain of what to do next. Sending both knights out was just my way of establishing myself as an interesting player, but it really held no strategical advantage, none that I was aware of at least. Not particularly proficient at thinking several moves ahead, my short-sightedness usually got the best of me in these games. I could tell that Troy, on the other hand, always calculated the next few moves, his own and mine together. His eyes rarely came away from the board, even if my roleplaying got obnoxious. He played to win. In facing off against Troy, I really just wanted to have some fun and see how each new match played out between us dynamically different players.

“It’s your move,” he said.

“Hey, chump, don’t rush me. I’ve got to show you what I’m capable of when I’m not messing around.”

I impatiently carried a pawn two spaces forward without considering the consequences and had it captured immediately. Already flustered by my own foolish mistakes, I unleashed a few frustrated flicks on to my seat. I looked up to try and see what Troy might be thinking, but he simply stared at me, blank-faced but no doubt content with himself. I gasped at my smug foe for no particular reason, but then quickly looked back down at the board.

“Just a test,” I assured him as I reached for my next piece.

The game went on for about ten minutes with me on the defensive and Troy taking full advantage my position. Almost no words were shared within that time. I watched on in dread as my army slowly crumbled by my failure. Then I just couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"You know," I started, "the reason I think I like chess..."

I paused, trying to make certain my certainty. Troy did not respond.

"The reason I like chess is because of the variety of pieces. When we play, I can see the types of characters that they represent and imagine the story that they tell. It's interesting to see the different scenarios derived directly from the different outcomes of each match."

I made another sloppy move and had another piece taken.

"What kind of story are you seeing in this match then?" Troy jested.

He smirked. I sighed.

"The tragically one-sided battle between a conqueror and a novice army."

I thought long and hard about the next move, and I eventually decided on one that would position me for an elaborate play in the next few turns. I tried to maintain a poker face, but that fell apart along with my plan as Troy swooped in with his own play. I tried to carry on as if I had never had a strategy at all.

"If you were one of these pieces, which one do you think you would be?" I inquired.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I don't quite see the story like you do. It's hard to understand what you mean."

"Well, just imagine it in whatever way you like. What do you associate each piece with?"

"Their moves," he answered easily.

"Okay, then using that," I continued, "each piece can be defined to some degree. The rook is straight-forward but effective. The knight is unique and rather hard to read. The bishop-

“I’ll be the pawn,” he said abruptly. “I like the way they look.”

I grabbed a pawn and moved it forward two spaces. It stood adjacent to one of his own pawns. I digested his words momentarily, but I wasn’t satisfied.

“I don’t think you’re much of a pawn,” I explained. “Pawns are more like the hoi polloi, the mundane common man. I’m sure you’re better than that.”

“You seem to think being common is an insult,” Troy replied.

“It’s not that,” I said, not completely sure that I didn’t, in fact, mean it as an insult. “I just think that you’re a lot smarter than most people and deserve a little more.”

“I don’t think that many people when faced with such a question,” he added, “would deem themselves a pawn. Every person thrives on their own quality of character, regardless of whether you or I recognize it.”

I paused to ponder it. I hadn’t planned on my question spawning a conversation like this.

“Besides,” he said, taking hold of a pawn, “what would a game of chess be like without the pawns?” He placed his own pawn behind the one I had just moved and then removed mine from the game.

I looked at the board for a few moments, not understanding.

“I don’t get it,” I finally said.

“It’s *en passant*,” Troy explained. “A move that only a pawn can carry out.”

I stared at the piece he had used to trick me and then finally accepted it with a “humph.”

“Okay,” he started up again, “which piece would you consider somebody like Wallace to be?”

I tapped my teeth together just enough to make a noise in my head, and I thought about the question.

“I would think maybe the queen. Wallace is really well-rounded, to the point that it amazes me. He interacts well with just about everybody, he’s got great leadership skills, and I’d think he would stomp most people in both academic and sports competitions alike. His versatility is probably his greatest strength.”

“Geez, why don’t you just marry the dude?” Troy quipped.

“I’m just giving credit where credit is due.”

Wayne would probably be the same, I thought. If only people had known what he was like.

“And if you were to define yourself as one of these pieces?” Troy moved on.

I looked at the pieces as if thinking, though I already knew what my answer would be. I had known even before I had asked the question the first time.

“I choose the king,” I responded, placing my fingers around that very piece. “It may not be the most amazing piece, and it may not even move very far by the end of a match, but without it, everything else falls apart.”

My explanation, I recognized, sounded a bit narcissistic. I clarified as I made a move.

“What I mean to say is that the king seems like the main morale for the board. If your king is in a good position, a player can dedicate themselves to moving their other pieces to attack. If the king is in trouble, though, it affects the way the rest of your pieces have to move. In other words, there are times when I am dependent on others. And the rest of the time, I want them to be able to depend on me for support, even if I may not be the most effective person.”

I felt that this answer was satisfactory.

“Then which king are you?” Troy asked.

“What do you mean?”

“There are two kings on the board, the white and the black.”

I understand that much, I thought.

“Right,” I said. “But they’re the same.”

“In most aspects, sure,” he presented, “but there is a certain difference. The white king always moves first, the black always moves second.”

“And what do you suppose that means?” I urged.

I had claimed white in every game against Troy so far, but I had never associated the different sides with their character traits.

“Well, if white always moves first,” he continued, “perhaps it means that the white king is a more effective initiator. They’re able to think ahead and get things started, play offensively with a plan in mind.”

“Then what about the black king?”

“Well, if you were to ask me, I would tell you that the black king is naturally more defensive. From the very first move, the black king has to be able to efficiently respond to every move that the white side makes. When we first played, I reacted in response to your ‘double-knight-initiative,’ as you call it, thinking that it was a part of your game plan. Since then, I have realized that it isn’t a plan at all and have therefore reverted to a less responsive style of playing. Assuming, though, that I was facing somebody with a procedure from the get-go, I’d have to play more defensively than offensively, at least until my opponent makes a mistake. Fortunately, your first move is usually a mistake.”

The new notion that the black and white pieces were naturally different left me in a silent state. Of course, the bombardment of sleights added to its duration. The game continued.

“I suppose,” I finally said, “that I would relate more to the black king. I’m not particularly good at thinking ahead in conversations or other situations, but I am prone to preparation. In most situations, especially with strangers, I don’t respond very quickly or effectively, and if I do, it is usually because I have prepared a response ahead of time. I most often consider what somebody else will say or do ahead of time and then have a counter ready before I even interact with them.” After a brief moment of thought I added, “Though maybe that implies more initiative...?”

“It’s not so easy to define a person’s character is it?” my friend proposed. “Not even your own.”

“I suppose not,” I admitted, feeling somewhat defeated.

“Over one of these same games,” Troy said, “you explained to me that before you and I had ever even exchanged words, you had labeled me as a ‘delinquent.’”

Then came embarrassment.

“What would you call me now?” he asked.

“Hmmm...” I wondered. “I suppose most people up until just recently when you started hanging out with me would consider you a loner. Maybe they’d still consider both of us loners.”

I got so caught up in thinking about how I defined Troy in my mind that I forgot to keep the game moving. Troy waited patiently. *Always laid back, I thought, definitely smart.*

“Perhaps calm... collected...” I continued. “Maybe even a genius!”

I figured adding some flattery wouldn’t hurt. I realized I had held him up and made my next move.

“Fine,” he went on, seemingly unaffected by the compliment. “Then perhaps you could sum me up in your head as the ‘loner’ or the ‘genius’ or the ‘delinquent.’ Or the ‘lone genius delinquent.’”

“I’ve dropped the ‘delinquent’ portion, though,” I clarified.

“I’m sure you’re not the only one who thinks of me that way,” he countered.

“Maybe, but the ‘Lone Genius Delinquent’ isn’t a very catchy or concise title.”

“It’s not concise, you’re right,” he replied. “Assuming we continue to hang out, you’ll only learn more and more about my personality, my habits, my sociability. My character. And for each of those things you learn, you’ll be able to tack on another adjective to my title, attempting to confine others and me to words. Heck, English doesn’t even have a word for everything. You may have to venture into foreign languages to define some people. The point is that you can add and add and add words to your definition, but you’ll never settle on a single word that is me.”

This was a certainly unexpected occurrence. With my original question, I had intended to get Troy seriously thinking, but he had forcefully flipped the table on my game, this duel of minds that complimented our chess match. And it looked as though I wasn’t to win either of these bouts.

“What about ‘Troy?’” I prompted.

“Huh?” he responded.

“The single word that defines you,” I explained. “Doesn’t ‘Troy’ do that?”

He thought about it momentarily, and a little part of me felt like it had won at least something.

“I suppose that’s the best you’ll be able to do,” he admitted.

I smiled.

“Just know,” he added, that I could have my name changed at any time, though.”

I laughed and focused once more on the chess board, but it was clear how it was going to end. I still tried to put some thought in to my next move, just to show that I wouldn't give up, though in the end, the move itself changed nothing.

“You'll have to edit your statistics,” Troy announced.

I raised a confused eyebrow in response.

“It would seem your ‘double-knight-initiative’ tactic only wins eight out of twenty-one times.”

He ran a pawn forward on his final move.

“Checkmate.”

“Gah!” I exclaimed, comically swinging an arm over the table. Pieces flew against the wall and onto the floor as I meaninglessly flipped the newly-cleared chessboard around and declared, “Rematch! But this time I'm playing black!”

These new friends of mine were incredible. I had been living for a long time lonely but always under the narcissistic assumption that I was the most understanding person around and that nobody had any new interesting thoughts to offer me. Together, Troy and Wallace, in less than a week, challenged that notion twice and shattered that falsehood in my mind.

“It's a real shame,” Wallace prodded, “that you don't like Isabelle.”

“Huh?” I snapped out of my daze.

“You said so, right?” he asked.

I hesitated momentarily. I suppose I had.

“Right,” I answered.

“Hmm...” Wallace said as he poked at his food with a fork. “I really thought that you two had been hitting it off. I told myself ‘Hey-o, it’s only a matter of time before these two good friends of mine are making kissy faces at each other.’”

He picked up an apple from his side of the table and kissed it in a joking manner. My face crinkled up while I looked down at the lunch that I had yet to touch.

“You know,” he kept talking, “I once had to mess a guy’s face up because he kept skirt-chasing her. After she rejected his advances a few times, he started getting belligerent. Isabelle, of course, the saint that she’s always been, refused to fight him herself, even though I have bruises on my arms that prove to me she could’ve. Instead, *I* caught wind of it and stepped in. I’m not a big fan of violence, but somebody had to get the message across to him.”

So that’s what had happened. I finally heard it from the horse’s mouth.

“Truth is, though,” he continued, “I don’t want to have to be the executioner who drops the axe on behalf of the monarch whenever the needed arises. I’m waiting for somebody else to take over that job for me, or at least for somebody else to teach her to do it herself.”

Well, I’m sure as heck not gonna do it... I’m not built for combat...

Then he added, “Plus, I had high hopes that you would be the one to get her unhooked from the other feller she’s been crushing on.”

I couldn’t help but react to this one. First Wallace informs me that he’s not an obstacle, and then he immediately turns the tables around by telling me that there *is* an obstacle after all? *Wallace, these things you do... do you even know?* My head shot up. Wallace must have seen the frustration in my eyes. He greeted my chagrin with a smirk. Immediately aware of how

transparent I was showing myself to be, I slammed my head back down on the table, fed up and defeated.

“You mean you didn’t know?” Wallace laughed. “Yeah, it must have been sometime last semester.”

Wallace, stop.

“Hey, uh,” he carried on, “between you and me, though, I think you’ve got a much better chance of convincing her to change teams. The other guy’s a downer, a bad match if you ask me. A real drag.”

I didn’t know whether to believe him or not. Even still, I had lugged these feelings for Isabelle through several weeks of fright, and I had just found out that she was still single. It was not yet time to give up.

All right, I thought, grinding my teeth. Who is this bastard?

Love

Something very awkward occurred in one of my classes last semester, an occurrence that still seems very surreal to me. Thinking about it still makes me embarrassed, and I'm not sure how I could have said such an odd thing out loud.

I sat in an introductory painting class with twenty other art majors, organizing my portfolio. I listened in on a couple of students sitting behind me as they spoke in vague terms about making some kind of choice. Some bits of the conversation made me feel like it was nothing more than the yammering of art students, the mentions of Rembrandt and photorealism, neither of which I particularly knew anything about. The rest of the conversation, though, made me nervous, as if I had forgotten to do something for an assignment that week. I rummaged through my disorganized memory files, but I didn't recall any homework. I was certain then that the conversation was just artistic gobbledygook not particularly related to that class. I continued to rack my brain just in case, but it didn't help. Just as the clock hit 9 PM, the professor suddenly turned to us, clapped his hands together, looked me directly in the eyes and stated with a hint of madness that the class had begun. My eyes widened, and my uncertainty intensified.

“Now, as you all remember,” Professor Norman began, now meeting eyes with the rest of the class, “I asked you all last week to come up with a theme that would become the focus for the rest of your projects during this semester and next semester. I hope you all thought hard about this. As soon as you tell me your topic, you're stuck with it. Starting in the back of the room, let's go around and tell me which topic...”

At the end of every class I'd been in since starting college, I had a tendency to write down any homework assignments in my composition notebook. I intended this practice as a

precaution just in case I ever forgot a homework assignment. However, I have also had a tendency to not open my notebook except when in class. After all, I wouldn't forget any homework assignment worth completing. When Professor Norman brought it up in class just then, I actually did remember writing it down. *I really need to revise my homework procedures*, I thought. I began brainstorming for themes for when the spotlight landed on me. I needed something that wouldn't bore me and could also be carried across two semesters' worth of projects. I looked around subtly, hoping for something to inspire me. A nearby window got me thinking and translated into some thought about mirrors. Sure, mirrors seemed like a theme worth working with. A few ideas for projects were already popping up into my head. Maybe that meant it was too easy, though.

As Professor Norman finished up listening to the back row of students, the door to the classroom opened softly, and in walked my recent fascination. Marine Jirka walked swiftly to the seat just behind me, a large showy canvas bag bumping loudly against her waist with each step. She drew most of the students' and even the professor's attention away from whichever student had been talking about their theme in that moment. Just before she sat down, she made eye contact with the professor and bowed her head apologetically for being late.

I took the opportunity while everybody had their eyes on her to stare at her myself. Her defined black curls, silky and shiny, bounced softly as she sat down much more quietly than how she entered. I watched her gently use both of her hands to tuck the bottom of her dress beneath her legs. Her eyes were particularly lovely to me, glimmering blue accented by two thin eyebrows, her dark brows themselves made bold by her matching raven hair. Her hair contrasted her pale skin. Never before had a girl so easily enraptured my senses. She was quite the beauty.

Marine would be the inspiration for the theme that replaced mirrors only a few instances after her arrival.

As the professor started speaking to the row behind me, I turned to look at the person talking, though I hardly paid any attention to what was being said. I attempted to quickly scrounge together a few project ideas for my new theme. I found it difficult, though. In my peripheral, I saw Marine perk up as the person just before her presented their ideas. As they finished, all eyes turned to Marine. She smiled briefly, visibly satisfied by the attention. Of course, I thought she deserved it.

“For the rest of my projects, I have chosen torture as my theme,” she proposed.

Eyebrows raised throughout the room. The strangest topic so far, the very mention of torture made students noticeably uneasy. Even I found it fairly odd. Her confidence, though, demanded people listen.

“I have considered depicting the cruelty inherent in the torture of humans and animals alike,” she continued, not in the slightest bit hesitant. “I would also like to find a way to depict life itself as a form of torture.”

“You’ve chosen a very serious and perhaps even brutal topic,” Professor Norman said, scratching his face. “Of course, I’m not going to tell you to drop that theme. Torture is very much real and must be assessed by individuals. Just talk to me after class, and we can discuss the parameters of what is appropriate for this setting, okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled, satisfied either by the approval by Professor Norman or by the shock noticed in her classmate’s faces. “Just don’t censor me too heavily.”

Life as torture, huh? I pondered. I didn’t quite understand Marine’s fascination with torture. It seemed too pessimistic, too gruesome a topic to spend half of a semester on, but I

considered that maybe I was missing something. I didn't get it, but I trusted that she would do well. Even as she spoke about a theme that might result in paintings of, as I imagined it, the removal of fingernails or bloodied animals, her voice was soft and her diction dominating.

Impressively magnificent, I thought.

As the professor reached the girl sitting next to me, I recognized my persistent trouble coming up with specific project ideas for my theme. Still, I knew I wanted it as a theme, though.

"I'd concentrate perhaps on creating portraits of strangers in order to reflect how weary they might be," my neighbor began to conclude, and I found myself becoming increasingly nervous. "In turn, I would hope it could inspire consideration for the turmoil and tribulation of even those people we don't personally know."

"That sounds like an excellent approach, Isabelle," Professor Norman said, and then he turned his attention to me. "All right, Roland, fire away."

In that moment, I realized just how vulnerable announcing our topics like that made us. I accepted the challenging nature of my topic. However, as I imagined the rest of the class's stares setting on me, I recognized just how cheesy my choice would sound. I froze up for a moment and fumbled with my words.

"Well, I was thinking of, uh, doing something along the lines of, uh..." I sputtered out momentarily, and uncertainty latched on once again. "Well, sorry, I'm just not sure if this is a very good topic, but..."

"Just say it. If you chose it, it's probably not that bad."

It was not Professor Norman who chimed in, oddly enough; he waited patiently for me to get the words out. Still, I looked up at him first, but his glance returned blank. Who else could be in a position to push another student to spit it out? It had been a female's voice, and the words

seemed encouraging enough. I turned around to lock eyes with Marine Jirka, who had her head resting in her two hands over her desk. My heart skipped a beat. My face spelled out concern at first, honestly surprised by this encouragement from my goddess.

Then I noticed the furrowed brow. I am still uncertain as to whether Marine intended to be reassuring or aggressive, but my instinctive assumption at that moment landed upon the latter. I interpreted her face as reflecting irritation and her original words then as criticism borne of impatience. And I didn't care to be criticized. I was aware that I had been taking my sweet time in presenting my topic, but criticism only made me tenser than I had already been from being put on the spot after forgetting about the assignment in the first place. It irked me.

"Just because I chose it doesn't mean it's a particularly good theme," I directed the words directly at Marine. "It's like saying there are no stupid questions. Of course there are stupid questions, and sometimes we all find ourselves asking them. I could just as easily pick a topic I'll regret. We aren't all super confident about picking things like torture to dwell on for such a long period of time."

"You *should* be confident," she responded surprisingly fast, lifting her head up from her hands and her eyebrows expressing even further aggravation. "You chose it because you think it is worth depicting in your art. You have got to take pride in that. It does not matter what any of the other people in this room think of it. It is still yours and it represents a part of your concerns, values, and personality."

I didn't let it go. I countered, making random and nondescript hand motions, "Still, maybe I'm not as completely certain about exactly what types of things capture my values or personality... and even if I was, I'd still be concerned about what other people thought of me."

My hands gripped on to the back of my seat, and I gazed hard into the girl's eyes. And then, amidst high tension, came those words that still bother me half a year later.

“Marine, I am aware that you are competent and self-assured, and I'm certain that I could easily fall in love with a demeanor such as yours, but you must realize that not everybody is like you and that we aren't always thrilled to describe the things that are on our minds.”

There were a couple moments of silence after I stopped. A lump suddenly caught in my throat as I thought about what I had just said in front of an entire class. I scanned my peers' faces behind me for any judgmental reactions they might have had. I couldn't be totally certain, but the expressions seemed almost entirely blank and unconcerned. I looked again to Marine just in time to catch her face as it contorted in confusion and perhaps even, as I thought, mild disgust. I turned back towards the front of the class in response to my professor speaking up.

“All right, all right,” he said, gesturing with his hand for us to stop bickering. “That's good enough. What is your theme then, Roland?”

I scratched my head a moment, still rather flustered. *Is this really a decent topic?* I asked myself.

“Beauty.”

To my greatest relief, the rest of the class seemed to go by normally. Professor Norman lectured, but I hardly paid any attention. Throughout the entire period, I felt the constant urge to turn around and see if anybody had a judgmental glance for me. I kept my wits about me the best I could. I didn't turn around, but my embarrassment ate away at my sanity. *Perhaps I should just give up on ever having a good reputation here*, I thought. *I hope “confessing-his-crushes-in-front-of-public-audiences boy” is too mangled a title to catch on.* I considered it momentarily.

I'm sure the determined will find a way to condense it. I had my chin on my table the entire rest of the class. I only hoped that the way people saw me wouldn't affect the way people saw Wayne. He was trying hard to make friends at the college.

We were released ten minutes early. I was one of the last people to finish packing up, but luckily nobody else made any jabbing remarks on their way out before me. Marine Jirka had approached Professor Norman to discuss the dos and don'ts of torture. Or at least her torture projects. She clearly already knew the ins and outs of torture; simply talking to her left me feeling fried alive. I looked over at her just before I left, but she didn't seem concerned with what I had said. I imagine that in most cases confessing one's love to another would leave one with the sensation of having lost a heavy burden. In my case, the weight became heavier. *Right over her head*, I thought. I sighed when I got outside. *Now what about everybody else's heads?*

I decided to head to the cafeteria to see if I could catch any of my classmates already striking up conversation with my own social awkwardness as an icebreaker. I had to stop at a traffic intersection along the way, and then I realized my regrettable comment would live on as somebody walked up behind me and spoke.

"Wow, quite the romantic, aren't you?"

Female voice. Not Marine's. I would have known if it was Marine's. I took a moment to swallow in preparation for the expectedly dreadful conversation to come.

"Is that the best you could do?" I forced a small chuckle. I wanted to play it cool, because I wasn't cool.

I turned to see my seat neighbor for the painting class, Isabelle, with an awfully big smile on her face. Though she often sat next to me in the front row, I had never even had a conversation with her, at least not a memorable one. I had always found her rather cute, though,

and it wasn't that I didn't want to try talking. I had just never been particularly good at talking to girls, so I had decided to save my best conversational lines for one that I really wanted to get to know. That's why I usually kept a tiny notebook full of what I had deemed "good topics for talking to women." Isabelle herself hadn't seemed my best option, as, at the time, I was certain that she was dating Wallace Kaiser. Ridiculous assumption, I now know. I had also assumed at that time that Wallace was the type of dude who would knock my teeth out for getting too close to her. I kept my distance. There she was, though, suddenly talking to me.

"Aw, come on," she spoke softly. "I'm not trying to making you feel bad. I thought it was sweet. The timing may have been a bit off, but it was sweet."

Her smile seemed sincere enough, but I didn't return it. Clowns are professionals at smiling, but they're still mocking you.

"Yeah, well, if I had been putting *you* on the spot, you wouldn't have thought it was so sweet then."

"You're worried about the publicity of it, huh?"

I bit my lip. She had noticed.

"Don't worry," she assured me. "I'm pretty sure nobody in there thought about it hard enough to really get it."

"Yeah," I laughed, looking at her. "I had hoped so."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me. I was only there to enjoy the play. I don't publish reviews or anything."

Having to talk to a stranger about it didn't particularly help ease my tensions.

"I wish, though," I continued, "that it had been Marine Jirka who had understood."

"You don't think she got it?"

“I know she didn’t get it,” I looked across the intersection to the crosswalk signal, but it was still red.

“You could always just try again,” the girl offered. “You’ve got all the time in the world.”

“Nah, I don’t think I care anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Isabelle asked.

I thought about what exactly I meant for a moment.

“What I said may have been out of place, but it was still sincere. She was too caught up in patronizing others to hear what I was telling her, though. I don’t think she’s for me honestly.”

“Oh...” Isabelle seemed somewhat disappointed.

The signal turned green. I looked at Isabelle, but she gestured to tell me that she wasn’t crossing. I shrugged, and then I added one thing before I crossed.

“Besides, I’d much prefer someone who appreciated the romance.”

After my enlightening discussion with Wallace, I felt that I had to fight my hardest on the battlefields of love, and even as I put forth my best effort, the identity of my competitor on that front remained yet a mystery to me. I had talked with Isabelle a few times since then, even employing some under-the-radar prying tactics with hopes of her letting slip a name but to no avail. In fact, I was starting to suspect that I might be my own worst enemy. Though I no longer had to worry about Wallace, I worried to no end about acting the fool in front of Isabelle. With an opportunity to finally win her affection, I also recognized an equal opportunity to say something idiotic or do something crazy. It could become a real moron under pressure.

Whenever I noticed Isabelle from a distance, I would rush to the nearest bathroom just to make sure I could pass as stylish and presentable. I never did give myself a passing grade, though. *My hair isn't parting properly*, I thought. *My eyebrows make me look mad... in the bad way. Is my nose crooked?* It really didn't matter what the problem might have been. I just couldn't be satisfied. Each time after I checked myself in the mirror, I asked Wayne what he thought.

"You look like regular old Roland to me," Wayne responded once, floating in front of me.

"I look old, huh?" I asked, touching my face. "Am I getting wrinkles already?"

"Roland, really, you're fine," Wayne said. "Maybe you should spend some time actually talking to the girl rather than looking at yourself in the mirror."

That particular instance was one where I exited the restroom only to find that Isabelle had disappeared. This happened on more than one occasion. Wayne eventually got fed up with the silliness of it all and pulled one over on me one day.

Just as I entered the cafeteria, he said, "Roland, look out, your shoe's untied!"

Trusting my dear friend, I knelt down to fix the problem without even looking myself only to realize he had betrayed me.

"Wayne, these shoes don't even have laces," I remarked, confused.

And then she appeared from my right flank as if in coordination with Wayne from the very get-go, exclaiming, "Hiya, Roland!"

I didn't look, but, of course, I knew exactly who it was immediately. I couldn't seem to get up from the floor, though, still dazed by this blitzkrieg maneuver. I could have sworn I felt

my face melting; I watched as sweat droplets fell to the floor. *Wayne, you monster*, I thought. *To your best friend...*

“Roland, are you okay?” Isabelle asked.

I lurched to standing and finally responded with all the coolness I could muster.

“Yeah hi Isabelle I’m fine how are you nice shoes nice laces where did you get them I think they have spaghetti in the cafeteria today!”

We both stood there awkwardly for a few seconds. I refused to make any eye contact with her. Wayne simply mocked me, “Nice!”

“Well...” Isabelle began, “I’m doing okay, thank you, I got them from a flea market in Georgia, and I love pasta days in the cafeteria.”

“Whoa, what?” is all Wayne had to say, surprised at the completeness of her response.

I didn’t have anything to say at all. I still had plenty to sweat, though.

“Do you want to eat lunch with me?” she suddenly asked.

It took me a moment. She just stood there smiling sincerely as usual. I suppose it should have eased my tension, but it only made me feel more foolish for hesitating. I eventually managed to respond.

“S-sure...”

We briefly split up to procure food but reconvened at a table near a window. The sun shined radiantly, but in that moment, it had nothing on Isabelle’s own brightness. She had returned with a plate full of nothing but pasta and a content grin on her face. I, the one who had brought up the spaghetti in the first place, just got a salad. Isabelle didn’t mention it. She led the conversation, talking about her adventures of that day. She made it sound extravagant and like

really something special, but I realized that she had simply gone to a few classes. Joy came easy to her. I wished I was the same.

“I finished *Blue*,” she suddenly mentioned.

“You what?” I asked.

“The book, remember? The one I showed you at the park. You told me to tell you what happened when I finished it.”

“Right!” I exclaimed, remembering. “So how’d it turn out?”

“Well...” she began, as her face suddenly changed notably from happiness to what I had originally assumed was discontentment. “The girl kept getting taken from place to place to cure people with her ability, but eventually she just couldn’t cry anymore.”

“Like she ran out of magical tears?” I questioned.

“No, not exactly,” she answered, and then she had to think a moment. “It was more like she ran out of sorrow.” Isabelle set her fork down and began poking at one of her thumbs before continuing, “No matter where she went, she noticed that there were always people who were suffering, and she realized that with a world full of people in pain, there was no way for her to possibly cure all of that pain by herself.”

Isabelle had stopped looking at me. Then I recognized that she wasn’t disappointed by the book, just upset by its outcome.

“Eventually,” Isabelle continued, “she just couldn’t be sad anymore. She had grown desensitized by her constant exposure to misery. The government tried hurting her a few times to make her cry, but they weren’t the same tears as when she had been sad. So she had lost her ability to help the people who were suffering...”

Isabelle started twiddling her thumbs though her explanation had ended. She seemed lost in thought. I could only watch her. I didn't realize she would be so affected by a book with a sad ending.

I finally asked her, "It really upset you that much, huh?"

"A little," she mumbled.

I didn't know what to say. I had watched as the rainclouds had covered this sun of mine, and I wanted to find a way to disperse them.

"I had a question for you..." I said quietly.

She continued to play with her thumbs without looking up. Her head tilted slightly, but I didn't interpret it as acknowledgement. *Perhaps this isn't the time*, I thought.

I had just begun to continue eating my salad when she suddenly looked up at me and asked, "Yeah, Roland?"

My heart skipped as she stared intensely into my eyes. I didn't know whether it was an indicator to forget about asking or to keep going. I hoped it the latter.

"I was wondering if..." I began.

I feared that I might stumble over all of my words and that the request might come out entirely mangled and dysfunctional. Wayne gasped dramatically as a joke. Isabelle didn't prod or gesture. Her eyes by themselves signaled that she wanted more.

"I was wondering if you would..."

You can do this, I tried to encourage myself. *You only have to say it once, and then it's over*. I pressed on.

"...if you would go on a date with-

“Yes!” came the early response as Isabelle slammed both of her fists on the table, shaking utensils and causing me to jump in anxious fright.

I lost eye contact briefly, but I reestablished it quickly when I realized what she had said. She continued to stare at me with ferocity. Her mouth hung open only slightly as she breathed heavily.

“Wait, really?” I asked in confusion.

She slid her fists off of the table, noticing that she had startled me, and again said, “Yes.”

For what may have been a full minute, I sat silent and concerned.

Then I finally asked, “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“But Wallace told me,” I commented, not even sure why I felt the need to bring it up, “that you liked somebody else.”

You’ve already achieved your goal. Why are you asking that?

“What?” she reacted, her eyebrows furrowing slightly. “Who’s that?”

“I don’t know who exactly,” I explained. “Wallace just said you started to like some guy last semester.”

We both took a few moments to consider who it could possibly be.

“There’s nobody else,” Isabelle eventually proclaimed. “Wallace must have just been messing with you. He’s like that, you know. The big joker.”

I sat back in my seat, somewhat baffled by why Wallace would bother making up something like that.

Then Isabelle asked, “So where are you going to take me?”

“Huh?” I responded.

“On our date?” she chuckled.

Oh, right. This is happening.

“You’re sure that’s where you want to go?” I had asked Isabelle, uncertain. “Isn’t it cheap of me considering I’ll be paying for us with a discount?”

“It’s really really fine, Roland,” she had assured me. “I love the amusement park. That’s why I always pester Wallace to get me in for a lower price. But now I guess you can do that, too. You’re off tomorrow, right, right? So let’s go!”

So we ended up at the amusement park where I had become a reliable employee. *I really hope Wallace isn’t working today*, I thought. I couldn’t be sure that I would be able to shake him off if he happened to spot us. Isabelle and I walked around together, closely but not touching. I had never been on a date before. There had never been many opportunities for someone like me. That is, somebody who sucks at talking to girls. I glanced over at Isabelle who marched along joyfully with the same backpack that she had brought last time, leaving a trail of smiles in her wake. Nobody she interacted with at the park could be left frowning. She simply had a way of making people feel good about themselves. I suppose you could call it a natural warmth that she exuded. Even I found myself unable to hold back my smile for most of our time there, and that had to seem especially weird for the staff who recognized me outside of my signature bear suit. I had never been prone to smiling. This had nothing to do with how happy or unhappy I might be. Smiling just made me feel goofy, so I didn’t. Following Isabelle all day, though, I couldn’t help it. The excitement of being there on a date with her overwhelmed me.

“Aww, Roland,” she said as she caught me in the act. “Your smile is wonderful. You should smile more often.”

“Oh, er,” I fumbled around in my brain for words. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” she replied, and then she added, whispering, “Maybe you could teach Troy to smile as well while you’re at it.”

I only laughed.

We rode the rides all across the park, with the exception of the rollercoasters. Isabelle informed me that she couldn’t handle the extreme speeds. Even without them, there remained plenty to take part in. Just before we sat down to eat lunch from a hotdog stand, I somehow managed to win a stuffed animal from one of the carnival game booths. As cliché as I thought it must have looked, I gave the prize to Isabelle. She seemed happy to receive it. *I thought those booths were always rigged*, I pondered. *Did the guy running it recognize me and decide to cut me some slack?* I shared this concern with Isabelle, but she refused to be bothered by the notion.

As we munched on overpriced dogs and cotton candy, I finally relaxed and struck up a conversation like I would with any other person. I just had to remind myself that despite her goddess-like appeal and radiant aura, Isabelle was, in fact, another human being just like me. I knew that she had agreed to the date so that we could actually talk to one another, not so that she could lead me along while I tried my hardest to muster up complete sentences. I didn’t want to let her down, so I did my best to keep the conversation going. We rallied back and forth, talking about some of our general likes and dislikes, favorite foods, the latest TV, our silliest fears. I felt especially accomplished when I managed to make her laugh, not once, but twice. I always knew I could be funny. I was just never sure what my sense of humor was worth until it worked those two giggles out of Isabelle. I don’t remember what we talked about in great detail, probably just the things you’d expect a couple of kids to discuss on their first date. I do remember one thing vividly: my elation at making it a worthwhile trip out for her.

The date carried on, with much less anxiety on my end after that point. As the sun began to set, I realized just to what extent I had hurt my wallet. Almost a week's pay gone in the same place I had made, all for the sake of an extravagant date. It was worth it. She was worth it.

One attraction remained for us. Isabelle had demanded we save it for the end. My worst nightmares manifested themselves as we approached the Ferris wheel. Of course it had to be Wallace running the ride that day of all days, pirate garb and all. As we approached him, he saw us coming from a mile away. I could tell he had laid eyes on the two of us together when the devilish smirk grew too big for his face. Frightful of even having the conversation that was sure to result from this, I stopped dead in my tracks, but Isabelle would neither slow down nor leave me behind.

“Come on, dearest Roland,” she said playfully, grabbing my wrist and yanking me along. “I'd hate to miss the ship's departure.”

As we stepped up, the evil intent in Wallace's eyes intensified, but he refused to blink or stop staring at me until I finally gave up and attempted to ignore him. I saw him gesture as he prepared to make his jokes. To my surprise, though, Isabelle cut him off, pulling her fingers across her own lips, warning him to zip his yap. And oddly enough, he complied, though I saw the disappointment strangling him. He let us into one of the pirate ship-themed Ferris wheel baskets and didn't say a word as we boarded.

“See, see?” Isabelle laughed, reclaiming my attention. “You just have to put him in his place when he's making trouble.”

“I see,” I responded, bowing my head to this wise woman. “Thank you for teaching me, master.”

“Of course, young pupil,” she replied, bowing with the same posture.

As she looked off to the side opposite the basket's door, my curiosity got the best of me. I couldn't help but glance back at Wallace. When I did, though, his eyes he had already fixed on me, and he now held his pirate hat in front of his face, meeting its skull and crossbones design with his lips in the most exaggerated and over-the-top kiss I had ever observed. He clearly had no shame. Anybody could have been watching him, but he didn't seem to care as long as he got his chance to poke fun at my self-conscious nature. It worked. Embarrassed, I turned away slowly without responding, only thinking, *I will get you back for this, Wallace, my friend. Just you wait.*

As our basket crept on its way towards the top, I could tell that the view mesmerized Isabelle. Only a few moments of watching her look out over the park passed, but I felt the selfish urge to bring her attention back to me.

"It's somewhat funny..." I began.

"What is?" she asked without turning away from the side of the basket.

"For quite a while, I was certain that you and Wallace were a thing."

"What do you mean?" she asked, still distracted.

"Like going out, I mean."

It was only a split second that I could have possibly noticed it, but I swear I saw the hairs stand up on the back of her neck before she finally peeled herself away from the sights and whipped around to face me, the most shocked expression I've ever seen across her face. But she only stared at me while I watched her constructing a response.

"Me and Wallace?" she laughed, her face still stuck in surprise. "That's hilarious, you kidder. Not in a million years."

I squinted at her, suspicious and asked, “But it did happen, didn’t it? Less than a million years ago, I mean.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said obstinately.

“Don’t play dumb,” I prodded. “I’ve already heard all about it.”

“That was just a phase,” she finally let up on complete denial. As she curled her hair nervously, she added, “Wallace is just a big goof who likes playing jokes on people just a little too much.”

She pinched her fingers together in front of her just to emphasize her point.

“Oh, god, it’s not that bad,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” she posed, stubbornly.

“Sure,” I responded. “I mean, he’s got brains and brawn. And a job, that helps. Plus, he’s nice to the point where people just seem to stick to him like glue.”

“Gosh, why don’t you just marry the dude?” she joked.

That’s exactly what Troy said to me, I recalled. God forbid I compliment a man...

My face contorted momentarily, so she took the opportunity to tack on, “Would you prefer a date with him instead of me?”

A joke clearly, but I responded as a flustered fool.

“Of course not,” I told her with much more seriousness than the situation dictated. “I asked *you* on a date because I like *you*.”

I dropped my head in embarrassment at my own words. I could feel my cheeks warming up and my heart accelerating. She must have noticed my dismay.

“Aww, Roland,” she consoled me, “you don’t have to be so nervous. I was only joking.”

She switched from the opposite side of the basket to where I sat slumped over and placed her hand on my wrist. I flinched, not expecting her touch, but she held it there.

“You know,” she continued softly, “Wallace is an awesome person, one of the best friends I could ever ask for, for sure, for sure. It’s just that I don’t think he has much of a romantic flame in him. And that’s fine, not everybody will. But I’d much prefer someone who appreciated the romance.”

That last line really struck a chord with me. I knew it from somewhere. *Where have I heard that before?* I wondered.

Rubbing her thumb back and forth tenderly on my wrist, she added, “I’m fond of you as well, Roland. And I don’t want to miss out on the opportunity that Marine missed out on.”

Marine? I wondered. *Marine Jirka? What does she have to do with...?*

Then I remembered! *That was my line!* Those familiar words were the same ones that I had said to her right after that ridiculous incident in our first painting class. *This woman... I thought, astounded. My eyes widened at my feet. She remembered something like that from that long ago? How could I have possibly forgotten all that...?*

And then came the next realization out of the shadow of the first. *That day was the exact same day that Wayne was assaulted that last time. The same day I received his final phone call. The same day that he fell.* A shiver ran down my spine.

I gripped at my chest, but it was colder than what I had gotten used to. I sensed the chill could freeze me over entirely. Desperately and without a breath in between movements, I reached instead for the hand that Isabelle had previously laid on my wrist.

For warmth.

I held on to her hand tightly as if having no plans to ever release it. I hoped that I hadn't alarmed her with my sporadic jerking about. I remained silent with the exception of heavy breaths, but I had lifted my head to look her in the eyes.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, Roland," Isabelle said, worriedly. "Are you feeling sick like last time? I really shouldn't have dragged you up here. I forgot. I just forgot about--"

"No, no," I tried to calm her. "It's not the Ferris wheel. I've gotten over that issue. I was just..."

I didn't know how to explain it.

"I was just lost in thought. I'm sorry."

That's all I've got.

"Oh..." she murmured. "Okay."

She didn't let go of my hand, though, and I enjoyed that.

"Honestly," I began, "the first time we ended up on this Ferris wheel together I may have freaked out a bit, but I really did enjoy it. Believe it or not."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I assured her. "I thought it was all very beautiful. The lights and the view from up here."

We had just reached the very top of the wheel, and I looked out over the park.

"I tried to paint it," I added, "for our class."

She gasped excitedly, then exclaimed, "That's right! Your topic was beauty, right? The one you chose last semester, right? Right? How'd it turn out? You never really present any of your stuff to the class."

“Bah,” I groaned immediately, then explained. “I just couldn’t do it justice. Any of it. Beauty. None of my work has turned out beautiful. No matter what I do, I just can’t get it right. I just can’t capture it.”

I leaned back and sighed deeply, remembering all of the disappointing pieces stored in the bin under my bed, the most disappointing of which being the several paintings of Marine Jirka that I had attempted in my spare time during my first semester.

“Don’t worry about that,” Isabelle offered. “We don’t always get it right on the first try, but that’s why we keep trying.”

“I don’t know,” I responded. “I’ve only been getting more and more frustrated with it lately. I always imagine it one way, and it always turns out another way.”

“Well,” she started, “how would you define beauty?”

I thought about it for a minute, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Okaaaaay...” she said. “Well, then, tell me something that you think is beautiful.”

I only had one good response in that moment.

“I think you’re beautiful.”

She let out a soft and sincere laugh, but I could tell she had tried to hold it in.

“You know,” she said, “you really don’t have to flatter me so much.”

I looked off into the distance.

“Well,” she continued, “then would you ever try to paint a picture of me?”

“I don’t think I could do you any justice,” I remarked honestly.

“If you don’t even feel like trying, then maybe it’s just something you shouldn’t try.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You said it frustrates you, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if it’s as bad as you make it out to be,” she stated, “then maybe painting just isn’t for you.”

I thought about it momentarily.

She added, “If it doesn’t make you happy, it’s not worth pursuing. Perhaps there’s something else out there that does make you happy, though? Say, I don’t know, writing poetry?”

Where the heck did that come from?

“What?” I asked, a little concerned.

“You don’t have to play dumb with me,” she answered quickly. “Really, Roland, I sat next to you for that entire first semester of painting, and you didn’t think I noticed how you were always scribbling in your notebook instead of listening to Professor Norman?”

“You were reading my poetry!?” I exclaimed.

“Over your shoulder, yeah!” her voice intensified with mischief. “All your deepest darkest poems!”

I stood up suddenly, letting go of Isabelle’s hand, completely astonished by the fact that I had never caught her in the act.

“You can’t just do that!” I proclaimed. “That’s just evil!”

She stood up to meet me.

“Well, well then, just call me the devil,” she said, placing her hands on her hips.

“Whatcha gonna do about it, erase my memories of it all?”

The basket began to shake violently from our sudden standoff. I looked at her concerned, but she just continued to smile while we both silently agreed to sit back down.

“You know,” she carried on, “You’re lucky it was me. What if those poems had slipped into the wrong hands? Evil, evil hands?”

I cupped my face in my hands.

“Those poems weren’t meant to be read,” I complained.

“But Roland,” she finally dropped the troubling intonation and replaced it with sincerity, “those poems are one of the reasons I like you.”

Looking up once again, I asked, “Wait, really?”

“Really really,” she confirmed. “All of your romance was alive in those poems. I apologize for reading them without your consent, but if I hadn’t, I probably wouldn’t be here today. You never really say much in class, and you’ve never showed off any of your paintings...”

“That’s because my paintings aren’t worth it,” I dropped in.

“Well, maybe not,” she admitted, “but I know for a fact that your poems are. I can tell you put a lot of effort into them. You like writing, right?”

“I suppose,” I said, though it had been a long time since I had really written anything creatively.

“Better than painting, I assume?” she asked.

“I suppose.”

My writings had been good at one point. My paintings never were. Writing had made me happy at one point. Painting never had.

“In the end, it’s all up to you,” she pointed out. “I’m only trying to help. If it means anything, though, I always saw beauty in your poems.”

It did mean quite a bit to me.

“Maybe you’re right,” I told her. “I’d always been frightened by the idea of having a major in writing, but now that I think about it, I don’t know how I could have ever thought my painting might have more prospect than my poetry. Maybe I’ll see about switching over. I’ll have to think about things a bit.”

“Take your time,” Isabelle said, patting me on the back. “You’ve still got to finish your courses this semester, so I guess I’ll have to make the most out of having the same classes!”

I looked her in the eyes and said with the utmost sincerity, “Thank you, Isabelle.”

She smiled at me with that infectious smile again. I couldn’t control my own.

“Would you mind if I asked you something then?” Isabelle asked.

“Shoot.”

I noticed that her face suddenly harbored solemnity.

“Like I said, I watched you when you wrote in class. But eventually, after a certain point, you started writing less and less until eventually you just stopped altogether.”

That is true, I thought. I couldn’t do it anymore. Because of...

“Did you stop because of Wayne?”

I sat silently at first, as if I hadn’t even heard the question, but I slowly came to realize just what she had asked. *She used his name. She used Wayne’s name.* Nobody from the college had mentioned his name to me once in the entire time since his fall. I was aware that some people had learned about the incident, but nobody had ever approached me to talk about it. I couldn’t have possibly discerned just who knew what about me. Who saw me as the awkward reclusive kid, and who saw me as the untouchable guy who had watched his friend commit suicide? It seemed she knew me as the latter. Having checked it over in my head a few times, I suddenly reeled my head back at an angle just perfectly in line with a metal beam extending from

my seat to the basket's roof. A resounding *clang* rang out as I fell forward again, clutching my head.

"Oh gosh, Roland," Isabelle responded, as she leaned in to try and help. "Are you okay?"

"You knew?" I asked, ignoring her concern and my throbbing pain to the best of my ability.

"Huh?"

"You knew about Wayne?" I tried again.

I didn't know whether to be angry or worried or wild. *How could she have known for so long and not even brought it up once?* I wondered as I took my hands away from my head. It continued throbbing.

"I knew," she replied simply, lowering her helping hands.

Dazed by this discovery and somewhat by the hit I had taken, I closed my eyes in an attempt to regain my composure.

"How could you not tell me something like that?" I asked.

"I would have told you that I knew sooner," she explained, "but you were always in such a rush to get out of classes, and I hardly ever saw you on campus."

I suppose I was always locked away in my room... pitying myself...

"For several months I waited for an opportunity to talk to you," she continued. "I always felt so horrible. I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like for you."

I didn't know how to feel, but it seemed like I had been worrying this girl before I even really knew her. *She really does have the heart of a saint*, I thought.

"I think I understand..." I finally conceded. "I'm sorry if I made you worry."

She breathed a sigh of relief and then said, “It’s okay. I apologize for not telling you sooner.”

“Well, since you’ve known for a long time,” I posed, honestly curious, “did you ever consider that maybe...?”

I trailed off. *Maybe it’s best not to ask*, I started to reevaluate.

“Consider that maybe...what?” Isabelle encouraged me.

I’m not afraid of the answer, I decided.

“Did you ever consider that maybe I was the one who had pushed Wayne?” I asked. “I’m aware of what some people said around campus. That is was me. Because I was there.”

She came back confidently, “Not for even a moment.”

I looked her in the eyes and knew that she was telling the truth. It came as a great relief to me.

“I may have never known Wayne personally,” she declared, “but I knew from the times when I saw the two of you on campus that you meant a lot to one another.”

I nodded, remembering a long friendship with Wayne that had started even long before college. Then Isabelle added something with her sweet smile that somber conversation had regrettably shooed away early.

“That’s why he came back to you, right?”

I didn’t respond, baffled. *Does she mean after his death? She never acknowledged it when I tried to tell her before. That can’t be what she means.*

Noticing my confused expressions, she clarified, “As a ghost, right?”

That is what she means!

I sat up straight, shocked.

“You know, Roland,” she laughed softly, “your reactions tell all.”

I smiled at her, though still bewildered.

“Well, he’s here right now, right?” she asked as she swung her legs excitedly.

I realized suddenly that I wouldn’t be able to satisfy any request she might have to converse indirectly with Wayne.

“Isn’t he?” she asked again.

“He’s gone,” I replied.

Unfortunate timing, I thought.

Her eyebrows bounced up and down mischievously as she inquired, “Did he agree to give us some alone time?”

I released a weak note of laughter in response then told her the reality.

“Wayne’s gone for good.”

The night before my date with Isabelle: Wayne appeared to me as I prepared to go to sleep.

“How’d it go with Isabelle?” my light orb friend asked.

“Weren’t you there? She agreed to go to the amusement park.”

“Whoa, nice job, dude!”

He bounced in the air to emphasize his encouraging spirit.

“Thank you, thank you,” I replied, bowing to my audience of one.

“I would have loved to hear my best friend make his first confession,” he assured me as he flew in a circle around my head. “But, alas, I fell asleep.”

“And you just woke up now?” I laughed as I crawled into my bed for some sleep of my own. “That’s some intense resting, Wayne.”

“You’re right,” he said, following my face. “Roland, we need to talk about something.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“You’re going to have to sit up,” he informed me. “It’s important.”

I didn’t take this statement of urgency lightly. I sat up.

“All right,” Wayne began, “I’m not entirely sure how I’m going to explain this.”

I hope this isn’t as bad as he’s making it sound, I thought, the tiniest bit nervous.

“Remember the book that Isabelle was talking about? *Blue*?”

“Yeah...” I replied, suspicious. “You want to talk about a book?”

“Sort of. Like I said, it’s important.”

“Okay, go ahead,” I agreed.

I’ll give this time to my friend.

“I think it’s getting near my departure time,” Wayne told me suddenly.

“What do you mean? Where are you going?”

It didn’t cross my mind for an instant that he might mean leaving me permanently.

“Ah, geez,” he exclaimed.

I heard frustration in his voice.

“Okay,” he tried again, “so in that book, there’s the one girl who can heal people with her tears of sadness, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Right,” he continued, “so nobody is able to explain why she has that power. She just does. So she’s an enigma to everyone, and though she doesn’t quite know why she has her

power, she still realizes her potential and is able to use that power to help a lot of people. That is, of course, until her opportunity to use that strange power runs dry. With the novel, I didn't read it, so I can't possibly know whether the heroine was satisfied with helping those few people in the end, but I can say for myself that I am satisfied with what has happened here."

"Huh?" I interjected. "I don't follow."

"As I listened to Isabelle telling you about it, I realized that it reminds me of us two and what's happened here, Roland. Though neither of us can explain why I of all people was given an opportunity to return from death, I returned. It hurts me to think that if I hadn't come back, you would probably still be locked up most of the time in this room suffering. But that's why I'm so glad that I could help heal the wounds on your heart with this strange power."

"That's right," I said, smiling at the ghost ball Wayne, "and it's also thanks to you that I've been able to meet such amazing people like Isabelle, Wallace, and Troy."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he responded. "And I'm satisfied with this accomplishment because, though there may never be another opportunity for somebody to rise up from the dead, I know that this does not all end with me. Because now there's you."

"Me?" I asked.

"Tell me, if you were to see somebody tomorrow in the same type of situation that you were in after my death, what would you do?"

"I don't think," I answered with resolution, "that I could possibly stand by and not reach out to them."

"Exactly," Wayne said happily, "you wouldn't just let them be. You can become for them what I have become for you, a door to happiness. That's why I have recognized this power as transferrable. Now you can use it for the sake of others."

I simply nodded toward him, knowing his words were true. I hadn't recognized my potential at that point to help others, but I realized that the power was in me, in my heart where Wayne had always rested.

"Just don't forget about the real forgiveness that I told you about. Not the one that comes from me or anybody else, but the practice of forgiving yourself. They'll need that most."

"You're right," I concurred, "I'll do my best not to forget. And if I do somehow, you'll be there to remind me, right?"

An awkward moment of silence.

"There's a reason that I had to bring all of this up right now, Roland," he said solemnly. "Like you mentioned before, my sleeps are lasting longer, and they're growing closer to one another."

Oh no, don't tell me...

"Roland, my power is running out as well."

I clenched my fists, anticipating what that meant.

I mumbled, "Don't say things to make me happy just so you can turn around and make me sad."

"I can't help it," Wayne stated. "I feel like whatever let me be here in the first place is ready for me to come back."

"But you said..." I murmured as my eyes began to well up.

I couldn't forget after just how hard I had attempted to deny his arrival when he appeared in that form and called himself Wayne.

"I'm sorry," he sympathized, "that I couldn't stick to all of my words like I had hoped to. I wish I could see a whole world with you, but I suppose if I don't take my leave, my fall will

have meant nothing. It's true that I regret going up on that bridge more than anything, but in the end, I still chose to go up there. That regret is part of what makes me who I'll continue to be."

"But you promised!" I yelled at him. "That you'd never leave me again!"

"The promise I made to you," he countered, "was that I would never leave you *alone* again."

"Then what are you doing?!" I raised my voice again.

"Roland, don't you get it?" he tried to settle me down as he fluttered about. "I may have to go away, but you'll never be alone like that again."

I just stood there trying to figure out what he meant. I should have realized who he was talking about, but the fact that he would leave still had its holds on me.

"Troy, Wallace, and Isabelle," he spelled it out for me. "Those are friends that won't be leaving anytime soon. I can tell."

Their faces flashed in my mind suddenly, and I knew once again that he was right.

"I'm sorry, Wayne," I told him, "if you ever felt like I was neglecting you since your return..."

"Are you kidding me, brother?" he laughed heartily. "I did what I came here to do. It's been truly something to watch over you as you made new friends. Now I can truly rest in peace."

I stared at my friend in front of me, bodiless but seemingly whole.

"I suppose this is goodbye then?" I asked, aware of what came next.

"I suppose so."

I tried to find the proper words to see him off.

"Much love, brother," I concluded as he started to drift away from me.

"Much love, brother," he responded.

Then he phased through the same window he had entered through on his first night back here with me, and he disappeared.

“Only last night?” Isabelle questioned me as she slammed her fists on the Ferris wheel’s seat. “I missed him by that short a time? That’s so infuriating!”

I laughed at her eagerness and slight misfortune, “Sorry about that.”

I looked off to the side to find that night had fallen completely. We had clearly gone around a few times, and the mesmerizing lights had imposed themselves across the park.

“How did you know that Wayne was inside of me?” I ended up asking.

“What do you mean?” she responded. “You told me yourself.”

“But you just ran away when I brought it up the first time. I would have sworn that you thought me crazy. I know Troy thought I was lying.”

She shifted closer to me and asked, “Do you mind if I show you something?”

She reached for her backpack which had been resting on the floor this whole time.

“Uhh, sure,” I hesitantly agreed.

Is she ignoring the question?

Then she pulled out something surprising, a couple smaller painting pieces that she unwrapped from tissue paper. The first piece, which she held in her left hand closer to me, showed a profile of a boy. The second showed the same boy’s face but this time from the front. He seemed sad.

“Hmmm...” I said at first.

Something seemed familiar about it to me, but my density held me back from figuring it out.

“They’re nice,” I finally concluded when Isabelle had shifted her gaze to me expectantly.

“Do you recognize him?” she asked.

My eyebrow scrunched up, confused. *Am I supposed to?* I looked closer. The streaks she had used were light and created a blurred light effect that disregarded deep detailing in these faces. Then I noticed what I thought of as a less than appealing part in the subject’s hair, and I realized who it was meant to be.

“Is that supposed to be me?” I finally proposed, turning to her, needy of an explanation.

“Yay, you got it!” she laughed excitedly, loudly.

I felt somewhat taken aback by what I saw.

“Do I really look this... gloomy?” I asked, prepping myself for an unwanted answer.

“Well, not anymore,” she assured me. “I’m showing you this because I want you to know there’s a difference, right? This person is completely, *completely* different from who you are now.”

Is he really, though? I wondered skeptically.

“A few months back,” she explained, “I can’t imagine you smiling at anything.”

She started looking deep into my eyes again, so I tried to return the favor.

“But today,” she added, “You’ve shown me your wonderful smile quite a few times, and it makes me rather happy to know it’s still there.”

I felt like I might be on display, but I didn’t mind the attention honestly.

“And it’s not just today either,” she continued. “The first time we came to this theme park together and you told me that you had a ghost with you, I knew immediately that you were telling the truth. And I knew that it was Wayne. Simply because of how much your face had changed in such a brief period of time. And how much brighter it had become. I had only ever

seen you smile so bright with Wayne around, so I had no reason to doubt your words. I'm sorry if it came off as me ignoring you the first time."

"That's okay," I supposed. "I'm amazed you went through the trouble of painting me of all people."

"Well," she said, "believe it or not, you actually fit the theme I chose for painting class quite perfectly."

I couldn't recall her theme, but I didn't worry about it.

"Could you do me one favor?" I presented.

"Sure, sure, what is it?"

"I'm not sure how I feel about these two sad-looking guys," I laughed as I pointed at the pieces. "I think you'll need to do another one to brighten up the set a bit."

She smiled at me in the way she does.

"You know, I think you're right," she agreed. "At least this time, I can ask you to stand still."

When we finally got down from the Ferris wheel, Wallace felt the need to inform us that we had made at least seven trips around. Thanks to his predisposition toward us, he had decided not to kick us off.

It was quite a ride, I thought to myself.

So just like that, Isabelle and I fell into a relationship of sorts. It wasn't long before she asked me to go out a second time to a museum in the city over.

"It sounds good," I replied eagerly, "but I'm not sure that my wallet had recovered just yet."

“Silly,” she said, poking at my ribcage, “you paid for the last date because *you* asked *me* out. I’m gonna pay for this one because *I* asked *you* out.”

I recoiled and responded playfully, “Oh, is that how it works?”

Somehow a couple of hooligans imposed themselves on our plans, though. Wallace and Troy found an all too coincidental reason to tag along as Isabelle and I got in my car to go. I didn’t care all that much, I decided, as long this didn’t become a habit of theirs. I couldn’t be so sure that it wouldn’t.

“Why are you rude ones here again?” Isabelle asked, a little irked, turning to the backseat where Wallace and Troy sat.

Wallace scoffed, “We’re not here to ruin your date or anything. Troy and I just had to...uh...”

He tried to think up an excuse but Troy had to interject eventually.

“We have a report to do on the museum,” Troy stated easily.

“Oh yeah, sure,” Isabelle called out the two boys as they started to nod in confirmation.

“The bio major and the business major have the same report do on an art museum.”

“Weird, isn’t it?” Wallace offered with his signature devilish grin.

I couldn’t help but laugh at my three new friends who had turned my car into a pool of fun remarks.

I suddenly realized as I followed my GPS’ directions toward the museum that I needed to take the bridge, the same bridge where I had watched Wayne’s body go under. At first, I didn’t know if I could handle it, but as I approached it, I actually managed to ease up a bit. I knew that I couldn’t let those bad memories get the best of me forever. After all, Wayne had come back just so they wouldn’t. As I made my way up toward the highest point, my eyes locked on to the exact

place that Wayne and I had stood that night. I had a thought suddenly that I would see him again one day, quite a way down the line perhaps, once I passed on from this life. I looked out over what had once been an abyss. Now, I watched in awe as the sun sparkled, running streams of light along the rough waters below.

“It’s quite a nice view, isn’t it?” I asked of my companions, and they agreed.

I knew that Wayne had left me in good hands. I wondered if maybe he could be watching from wherever he presided. I felt confident in the life to come. I felt happy with what had come to me in recent days. And I knew that I owed a lot to Wayne. With one hand, I touched my chest.

Wayne is gone, I thought, but a part of him lives on.

Reflection

As a history student at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, it has been a privilege to be able to write an Honors Thesis in a field unrelated to my own major. When first faced with the overwhelming decision of what to do with my thesis, I was uncertain as to whether it would be reasonable to tackle creative writing. How having a creative writing thesis would benefit me in the future, I could not say for sure. The fact that nobody else in my class at that time would be pursuing a thesis in creative writing was discouraging as well. Eventually, I settled on it, pushing myself with little more than the reminder that I wanted to be a fiction author in the future. Despite the fact that I had never taken a creative writing course while at USFSP, Professor Heather Jones, my thesis director, and Professor Anda Peterson, my second reader, were willing to commit themselves to reading and providing feedback on the novella I began. To them, for that opportunity, I am especially grateful.

A Guide to the Gaps, my novella, was originally meant to act as a sort of prototype for a future series of fictional high fantasy novels, which I had already begun to organize. Two of the most important aspects to the future series would be poetic language and social commentary, both of which I wanted to practice with in this novella. In a way, *A Guide to the Gaps* was experimental for myself as a writer.

As the novella began to develop, though, I found that it was beginning to mean more to me than just an experiment. It was growing to be more than just practice for something else, and, though it is by no means a masterpiece, I want it to be seen. It is for this reason that I have decided to not let *A Guide to the Gaps* end with its submission for the university requirement. Instead, I will be continuing to expand on this novella as a piece of writing that is more than a

step toward a future novel. In pursuit of publishing, it will be a work with the ability to stand on its own.

Writing this novella has been a journey, a rough one, a pleasant one. Before even starting the novella, I dug around through a few theses from previous Honors Program students. With one of the creative writing theses, a novel, came a reflection that discouraged future students from writing novels unless they happened to already have plenty of characters, settings, and plot points written down somewhere and ready to go. This particular comment was disheartening for me personally, because, though I had ideas, I did not have tons of details established prior to beginning the writing process.

However, having finished the writing of my thesis, I must disagree with the reflection that worked to frighten me. One should not shy away from writing a novel for their thesis just because they don't necessarily know where to start or where to take it. As long as the student is willing to dedicate their thoughts and a reasonable effort and as long as they are passionate about writing, they should never be afraid to write. Though I did not start with characters, a setting, a plot, or anything else particularly substantial to what the novella would become, I did have passion, a desire to write. This is my advice to any future Honors Program students wanting to write a novel for their thesis: do it. Always keep your novel at the back of your mind. Never stop thinking about it, and details will come to you. Then the book comes next.

My own novella started from scratch. For the first couple months of Thesis I, I struggled with deciding exactly what kind of approach to take. I remember at one point wanting it to be simply entertaining: not necessarily thought-provoking, but something that could make somebody laugh. At one point, I thought that I could, in fact, incorporate my history major by making all of my characters references to major historical figures. However, I eventually decided

upon writing something contemplative. Amongst my priorities was the intention get people thinking. About what exactly I wanted to get them thinking, I was not certain. However, I knew that philosophy had a place in this novella. With too many pent-up thoughts on my being, society, and the universe and very few people to converse with, I felt that my novella could become my outlet for those thoughts. From there, I searched for inspiration for the atmosphere and my favorite part of any novel, the characters. Upon realizing that my novella did not have to become anything grandiose, a tale for the centuries, I chose to use what I had in front of me for reference. My own life became the inspiration for the story.

With a fascination for Voltaire at the time, I thought I might want to write something simple in the style of *Candide*, a book that I still find incredibly interesting despite its age. I did not necessarily want satire or outlandishness. I only wanted the straight-forwardness of his sentence structures. I attempted to write using a similar structuring, but that plan quickly fell through when I realized that I was too detail-oriented. I couldn't help but elaborate on people and occurrences as much as possible, a trait that in the end, severely affected the parameters of the novella. I learned much about myself as a person and a writer while bringing this book to life; this was one of the first things I learned.

I kept my novella at the back of my mind for quite a while before finally making a definite decision about what kind of plot it would have. As I stated before, my own experiences would be the inspiration. I created a main character, Roland, who was meant to be somewhat simple to write, because he was based on me. His thoughts would be my thoughts. Around him, I formed a handful of other characters. Each of these, with the exception of maybe one, were based on people close to me in real life. Often, these characters saw traits from multiple people mixed into them. I wanted to keep things simple for my first major piece, so I limited the number

of characters. When I started writing chapters, I had created six more characters, all of which were meant to interact with the main character in different ways so that the main character could actively compare himself to others.

In comparing himself with others, the main character was intended to fall into contemplative episodes, where his thoughts would be expanded upon. I had a long list of places that his thoughts would take him when the novella began. Eventually, I had to shorten the list to a manageable size. With focuses on societal views of professionalism, relationships, and the purpose of individualism, these thoughts were meant to be agreeable in some senses and disagreeable in others. Many of the contemplative episodes experienced by the main character are based on episodes of my own. However, I would not dare claim perfection, so along with the flawed thoughts I have had before come the potential flaws present in the character's own ideas. Instead of attempting to present arguments and answers for an audience, I chose to present questions with the intention of making people question themselves and the world around them. In these questions, I hoped that the novella would find a practical application of reason to prevent it from drowning in delusion.

Of course, that is not to say that the novel is free of fancy. I wanted to create for readers an emotional appeal to go along with the appeal to reason. In order to do so, I had to find a subject matter that was worthy of emotional investment. From the need for this came Wayne, the main character's best friend who finds himself suicidal due to bullying-induced depression. Though it is hard for me to talk about intense depression, having never really dealt with it myself, I have had friends who have been depressed, which is why I found it all the more important to me to discuss it. I have instead dealt with anxieties before about meeting and talking to new people, so some of the main character's development is based on that particular issue. Of

course, I have realized with my own life that these particular issues – depression, anxiety, loss – are not the end of the world. In the past, I have had to deal with strong feelings of guilt due to mistakes that I have made with people. The misery induced by that has been so great before that it has brought self-loathing and even fearfulness about making further mistakes in the future. When one has those types of thoughts, it's very hard to make them cease. A lot of the thoughts that Roland, the main character of the novella, has have been thoughts that I myself have had before, even some of the ones that seem the most vicious or overbearing. It's a terrible cycle of emotions that I don't think anybody else should have to experience.

Having said that, this novella had particular goals involving those terrible feelings of guilt, anxiety, and depression. First, I wanted to be able to show the reader who has suffered from any of these things that there is a way out, a light at the end of the tunnel if you will. Sorrow does not have to be the conclusion. I personally know that this is a hard thing to believe sometimes; I have been there, thinking that no matter what you do, your problems may never be fixed and gone. I wanted to prove to somebody that they can, in fact, beat those awful emotions, that they don't need to be distressed forever. Furthermore, I wanted to use my story to convince somebody who does not suffer from any of these issues to reach out to somebody who does or might. I realize that sometimes it is hard to tell how somebody feels, especially if that somebody actively attempts to hide it from others or if they physically avoid interaction with people.

In the end, I didn't want the novella to just be about depression or anxiety. I wanted the novella to show somebody coming away from these things. That's why the most intense occurrence in the story, the suicide of Wayne, occurs so early on in the plot. I wanted to get it out of the way so that the reader didn't feel the need to dwell on it. The main character's final goal is happiness. In looking for it, he has to ask himself not only what he needs to let go of but also

what he needs to look for. That's when the book develops to ask questions about what is worth wanting out of life. Can one derive happiness from their profession? Can one derive happiness from artistic pursuit? From helping others? From knowing a god? From knowing themselves? From love? By the end of the novella, I really wanted to get the point across that happiness does not come from anything but one's own self. Happiness, as I've seen it, is nothing more than being satisfied with pursuing the things you want to pursue. No person or thing can weigh you down if you simply do what you love. That is where contentment comes from. That is happiness.

I struggled long and hard trying to figure out exactly how I would be able to get this most important of messages across to the reader. I have debated with friends about whether an artistic work should, upon completion, effectively relay the artist's intended message to the audience or whether it is acceptable for the artist to not always know what their work will communicate to the audience. Should things be left up to audience interpretation? Can the artist be influenced by their culture, their society, or the time period in which they live without the artist knowing it? I personally feel that the artist needs to have a firm grasp on the ins and outs of their story and the concepts that they want to pass on to the reader without being largely influenced by any external factors.

While working on *A Guide to the Gaps*, though, I often found it hard to accurately define and transfer the messages I wanted into the medium. One of the major problems with writing is that at times it is hard to find accurate words to describe just what one means as an artist. Often, my sentences ended up too wordy as I had to find complicated means of defining seemingly simple concepts. At other times, dancing around certain concepts too hard to define became impossible.

I would meet with my thesis director usually every week or every couple weeks so that she could read over a new portion of the novella. There were times when I looked at her comments and found that as a reader she had interpreted certain scenarios, dialogue, and characters in a way different from the way I had intended them to be interpreted. At times this was bothersome. I could see how Professor Jones came to conclusions that were different than my intentions. Usually, I recognized external factors, culture and the norms of my society, and their influences on shaping my writing. Through this writing process, I realized that I am not yet a perfect writer with the ability to escape these forces.

Speaking of my readers, it was an especially pleasant experience to have professionals in the field of creative writing looking over my very own novella and providing feedback. A great deal of the time, I was in no particular mood to write, and I would find it hard convincing myself to start typing a new section. When writing in the past, I usually relied on a feeling of inspiration to move me. However, when you only have a semester or two to write a novella, one doesn't have the luxury of waiting on inspiration. Inspiration is too uncontrollable. It was Professor Jones and Professor Smith who gave me advice to solve this problem. They told me that as a professional writer, I cannot wait around. Instead, I have to write at least a sentence a day, even when I really don't feel the urge to write.

When I would go to meet Professor Jones to discuss my writing, I always felt nervous about having my work critiqued. As I wrote portions and submitted them to her for review, I was ever aware that things would have to be changed, shifted, and removed. Of course, after writing these portions, I came to appreciate my own work, so I was never prepared to see it torn apart by somebody else. I found it surprising, though, that my work was not being torn apart necessarily. Instead, when Professor Jones left a comment on one of my pages, I usually understood exactly

where she was coming from with her criticisms. She would often recognize and point out sections of the writing where I had actually found myself struggling to write. I can't recall any particular points in the critique of writing process where I was not on the same page as my readers. Being able to understand my reader's critiques, more than anything, made me confident that I could effectively and adequately rearrange and recreate my piece to make more sense, even when recreating it meant rewriting an entire section to be an entirely different scenario. When I was confident about what had already been written, it gave me the push to keep moving forward.

One of the most amazing aspects of being a writer is being able to watch your work slowly grow. When I was writing this novella, I did not write from the start of the story to the end of the story. Instead, I would visualize scenes from different parts of the book at different times and write them wildly out of order. It took a while before the written portions started to connect, but once they did, it was truly rewarding to see.

I watched as *A Guide to the Gaps* changed drastically in my aspects over the course of my being in Thesis I and II. For example, the title of the novella was one of the very first things that I settled on. The title is meant to be a clever wordplay on the concept of the God of the gaps, the idea that God explains whatever science cannot. With that idea, I wanted to elaborate on questions about deities and spiritual purpose as well as question whether one can be satisfied in life without knowing all the answers. Instead, I couldn't find the time or the appropriate place to discuss concerns about God, so I took it out for the most part. Another thing that changed drastically was my use of poetry. Originally, I had wanted to use poetry more frequently than only at the beginning of the novella so that I could have another outlet, a more artistic outlet, for the main character's thoughts, but instead I had to take that out as well, letting the prose dominate the book. There were a couple of characters that were removed from the story as well

to keep the plot on course. Honestly, I had originally thought that removing all of these things would make the book feel emptier, but I actually ended up writing a lot more than I had originally intended. I think it was for the best that I removed a few characters and subplots in order to meet deadlines.

I had originally planned this novella as practice for another planned novel in the future. Instead, I came to love this story so much that I want to continue building on it. I'm sure that what it lacks now – those lost characters, the poetry, further contemplative episodes – will make their way into a final version as this novella grows to be a novel. As I said before, having it as my thesis doesn't mean I'll be done with it once the class ends. It is incredibly satisfying, in the end, to have grown attached to this novella, my very own piece of art, and to know that it will not be dying anytime soon. I hope that one day it will be able to inspire others.