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editors' note

Past editors have used this introductory page to reminisce about their years with *Outbreath*. They have shared their attachments to this magazine as well as the feelings evoked by leaving the publication behind upon their graduation.

Fortunately, our sophomore status allows us to forgo such sad subjects, and instead, we are simply able to share our excitement about the magazine and its future.

Although we were not present at its creation, we learned about *Outbreath’s* history and growth by reading past issues and speaking with senior staff members. We heard stories detailing the dedication of the magazine’s original staff, and could clearly see the pride and delight on the faces of last year’s editors as they spoke to us of *Outbreath’s* development.

Knowing we had big shoes to fill, we took tentative but enthusiastic strides in assuming our executive positions. And although we have added our own flare to the magazine, we wouldn’t choose to alter the vision and remarkable essence upon which *Outbreath* has flourished.

We truly enjoyed the process of fashioning this publication and look forward to many more productions. We hope that you appreciate the talent of your peers and this beautiful compilation.

Sara Kaplan and Kristina Ceruzzi
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julie furbush
“Cassandra, are you listening?” the psychiatrist asked in an even tone. “I need to be sure that I have your full attention for this conversation to be as beneficial as possible. I’m here to help you. Cassandra?”

The psychiatrist sat up very straight in the hard chair across the table from Cassandra, who sat limply, staring at the floor. Her eyes were blank, glazed over, as she peered through the floor, hardly blinking and receding farther into the blue-gray void behind her irises. Her hands, as if independent of the rest of her languid body, repeatedly twirled around each other in her lap, ceaselessly searching for the dirt beneath her fingernails that didn’t exist.

The psychiatrist crossed her legs and leaned forward from the back of the chair. “Is there something wrong with your hands, Cassandra?”

But she wasn’t listening.

…

Cassie sat on the sidewalk outside the Shop Rite smoking a cigarette on her fifteen-minute break from ringing up the crazies that lived in Freetown, Indiana. Just before she had come out, she sold seventeen oranges and one banana to a woman who tried to pay with an assortment of coupons before busting out her wallet from her giant straw purse. As she smoked, Cassie absentmindedly ran her thumb over each plastic fingernail on her left hand while she flicked ashes with the right. She watched two cars pulling into the parking lot only to fight over a spot, leaving the blue one to circle around a couple of extra times, before the driver got out and huffed past her, storming through the automatic door. The driver of the triumphant white Honda stayed in his car, blasting the hardcore music for a few extra minutes and then coolly sauntered past Cassie’s perch into the supermarket.

She was startled when he came back out just five minutes later as she was lighting the third cigarette of her break.

“Hey, can I bum one?”

He didn’t seem to her like the type of guy that wouldn’t have his own cigarette, but she reached into her packet and grabbed one for him anyway. She didn’t really care, because it wasn’t like she paid for them or anything. Jimmy, who worked behind the cigarette counter, usually pocketed an extra pack for her, and lord knew that her mother was never short of Marlboros.
There might be days when there was no food in the house, but there were certainly never fewer
than five cigarette packs stashed in various cabinets and drawers.

Cassie looked up to pass him the cigarette and noticed that he did have one tucked behind his ear.
“Hey, thief,” she said. “You already have one.” But he took the one she held out in her
hand and lit it anyway.

He inhaled, sucking in his cheeks and holding the cigarette deep in the crevice between his
fingers. “Yeah, so?” he said, exhaling with a half-grin. And she blushed as she realized that maybe
“Can I bum one?” was his version of a pick-up line. She tucked her straightened, dyed-blonde hair
behind her ear, and began fiddling with the silver hoop earring. Then she wrapped her arms around
her knees and clasped her elbow with her right hand, partly to keep still and partly to hide the ugly
red Shop Rite apron she was wearing.

“So are you going to sit?” Cassie ventured.

“Nah,” the mystery guy said. “But I’ll see you around.” He winked before turning and
heading back to his car. She watched him confidently swagger away, pull out, and turn onto Main
Street, with his tires squealing over the thump of the fading bass.

Jimmy came outside, which meant that her break was ending and his was beginning. “Get
your hot ass back to those customers,” he said in a creepy old man voice, imitating their boss.
Cassie wiped the dirt from the sidewalk off her black stretch pants, and punched Jimmy in the arm.
“Hey, do you know who that guy was? Who was just here? The one in the Hurley sweatshirt.”

“Was he driving a white, pimped-out Honda?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, that’s Mason – he goes to our high school. He’s just not really there all that often.”

“So how do you know him?” Cassie asked.

“Well, he helps me, I help him. You know. We’re mutual beneficiaries of each other, or
some shit like that.” Jimmy laughed. Then in the grumbly, grouchy voice, he said, “Now get back
to work! Pronto! You’re not paid to slack off and fraternize with the other employees!”

Cassie smiled and stepped on the black, ribbed mat that opened the automatic door. But
she didn’t really know what he meant. What the fuck were mutual beneficiaries?

“Cassandra, I’m going to ask you a few simple questions, okay?” the psychiatrist said in
an endlessly plain voice. She apparently was not fazed by her patient’s lack of responsiveness.
But Cassie looked up slowly, bewildered, as if noticing the other woman’s lack of responsiveness.
She laboriously turned her head to look beyond the psychiatrist’s face and noticed the armed guard
keeping post at the locked door. She looked up and squinted at the fluorescent light above the table and then returned her gaze to the psychiatrist, grunting in response to her question.

“What’s your last name, Cassandra?”

She furrowed her brow, but murmured, “Jones.” It wasn’t that she couldn’t remember, it was just that she couldn’t seem to wade through the images in her mind to grasp onto anything she was looking for.

“Good. And what’s your father’s name?”

“Don’t have one.”

“And your mother’s first name?”

“My mother,” Cassie whispered, as if she was about to start a sentence. But her nearly imperceptible voice trailed off into nothing as she returned to the race inside her head.

“Seriously Mason, I don’t know why it matters so much to you. Let’s just go to your house or to 7-11 or something like we usually do,” Cassie said. “Look, there’s my mom’s car in the driveway; I told you, she’s always home, and if she’s not, she’s always back soon. Your parents are always working.”

“Yeah, but even though my parents are usually at work, you’ve at least met them. I don’t know a single thing about yours.”

“There’s nothing important to know.”

“Come on, Cass. You’re being ridiculous.”

“Fine,” she said, lowering her voice to the level just between anger and resignation. She looked out the car window at her mailbox and swallowed, her feet propped up on the dashboard. “Look, my dad took off when I was a kid,” she suddenly spat out. “Who the fuck cares where he is, because he used to beat her anyway. And my mom is an alcoholic. You wanna meet her? Fine, let’s go. You can meet her.”

Cassie swung out of the car and slammed the door behind her before Mason could say anything. She stormed halfway up the walkway to her house before she turned around and waited for him to catch up. The bright red door had an old, faded plaque on the front hanging crookedly that said Home Is Where the Heart Is. Cassie turned her key in the lock and they walked into a dark living room that had nothing but the TV turned on and Cassie closed the door gently behind them.

“Cassandra, is that you?” a slurred voice mumbled from the couch. “Whyya gotta go slammin’ the doors all the time?”

“I didn’t slam the door, Ma.”

“Yeah,” she said indignantly.
Mason and Cassie walked farther into the house, around the back of the couch so her mother’s face came into view. She was lying under a mass of blankets with bare feet poking out the end. Her half open eyes were glued to the television screen, and a blue glow flickered across her face in time with the infomercial. There was an imprint on her cheek from the couch, like the skin of a burn victim and her gray hair looked like it hadn’t been brushed in days. Mason’s lips were shut so tight, they had become just a line on his face, and he looked apologetically toward Cassie. She sat down on an ottoman. “Mom, I want you to meet someone.”

“They show you how to slice and dice a potato 46 different ways,” she said as if she was talking in her sleep. “And they include a free recipe book.”

“Oh, that’s great.” Cassie paused. “Mom, this is my boyfriend Mason,” she said in a hurry, intending to gloss over the introduction and bolt for the door. Her stomach growled audibly and she thought she could feel the acid in her intestines.

Her mother’s eyes abruptly snapped into focus and her body tensed as she turned to face her daughter, and noticed Mason standing in her living room. She slowly sat up, the layers of blankets falling away, and the frail woman suddenly looked dangerous, like a zombie rising from its grave, ready to hunt down the person who caused its death. “Your boyfriend? You brought a man into this house?” she growled, her voice low, but steadily growing louder. “I thought I told you. Men are poison. Poison!” She stood up and hovered over Cassie, who sat looking at her hands in her lap. “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” she screamed, her hoarse voice cracking with the effort.

Cassie tilted her chin up, but kept her eyes down defiantly, and her mother slapped her across the face. She looked up, resigned hatred boiling in the space just below her ribcage.

Mason grabbed Cassie’s mother’s wrist. “Hey, don’t you touch her,” he threatened. The five-foot-four woman shivered in her nightgown and she looked at Mason as if he were a ghost. The moment of fear quickly transformed into hysteria as she began shrieking and frantically smacking him with her free arm.

“I told you never to come back here, you bastard! I told you to leave this house and never come back! Get the fuck out of my house!”

Mason, confused, pushed the panicked woman backwards, and she fell into a heap of sobs on the couch. Cassie stood and glided to the door, looking back at her mother, and then to Mason. He followed her, closing out the tears and the voice of the infomercial salesman with the door behind him. Cassie didn’t need to turn around to know that she could have seen a silhouetted arm through the curtain of the front window, reaching for a bottle of vodka.

Cassie crossed her arms and fixated on the side view mirror as Mason sped away down the road, his music screaming and the speaker’s vibration tickling the bottoms of her feet as always. They didn’t talk. When they pulled in front of Mason’s house, he left the car idling.
“Wait right here, Cass. I’ll be right back out. I just gotta grab something.”
Cassie nodded.
He came back looking like he wasn’t carrying anything, but he had his hands tucked into
the pouch on the front on his sweatshirt.
“What’d you have to get?”
“You’ll see,” he said and he gave her the half grin that had won her over a month ago in
front of the supermarket. Mason was always very mysterious, but in a way that made her want to
follow him. He was like a little boy with secrets, and she was the girl who would chase him around
the playground to be let in on them. And despite his curious absences on certain afternoons and
nights, he was remarkably consistent. He might not always be around after school, but weekend
nights were reserved for them. Reserved for aimless drives down the highway and movies that
played while they fooled around in his bedroom. He was her escape, a car to drive away in, a face
to find in daydreams.
Mason pulled into the grass soccer field parking lot, and drove to the very back along the edge
of the woods where the light from the streetlamps didn’t reach. He turned off the car, and in the silence,
reached across the front seat and put his hand gently over her jaw, softly touching the skin behind her ear.
“I love you, Cass,” he said, and kissed her.
She didn’t know how to respond. Did people really fall in love after a month? Was the
distraction of deep kisses and loud music enough to equate to love? She couldn’t seem to make
the words come out of her mouth, so she wrapped her arms around his neck, and he didn’t seem
to mind her silence.
“Now it’s time to celebrate,” Mason declared, and pulled a rolled joint in a plastic bag out of his pocket.
“Mason…” Cassie was reluctant. “I’ve only tried it once, I don’t really know. What are
we celebrating anyway? My mother drunkenly raving at you, thinking you were my father?”
“Come on. It’ll be fun. And, no. We are celebrating the fact that you have been riding
beside me in this car for almost a month. Come on, let’s go.”
He grabbed a blanket from the back seat and spread it over the hood of the car. After a
minute of attempting stubbornness, Cassie sprawled out next to him, and let her back be warmed
by the leftover heat from the engine. It was mid-April, but the nights were still cold and damp,
and she appreciated the warm, harsh smoke in her lungs when she took a hit of the joint. They
stayed there, silent and mellow, staring at the haphazard pinpoints of light in the sky above them
until the joint was finished and the car hood was cold metal through Cassie’s sweatshirt.
Mason slid to the ground, and took Cassie’s hand. She felt like she couldn’t move, but she
followed him as he pulled her into the backseat of the car and pressed on top of her. They were
kissing suddenly, yearning for each other, melting into the taste of the other’s mouth. It felt as if scenes were passing, frame to frame, like a movie in slow motion, yet skipping from one part to the next and she was watching from the outside. It didn’t mean she didn’t like the sensation of his hands under her shirt or running over her hips or the moistness between her legs. Everything was moving faster than it ever had before, yet it felt slower than dripping honey and she knew that even if she couldn’t give him love, she could give him this. She could give him moans as he slid inside her and heavy, wet breaths in his ear. She could give him this that no one had ever asked for.

Cassie stared at the two blue lines on the strip for a long time before throwing the box and the pregnancy test into the trash of the bathroom stall. She simply couldn’t be pregnant. It had to be a mistake. She chain-smoked on her walk to work from school, and found Jimmy outside the Shop Rite. She parked it next to him on the curb.

“Hey, Jimmy.”
“Yeah, I smoked the whole way here.”
“Uh oh. What’s goin’ on?”
“Oh nothing,” she responded. She rummaged through her backpack, pulling out her wrinkled red apron, and then plopped it back into the bag, crinkling her forehead between her eyebrows. “I’ve just been wondering…Well, it’s just that Mason really never picks me up after school and I can never see him during lunch. And I was thinking about that thing you said to me a few months ago. What did you mean that you and Mason are mutual beneficiaries?”

Jimmy laughed, but when he saw the look on Cassie’s face, he asked, “Are you serious?” She nodded and he said, “Mason’s my dealer.”

“No, my very own professional poker dealer. Yes drugs! Don’t say it so loud,” he said, glancing behind him. “I mean, Mason is a great guy, but he’s tough as nails too. How could you not know?”

Cassie got up and went into the grocery store, pulling her apron on over her head. Jimmy called behind her, “Cass, wait. Cass! Shit.”
Cassie sat with the clipboard of forms in her lap. She filled out her name and insurance information off of the card she found buried in her mom’s purse, and then turned the page to begin the huge checklist.

“How long have you been pregnant?” She checked the box for 3-6 weeks. “Do you have any allergies?” No. “Do you smoke?” Yes. “Do you use illegal drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, crystal meth, heroin?” Yes.

Cassie looked uneasily around the waiting room of the Planned Parenthood, tapping the pen against her thigh. It was empty except for one other girl who had a clipboard in her lap too. Cassie wondered if she was there for the same reason, and swallowed as she watched her disappear behind the door. She stood up and grabbed a pamphlet off the wall. They were so damn cheery. Pink and blue, as if pregnancy was just a dandy old time. “Preparing for the birth of a child can be one of the greatest life experiences.” She doubted it was a great experience for her mother. Look at where she ended up. “Get a check up. Change old habits,” the bold titles said. Cassie paused at the one that said, “Don’t use drugs.” Addictive, habit-forming, or trippy drugs such as heroin, cocaine, codeine, crystal meth, uppers, downers, marijuana, PCP, or LSD can cause serious problems for the fetus and for the baby when it is born. Many don’t survive.

She put the pamphlet back and sat down to finish the checklist. She turned to the next page. The bold, black words were like an unexpected slap in the face: Parental Consent Form.

“Fuck,” Cassie said out loud, she couldn’t believe it. She dropped the entire clipboard in the trash and rushed out the door, leaving a stunned receptionist and cheerful bells clanging against glass. “That wasn’t me. I’ve never been there,” she thought, as if defending herself to an invisible accuser. “I’m not pregnant.”

Mason leaned over and tickled the strip of bare stomach that emerged as Cassie stretched backwards in his beanbag chair. She relaxed with her hands behind her head and her legs straight out in front of her. They were stoned again.

“Hey Mason?”
“Yeah, babe?”
“I want to try something else besides pot. What else you got there in your sock drawer?” she asked almost playfully.

Mason looked at her innocently. “What do you think I am? Your one-stop drug source?”
“Yep. Or do you only deal pot?”

The teasing look on his face fell, but he didn’t seem angry. Rather, he seemed relieved that
his big secret was out and a sly smile formed on his lips. He lowered his voice a little, savoring the deliciousness of his knowledge. He said frankly, “I have some opium. But I know where we can go for some good crystal meth, if you’re serious.”

“Yeah, I’m serious. Let’s go. Let’s go try it.”

They pulled up to a house only five minutes away. The entire front was dark and the curtains in the window were drawn. The dead eeriness reminded Cassie of her own house, and she could feel her nerves starting to get on edge. But she followed Mason around to the back of the house and down the stairs to the entrance of a basement apartment. He knocked loudly and clearly three times. A scruffy looking guy with dark hair answered.

“Yo, Mason,” he said smiling, and shook his hand and clapped him on the back. “What’s up man, come on in.”

“Hey TJ. This is my girlfriend, Cassie. Cassie, this is TJ.” The two exchanged nods.

“Have a seat you guys.”

TJ didn’t even ask why they were there. He just disappeared through a beaded curtain and returned with a pipe and a lighter. He turned up the music so loud that Cassie couldn’t hear or feel anything but the music invading her body. The three sat on the couch, TJ and Mason relaxed, sitting deep back into the cushions with their legs wide apart and sweatshirt hoods up; Cassie sat back, trying to feel relaxed, but with her arms and legs crossed, and shoulders tensed. She watched them intently, so that when it was her turn, she wouldn’t have to ask how to do it.

Mason passed her the pipe and she lit it and inhaled. She leaned back and suddenly, it was like she was flying. She was weightless and her body was hollow, filling up with pink clouds and purple circles of vibration, the words and the music melting into one, airy film inside her. She started to giggle as if she was being tickled from inside her skin, and she fell over into Mason’s lap, with her arm outstretched falling into TJ’s.

“TJ, that’s some good ice, man,” Mason said smiling.

Cassie got up and started dancing. She pulled the two boys up by the hand, and the three of them began dancing with Cassie sandwiched in the middle, sweat beginning to form under her skin from the heat and excitement of it all. But she was free, she was alive, she had the earth pumping through her veins, and she couldn’t think of a single thing except for the racing, fierce lightness of that moment.

…

“Do you do drugs, Cassandra?” The psychiatrist’s spirit seemed to be renewed with the few responses she had elicited from the frozen girl. She really wouldn’t stop asking questions now. “Alcohol, pot, coke, heroin, meth?”
Cassie rolled out of bed, feeling like her brain was far too large to fit inside her skull. The hot noon sun was streaming in through the window, but she zipped on her sweatshirt before stumbling to the bathroom, her skin clammy and pale. The water sounded like Niagara Falls as it poured out of the faucet and she shoveled handfuls of it into her dry mouth.

The summer was unbearable. As a kid, Cassie always used to look forward to it, but now it just meant making up extra excuses to be out of the house. Or dealing with her mother’s wrath when she came back after spending a few days at Mason’s. She took on as many shifts as she could at the Shop Rite, but she spent the hours thinking about her next high, hoping they would go to TJ’s that night.

She shuffled to the kitchen past her mom’s permanent residence on the couch, a re-run of Oprah playing on the television. Cassie opened the refrigerator and took out the carton of orange juice.

“What are you doin’ in there?” her mother whined from the couch.

“Getting some breakfast.”

“Well, easy there, Bessie. Maybe you should think about goin’ on a diet,” she said carelessly, never taking her eyes off the TV.

“What?” Cassie stood leaning against the door frame between the living room and the kitchen.

“Like you should talk, maybe you should think about going on a diet that involves actual food.”

“You watch your mouth!” her mother spat back, temper rising. “At least I’m not a fat whore who runs around god-knows-where all night!”

“Fuck you. I don’t need this.” Cassie slipped into her flip-flops in the hallway and stormed out the door, slamming it so hard behind her that the Home is Where the Heart Is sign fell off.

She walked away from her house as fast as she could, the heat radiating off the asphalt and filling up her lungs. She felt like she was suffocating, but she kept going. She knew where she was headed.

When Cassie knocked on his door, TJ was surprised to see her without Mason, but he welcomed her into his air-conditioned haven. She couldn’t even open her mouth to ask for a quick hit before he gently cut her off.

“Look Cass, I’m real happy to see you, but a couple of people who usually come by haven’t been around lately. As much as I’d like to, I can’t keep giving you shit for free.”

She shook her head, pushed him over to the couch, and slowly sank down to her knees while he gaped at her, eyes wide. She would be getting a paycheck at the end of the week. And until then, she would do anything. Anything to forget who her mother was, who she was, who she was going to become. Ten minutes of purple swirling music and blissful numbness.
Mason came storming in through TJ’s door, without knocking, bringing in a bright stream of September sunlight behind him, before slamming the door.

“Heyyyy, Mason,” TJ called over the sink from the kitchen.

Mason was hovering over Cassie in an instant, who was sitting all too comfortably on the familiar couch, manically tapping her foot and bopping her head to twice the beat of the music playing.

“What are you doing here?” he screamed venomously, too close to her face. “What are you doing here?”

Cassie slid around him to the other end of the couch. “Relax, Mason. I’m just enjoying the end of my summer,” she said, unconcerned by his anger.

“No. You’re sitting in my asshole friend’s apartment in that ridiculous sweatshirt getting tweaked.” He turned toward TJ. “What the fuck is she doing here?”

TJ came around from the other side of the kitchen island, wearing nothing but boxers.

“Look man. I think it’s pretty clear by now that it’s over between you guys. Maybe you should just get outta here instead of making a scene.”

“Making a scene? Making a scene! Cassie, get up, we’re leaving,” Mason yelled.

“No way.”

TJ came up beside Mason and tried to usher him toward the door. Mason ripped his arm away and started swinging, managing to land a feeble punch on TJ’s jaw. TJ swung back, connecting in one jab, probably breaking Mason’s nose. Mason looked up with defeat, a pool of blood forming in his hand. He turned, dripping blood on the floor, and walked out the door.

TJ sat on the couch next to Cassie and passed her the pipe.

“Look, Cassandra. Do you know what today’s date is? Do you even know where you are? This is prison, and the only way that I will be able to help you is if you talk to me. Now snap out of it.” The psychiatrist seemed to be losing her patience.

Cassie looked up.

“That’s better. Do you know what today’s date is?”

She shook her head no.

“It’s October 31th. You’ve been here for a week. I need to be blunt with you, Cassandra. Why did you do what you did to your baby?”
Cassie looked puzzled. Her mind was thick with gray pictures that suddenly began to come clearer. She was still nervously picking at her fingernails. They felt so dirty. Images began flicking on and off, flashing like a slide show running too fast, clicking from one to the next. She could feel the coldness of the square bathroom tiles on her bare back and the tightness in her jaw as she clenched her teeth to keep from screaming. The panic rushed up into her throat and her pulse raced so fast that she couldn’t even count the beats. She could feel the weight of the plastic bag in her hands and hear the abrupt muting of a barely released cry. The smell of week-old produce and damp cardboard swirled in her nose and made her want to vomit. She just couldn’t get the dirt out from underneath her fingernails, after she burrowed through the dumpster to bury the bag at the bottom of the pile. And the look of horror on Jimmy’s face as he tried to keep her from manically rocking into the brick wall behind the Shop Rite suddenly seemed burned into her eyelids.

Cassie looked at the psychiatrist, tears welling up in her eyes as she erupted into heaves and waves of sobs, her stomach muscles clenching tight. She put her head down and wailed, with nothing but the cold gray table to comfort her.
dos nue
chloé pinto
Jacob pulled on the grimy screen door, pushed his shoulder into the wooden door behind it and walked down the hallway. He lunged into his room, heaved his soccer bag into his closet and collapsed onto his plaid comforter. He lay on his back like a marionette whose strings had been abandoned. He stared up at the ceiling, brooding.

Finally, Jacob dragged himself off his bed, headed toward the bathroom and heard his mother shout from the kitchen, “Jake! How are you? How was your day?” Her voice was filled with enthusiasm but he doubted its sincerity. Jacob walked directly into the bathroom to shower. He stripped off his uniform and submerged himself in the steam; disappointed and disheartened, he soon heated up. It was his last high school soccer game and she was too busy to be there? Don’t mothers live for this stuff?

When he was clean and calm, Jacob went into the kitchen to see if dinner was ready. His mother, wearing her dark, worn jeans and the same loose-fitting tee shirt that she had had on the day before, was peeling carrots by the sink.

He didn’t want to ask. He didn’t want to make a big deal. “Mom?” He couldn’t resist. “Ahh!” she yelped. “Jesus. Don’t sneak up on your mother like that,” she said. “Dinner’ll be ready in fifteen minutes, ok?”

“You missed my game today,” Jacob stated matter-of-factly. “I know, but I thought I told you I wasn’t going to be there,” she said. Jacob stood motionless. “I had to take grandma to the doctor. Next time, sweetheart.” She turned away from him, now peeling faster than before.

Jacob slid into his usual chair, crossed his arms atop the kitchen table and rested his head. It was just one game, he reasoned. But she didn’t even know it was the last one. He sat up. “It was the last game” he said, his eyes focused on his mother’s back. “What?” She turned around. “You can’t go next time,” Jacob’s words slowed, “because there is no next time.” His volume increased and his fists clenched. “Jacob,” she sighed, “I’m sorry. I really am. You know how much I love watching you play. But there’s nothing I can do about it now.” Once again, she returned to her carrots. “Would you set the table for me, please?” “Are you kidding me? You didn’t make it to a single game. Not one. Today you were with grandma. Fine. Where were you all season?” Jacob stomped out of the kitchen, opened his
bedroom door and then slammed it shut behind him. Back on his bed, he blasted music, trying to drown out the hateful thoughts in his mind.

An hour later, when Jacob left the sanctuary of his room, he found that his mother had gone to sleep and his father had not yet returned home. He shuffled through the unlit hallway into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Fantastic, there was no toothpaste. Jacob slowly opened his parents’ bedroom door, trying to avoid the expected squeak, and sneaked into their bathroom. He closed the door behind him and turned on the lights. He searched through the cabinets beneath the sink, but couldn’t find a single tube. Confused and annoyed, he got down on his knees and removed items from the drawers: Advil, vitamins, floss, and prescription drugs. He stopped. The sticker on the orange bottle said Paxil and the label had his mother’s name. Memories of past health classes and awful television commercials flooded his mind. Paxil is an antidepressant. He leaned back against the radiator and continued to examine the bottle. The prescription had been refilled today.

Jacob was sitting on the cold, white tiles, holding his head in his hands when the door opened. He looked up and found his father, who must have just returned from work, still in his black pinstriped suit, staring down at him. Jacob closed his right hand tightly around the pill bottle.

“What are you doing in here?” his father asked.

Jacob thought for a minute. Why had he come in here? “I’m out of toothpaste.”

His father shot him a suspicious glance, turned to the cabinet next to the mirror and there, on the first shelf, was a brand new tube of toothpaste. Jacob stood up, awkwardly reached out his left hand and took the toothpaste. He nodded at his father and then looked at the door. He wanted to walk away, crawl into bed, and forget what he had found. But he couldn’t. He handed his father the bottle.

His father squinted and read the label. He sighed.

“Well?” Jacob said.

“I told her to talk to you about it, but she didn’t want to worry you. She thought you had enough going on with soccer and homework and graduation coming up.”

Jacob was still. He thought about the past few months and all the petty fights he had started, the lies he told, and the haughty attitude he maintained. She had remained so considerate despite his adolescent arrogance, and he had been so selfish. “Is she okay?”

“She’s been getting the help she needs and she’s doing fine,” his father replied.

Jacob nodded. “I’ve got some work to do.” He placed his hand on the doorknob but waited. He turned, took a step toward his father, and threw his arms around him. The two tall, stalwart figures held each other for a few intimate moments before Jacob lifted his head from his father’s shoulder, patted his back twice and quickly left the bathroom.
The next morning, Jacob entered the kitchen planning to tell his mother the truth. She was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. He paused. What would he do if she started to cry? Was he ready to hear the details of her illness?

“Want me to make you something for breakfast, sweetheart?” his mother’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

Jacob looked at her and shook his head, “No.” He wanted to tell her he knew where she was yesterday. That he understood. That he was sorry. That he would be supportive. But he couldn’t. He said, “I hope Grandma feels better.”

His mother waved her hand. “She’s fine,” she said.

“Is she really okay?” he asked.

Jacob’s mother stared at him for a few seconds and softly smiled. “Yeah, she’s alright.” Jacob nodded, kissed his mother on the cheek, and left for school.
monopoly

anonymous
It is a worn down dirty video store, burnt with the embers of a hundred thousand cigarettes and lit up like a whorehouse, not a Christmas tree. Behind the desk I sit on a stool, tall enough to boost me eye to eye with the customers, those lonesome souls who mostly drift to the larger than normal adult section only to emerge from the curtain several minutes later, averting their gaze as if to preserve a base level of human dignity.

John Doe in a Giants windbreaker walks up the counter, shamefaced with a skin flick. On the other side of the store Angie is drawing pubic hairs on a Jennifer Lopez movie poster.

“Do you want this?” I ask Anonymous. He’s confused and violated by my indiscretion, wild eyed like an animal caught in a trap.

“Uhhh, I’d like to rent it yes,” he says like he’s solving a trick question.

“No, do you want this? I’ll give it to you for twenty bucks.”

“Wait, what?”

“Alright fifteen. That’s only ten more than you’re paying to rent it, and you know you will be back for it next week.” Repeat customers, these ones, and yet, they never fail to return their movies on time, lest we should tell the federal government that Cocksmokers 4 is overdue. Alert the pervert patrol and inform the neighbors just whom they are living next to.

I pocket the ten and five he hands me and he takes the video off the counter. He slips it into his coat before I can offer him a paper bag. Yet another untrusting stranger carried through the streets of New York like garbage in the rain. I am useless.

The bell chimes once more and Ahmet barks into the store like a tornado warning. He wears a dark suede jacket almost the color of his skin, with the air of the nouveau-riche; Ahmet’s store just got bought out by Blockbuster. Sometimes large chains will buy an independent store but let it keep its own name and management if it has a loyal costumer base. Or if has a successful niche appeal that doesn’t fit with the corporate image, such as our unusually large pornographic selection.

“Angie, what are you doing?” he demands imperiously. The colonized has become the colonizer. Angie pops the tip of her tongue ring out of her mouth and rolls the ball back and forth like a zipper that never unzips. It is her newest toy and her words still swell up in her mouth thickly when she speaks.

“I’m fixing the promotional pietheth Ahmet,” she says, exposing the small pink beast, pinker even than her hair, speared and wet and secret in her mouth. It makes me want her more than ever, but only in an abstract way, like a gift I would enjoy but not worth my own time or money.
Ahmet quickly scans the small store. Harsh florescent light pounds down on us, the plastic covers which softened the neon tubes’ fierce gaze having long since been cracked and crushed and fallen out of sight and mind. The rows of dark black scaffolding holding the videos don’t conceal the two customers doing a familiar shuffle. Ahmet’s new Italian loafers tap-dance restlessly as he looks for something to criticize.

“Are you sitting on Chestnut’s pillow?” he demands, looking me in the eye like he’s trying to be hard, like he knows anything about being hard. Not such a long time ago he was wearing sweatpants on those nights I finally dragged him out to the bars with me and Claire so he could ogle her friends with the forlornness of a perpetual outsider. Now he wears designer jeans.

I squirm on the stool, feeling his cat’s special anti-allergenic pillow warm underneath my ass cheeks. What kind of a cat has allergies anyway? “Oh yeah,” I say, “My bad,” and resume my doodle of a robot on the counter next to the register.

“Get the fuck up!” Ahmet yells at me. “How many times have I told you it’s her special pillow!” “Somebody forgot to take his pills today,” I say under my breath, but loud enough for him to hear. “You know what, smartass?” he yells, “I’ve had enough of you. You show up late, you drink on the job, you talk back to me…well, get the fuck out. You’re fired.”

Other days I might have ignored him. This is a game we play. He pretends to get mad at me, I pretend that I care. But not today. “Go ahead, Ahmet,” I tell him. “Heap your shit on me, go ahead. Like my month isn’t going shitty enough as it is.” I am useless. I contribute nothing to society. This is what Claire told me before she left. I feel like an Allen wrench in a world full of Phillips-head screws; nothing fits and nothing feels right and even I can’t see my purpose anymore.

The door chimed on my way out and I wondered if maybe this time would be the last time I would ever hear it, but I put all of that from my head like I have been trying to smother all my doubts lately and I started off downtown to the jazz BYOB where I know my friends are waiting.

We sat only feet away from the trumpet player, watching his fluids sizzle to the earth like the smoldering shell-husks of fireworks falling to the ground, stars out of the sky finally revealing themselves for the little pieces of nothing that they are. I took a sip from the brown bag and passed it to my left, tapping my toes with the rhythm of the bass bouncing off the ground and back up into me, playing hopscotch with my heart.

“He’s good.”
“Yeah he’s good. He’s better than the saxophonist they had last week.”
“Yeah he is. Pass the bottle,” said Drew.
“Did you hear from Claire yet?” Phil asked.

“Aw hell, why did you have to bring that up at a time like this, Phil? You have no fucking sense of things sometimes,” Drew said, and then hocked up a piece of phlegm and spit it out on the carpet in front of us. I looked around the smoky piano bar with the apprehension of an accomplice. The whole room buzzed with a languid hipster cool, like a modern speakeasy, popping to the sound of the piccolo snare drum.

“No, it’s fine Phil,” I said over the ride cymbal, “I don’t mind. She called me on Tuesday. Said her plane got in fine and she’s found a good place to live, in a safe part of town. She starts her training next week.”

“She’s teaching English, right?”

“Yeah, as soon as she completes her English as a second language class.”

“I wouldn’t have thought they needed English teachers in ..where is she again?

“Madagascar.”

“Where’s that.”

“Africa. Its an island off the West Coast of Africa.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. Finish that joint and we’ll go buy some beer.”

We walked up the stairs and onto the street with an apathetic determination to forge onward, to continue our regimen of drinking and walking and finding secret places that exist sometimes in large cities, like thrift store junkies bargain hunting for a perfect moment.

Drew said he knew a spot where an old billboard used to sit above the pier. It had long since been turned into a parking lot, but on top of the lot there is a catwalk hanging out over the ocean, in the one spot on Manhattan where you realize that you are, in fact, on the cusp of the Atlantic. So we paced the long city blocks until they became choppy and broken up and crossed the highway to the pier. We walked up the ‘vehicles-only’ ramp with our plastic bags hanging from our hands and the glass clinked against the ground as the cement rose up beneath us. At the far end of the rooftop, past an elevator leading down to the trendy yuppie gym in the sports complex below, a ladder led up to the remnants of a tall maintenance deck. Rusty and awkward, leftover like the skeleton of a shipyard, it was singular and terrible in its immediacy.

Our nerves hiccupped as we gazed up at our ladder, thin and hard and unforgiving like a tightrope, reflecting in its ancient iron joints all the uncertainty we felt in our own. I checked my shoelaces and wrapped the plastic bag around my hand one more time like the hard leather strap of the tefillin my grandfather had used to give thanks to god, and dragged myself up to the precipice.
From four hundred feet we let our legs hang, smoking cigarettes and drinking liquor
eye-to-eye with the Manhattan skyline. From our secret perch we held its gaze, devouring the
city ravenously, like Peeping Toms. On our right, the water lay black and still and flat as a sheet,
shiny and secret in the night like a puddle on asphalt. Across the river, Brooklyn crowded in,
desperate to be part of the conversation. Nervously we giggled as we passed the bottle; Phil said,
“I hope I don’t get too drunk to climb down.”

On the East Side Highway, neon arteries hemorrhaged.

For twenty-six years I had buckled down and bent under, riding the chutes, but never
climbing the ladders, and now, whipping in the cool night breeze like laundry on the line,
pinned down by the heavens—too close—I felt the scope of the concrete and the silent Hudson
below, like Icarus fearing a fall from divinity.

The night before she left I had woken up like I used to do sometimes with her; something
she did must have woken me up because I would wake up four or five times in the night and now I
never do that. I inched my head over her shoulder and pressed my breath against her cheek just to
see if maybe I could quietly wake her too, only so that she wouldn’t know it was because of me,
and she made a deep noise and arched her back like a question mark and put every inch of her skin
against me like a hermit crab growing to fill its shell.

“I love you,” she said softly, the smallest complete part of speech, a noun, a verb, a noun,
those three quiet syllables that had once clung to the roof of my mouth like peanut butter but we
now said in same easy tone as hello or goodbye. I wondered how long she had been awake.

“I love you,” she repeated.

“Then don’t go,” I said, too sleepy to lie.

“I have to go. You know I have to go.”

She went quiet and rolled away from me and I knew she was either working herself up to
cy or trying not to. I resisted the urge to run my hands through her curls.

“I need to do something important. Don’t you ever feel that way? Don’t you ever feel like you
need to do a job where you make a difference in peoples’ lives? I want to be needed for a change.”

The response was too obvious and too clichéd and I’d be goddamned if I was going to say
it. Her voice was all ground up like a small motor, choked but not primed, when she started again.

“I can’t take this city any more. I can’t take this life anymore. All people do in this place
is consume or be consumed. But I don’t want to live my life like a looter in a riot, trying to steal
as much as I can before the lights come on and judgment is restored.”
“Yeah, why don’t you be a little more dramatic,” I told her, which was not the most tactful thing to say but I couldn’t help it any more than I could just be happy for her. I took her to the airport the next day at nine.

One by one we humped our way down the ladder, all hands and feet like caterpillars as not to miss a step. Back on the rooftop, Phil stumbled and slammed into a BMW SUV, setting off the siren. Our voices and our laughter hummed along the concrete lot like the vibrations in a bridge. We walked down the entrance ramp and Drew tripped, rolling and laughing as he spun down the circular ramp with the thumpity-thump of elbows and knees.

“Let’s keep drinking,” I said after we chased him down the helix and stepped out from the parking garage. The city had grown darker still, with no one but the unwanted smiling in its corners. “Always,” said Drew. “We always keep drinking.”

Phil stared at us, inscrutable, trying to separate intention from action. “It’s four in the morning and we have a cab ride back to Brooklyn,” he said to Drew.

“Fuck you!” yelled Drew. “You always ruin everything!” Phil looked at us both painfully then turned his back on everything all at once. He started walking towards a taxi stand. He was moping like a child but we knew it was hard to always be the scapegoat and we had pushed him too far.

“Wait up!” cried Drew, chasing after him.

“Let’s keep drinking, you pussies!” I yelled after them both, thinking that every hour I stayed awake I was approaching some kind of greatness; always more, always longer, never sleeping, never ending anything, never making chapters in our otherwise fluid lives like locks in a canal. But maybe if I keep walking and drinking and smoking I can keep away from the small quiet moments when I miss her the most, the tiny moments that used to be just us and no one else and now belong only to me.
grandfather’s passions

annie ross

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It hurt, but he wanted it. His heart was pounding, a small mass of fragility and passion. His pupils dilated as he stared straight into the eyes of his master, focused deeply. What was behind them, he burned to know. What truth was hidden so well? Tears of overwhelming vulnerability formed between Angelo’s eyelids as he lay on his back. He did nothing but look, searching for meaning, searching for an emotion. Angelo could see his own reflection in the glossy lens of Nevil’s irises as he searched meticulously, this time over Nevil’s entire face, mentally tracing the outline of his every feature. First his eyebrows, thin shapes of blackness, dark and sharp and deadly. Then his nose, sculpted with slender precision, flanked by prominent cheekbones.

“Tonight, you’re mine,” claimed his master, pressing his lips against Angelo’s, pausing before letting the corners of their mouths meet. Angelo could almost taste the sweet musk of Nevil’s powdery cologne as they lay there on the bed breathing into each other. Nevil’s tongue, the serpent of debauchery, had found its prey. And all at once, the serpent proceeded to strike. Angelo suddenly stopped searching. He was lost again, but he didn’t seem to care as he shut his eyes and let the tears trickle down his temples.

A mute TV screen flashed winks of blue throughout the dark Embassy Suites hotel room as the serpent slid down Angelo’s chest and between the ridges of his ab muscles, causing the boy to release soft moans that substituted the sound of a 3 am infomercial. Littering the floor was an empty bottle of Zinfandel, some Styrofoam Chinese takeout containers, and articles of men’s clothing that formed a sloppy path to the door. An impressionist painting above the bed was the only piece of art in the small but posh room. Maybe Monet, possibly Sisley. Nothing too spectacular. Just an image of an isolated children’s playground buried in snow, a serene winter wonderland that possessed an element of agelessness, but clearly existed only in some abstract milieu. As Angelo closed his eyes again, he imagined himself in the painting, a vivid but equally dreary world. He looked around, and everything was covered in snow. Nothing as far as he could see interrupted the pristine whiteness that shrouded the Earth. There was no clear horizon separating the end of land and the beginning of sky; they blended together and traveled into eternity. “Nevil?” he called out. “Where are you, Nevil?” As he looked for him, Angelo feared he would be searching for his entire life. He began to run, as fast as his feet would let him, in the deep snow.

He noticed a single tree in the middle of the playground, a small distance from himself. Angelo ran toward it, but as if he was on some kind of invisible treadmill, he didn’t seem to get
any closer. Something was happening to the tree; it was growing bigger, taller, stronger, by the
second. He felt the tree’s roots expand under the ground beneath him. He was still running, but
still going nowhere. Angelo tried to run faster, but only moved slower. “Nevil, where are you?” he
screamed, hot tears running down his face. The snow on the tree melted away as Angelo began to
sweat profusely. He was getting warm with the draining of his body’s physical strength.

A snake at the base of the tree was slowly made visible with the disappearance of the
snow. It lay there fearsome, intimidating anyone or anything that should approach, as if protecting
a sacred territory. Angelo noticed the snake gracefully crawling up the bark of the tree, coiling its
body around the wet wood, sneaking into the branches now dripping with melted snow.

He opened his eyes and saw only Nevil. Angelo was momentarily lifeless as Nevil lay on
top of him again. He did not even realize that he hadn’t taken a single breath in forty-five seconds.
“I’m right here, baby,” Nevil assured him, cupping his face in his hands. “I’m right here.”

When it was over, they eased into post-orgasm relaxation, fatigued, their arms and legs
entwined. Nevil was beautiful, the darkness of his body versus the white of the sheets that en-
tangled him. He was completely still, not quite asleep but definitely not awake, just lingering in that
hazy midpoint you enter right before the real thing. All was quiet now. At this hour, a full moon
could have been seen out of the window from the right angle. Angelo’s back was tense, his muscles
sore. But it felt good in a twisted way. He liked pain. Tight, excruciating, sweet pain. His passion
for near-violence was indicated clearly by the teeth marks on Nevil’s torso. For him, there was a
very thin line between what felt good and what hurt. He enjoyed the simultaneity of pleasure and
pain, or better yet, the merging of the two. He couldn’t pinpoint where the line between them began
to dissipate. And Nevil found it exciting to be with him. Angelo brought a sort of volcanic intensity
into their relationship. He was no little boy, Nevil was sure of that. But Nevil always saw the brutal
truth hidden in Angelo’s eyes every time he fucked him. He was far from being a man.

Angelo reached over and grabbed the fortune cookie on the table beside the bed. “This is
so much better than prom,” he thought as he tore off the plastic wrap. Angelo loved Nevil un-
conditionally. He loved him more than life itself. And even though Nevil did not say it in return,
Angelo knew for certain that Nevil loved him too. Surely he was certain, but confusedly certain.
Then again, he was certainly confused. No, more than confused, blinded. Blinded by love, a love
he thought was real. A love equally shared and evenly expressed, more than just the lopsided re-
lationship that exists between a lover and the one he can only call his beloved. More than just un-
balanced actions motivated by unreciprocated emotions. What they had was mutual. Angelo con-
vinced himself of this mutuality as he cracked open the cookie and pulled out the little rectangular
piece of paper. Printed on it in simple red lettering was an intriguing quote, a rather appropriate
one for the setting. Provokingly, the fortune read: Silence is the loudest noise. It was an oxymoron
that made perfect sense, and it succeeded in bringing the room’s present silence to Angelo’s full attention. The silence was so noticeably loud it was almost chafing, as it rang in Angelo’s ears and lured him into dreamland.

He was in the painting again. There was a clear horizon this time. Even the sun and clouds had emerged over the playground. The snow was all gone, but the grass was still semi-frozen as the wind blew cold over the abandoned piece of Earth, the outlandish sector of some artist’s illusory vision. From where Angelo stood, for the second time, he could not imagine any connection or gateway into the real world.

Over by the swings, he noticed movement. It was a young child, sitting on the ground by the third swing, a little boy of about three or four years old. A million questions raced through Angelo’s mind at the strange picture. Where are your parents? Do they know where you are? Why are you here by yourself? Where do you live? How did you get here? But instead of battering him with questions, he merely walked over and sat on the swing next to the boy, who paid Angelo no mind.

“Hey kiddo,” he muttered to the small boy.

“I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” said the young one, never looking up to face the man in the playground.

Angelo was amused by the boy’s training. He remembered dozens of times in his childhood when his parents warned him before going off on his own to never speak to strangers. But he didn’t remember once thinking that he would have actually listened to them should a polite human being who he did not know start a conversation with him. And he also remembered the emergency routine. It was a practiced routine he was to execute if he ever found himself lost in public. Only go to mommies and children, never go to men. Angelo found it funny how he would now fit into that category himself, the group of men, the ones to watch out for, the dangerous ones.

“Okay well, if I introduce myself to you, then you’ll know who I am, and I won’t be a stranger anymore.”

“You’ll always be a stranger, Angelo,” said the toddler voice, still not bothering to look up.

“And I will always be a stranger to you, too.”

Even more intriguing than how it was realistically possible for the boy to know his name, was the meaning of his comment. Angelo sat puzzled at the boy as a bunch of passing clouds swept in front of the sun, making the playground a little darker for a few seconds. Angelo was reminded of the day’s lateness as he saw the sun inch closer and closer to the horizon. Soon it would be night.

“Is someone coming to get you?” Angelo asked the boy, worried also about his own safety and well-being.
“You already came for me,” the boy said, reaching inside his little jean jacket pocket and pulling out a small green action figure. It was a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

“Hey, I used to have one of those,” said Angelo. He noticed the purple ribbon tied around the miniature figure’s head and realized that it was Donatello, his favorite Ninja Turtle. “I liked him the best.”

The boy looked up at him now. Angelo was shocked at the sight of his face. It was his own face, himself when he was much younger. It was his own child rendition right in front of him, staring him dead in the eye. “You won’t leave me again, will you?” asked the younger version of himself.

Nevil’s subtle cough jerked Angelo from one state of consciousness to the next. Angelo rested his head back down on the pillow and quickly closed his eyes. He tried ever so hard to fall asleep and bring himself back into the dream. Moments later he was there again, in the same spot by the swing. He knew now that he was dreaming. He could even wake himself up if he wanted to. But Angelo intentionally subjected himself to the mercy of his own brain, delving deeper into the abyss of his mind, as if digging in his own back yard. He sat there, on the swing, enigmatic. But the child was gone. And the snake had reappeared on the tree a few feet away. Only now it was longer. It looked evil, iniquitous, its tongue slithering out, a nihilistic passion burning in its eyes.

Jolted back into the correctitude of reality, Angelo acutely remembered the dream, the snake, its look, its monstrosity. When he looked up at the painting from the bed, he realized that it was all a fabrication of his imagination. The snow had returned. There was no snake, no little boy. Just the playground covered in snow.

As he lay there in the room afflicted with silence, he wondered whether Nevil was asleep or not. He watched Nevil’s chest rise up and down as he breathed, waiting for him to make some kind of indication that he was awake. When Nevil gently cleared his throat, Angelo figured he was still up and leaned over to him. “I love you so much,” Angelo whispered softly, trying not to break the silence too hard. But his master did not respond. And so the silence filled the room again. And it was loud alright. Painfully loud.
growl

kristina ceruzzi
the door to the building

annie ross
Alexander let out a soft sigh as the professor continued his lecture. From the corner of the recitation hall he looked out on the sea of students, mostly undergraduates, all listening with various degrees of attention. Alexander wondered, if he ever bothered to investigate fully enough, if he could predict which of the students would do well on the next test by the brightness of their eyes, the straightness of their posture. He guessed the slouchers and droopy-lidded ones would be those hanging on the other side of the bulging bell curve. Well, except for the really awfully bright ones, the ones who were too sharp to allow the world to be a fair place.

He pulled his mind from its wandering path, back onto the task at hand. Before him were stacks of opinion papers waiting to be marked. In a class this large, most of the grunt work fell on the TA, so Alexander was left to wade through this morass of paper. His hand, bearing two band-aids on the fingers, led his pen tip along the lines of this particular student’s argument. Just reading it made Alexander frown with dislike. It was well written, and that only made the too smug, too cocksure opinions it espoused more irritating. It was smart but not wise, and that was the worst. You could tell, just from the use of that Cicero-esque ‘thus’, that this student thought himself the next Joyce, the next Proust.

It didn’t matter, despite what young Hemingway here thought. It didn’t matter whether or not you use self-reference. It didn’t matter if you obey classic rules of chronology or resolution. It didn’t matter if you did it, it only mattered that you did it right. Alexander looked up again at the rows of the faces, trying to see if he could determine which one had produced this self-assured essay. The more he looked, the more he realized it really could have been any of them.

He could see it in their eyes, an almost reckless sureness. Every one of them was destined to make a difference, to change the world, to alter the course of history. In each of them was the seed of the next Great American Novel, or the next Great British Novel, each depending on their origin. At least, according to them. But Alexander knew better. Higher learning a great writer does not make. Miller was a construction worker before he was a playwright. ‘It didn’t matter what you learned you were supposed to do, or even what you did. What mattered was, when you did it, you did it the right way. You couldn’t learn that, couldn’t learn greatness. You had to find it.

Alexander suddenly scratched, in large, sharp letters the words ‘You are not special! All the class in the world will not change that!’ in the half page of space on the last page of the essay. The pen tip stabbed at the paper violently as he added the dot to the last exclamation point. His grip, which had been almost painfully tight, loosened until the pen dangled from the web between his index finger and thumb.
After a moment he looked up to see if the professor had noticed, and scratched the words out carefully, covering every last trace of the outburst in blue ink. He added ‘Never mind’ just next to it, to dispel any question that might come up, and then moved to the next paper.

Mrs. Renquist was right by the entrance, getting her evening edition, when the Mackenzie boy stepped inside, looking a little awkward with his puffy down jacket, knit wool cap and foggy glasses. She smiled and lifted a hand in greeting as he stomped his feet free of greyish slush. He pulled off one of his gloves and returned the wave before taking off his glasses and blinking slightly.

“Nasty weather we’re getting,” Mrs. Renquist said. “Too bad college doesn’t cancel over snow.”

The Mackenzie boy smiled faintly, still not in the mood for joking, but she would do her best to keep his head above water. In that apartment, all alone, he was bound to need a little bit in the way of light conversation, to save him from himself. She had heard the shouts and the slamming door from three days past, and knew full well that what she always thought would happen had happened. That Carla girl had broken poor Alexander’s heart.

“Yes,” the Mackenzie boy replied, “I hate how the snow has to turn into slush. A sort of symbolic entropy. Depressing.”

Mrs. Renquist waved a hand, dismissing what he had said as unimportant. She was sure it was just dark talk blown up with fancy language, not doing anyone any real good, least of all himself, “It’ll all melt away by spring and then it will be pleasant again, God willing.”

The Mackenzie boy nodded agreement, putting his unfogged glasses back on and pushing them up his nose with two fingers, “True. Still, doesn’t make the present any more pleasant.”

“My, you are set to see the darker side of things today,” Mrs. Renquist said, coming right out and speaking her mind. “Come, I’ve some water on the boil. I always take tea with the evening paper. You can come and join me for a few cups if you’d like. I often find a warm drink lifts the spirits.”

“No, thank you,” the Mackenzie boy said. Mrs. Renquist had been expecting that answer, but that did not make her any less disappointed. “Thank you, though. Really. But I’ve got papers to correct.” He smiled in a way that made Mrs. Renquist wish even more that he had accepted.

But Mrs. Adam Renquist wasn’t about to give in so quickly. “Just you wait a moment,” she said, lifting a prohibitionary hand and heading back into her apartment before Alexander could make some sort of excuse to get away. A few moments later she returned, holding a brown paper grocery bag with twine handles.

“I seem to have gone and bought food for two again, and I always say: ‘waste not, want not’.”

“Oh, it’s not really necessary, thank you. I truly appreciate it, but I don’t want to - really, I can’t,”

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the Mackenzie boy said, trying to politely refuse, but she would have nothing of the sort. He was a man, and men are proud, but pride doesn’t keep one fed.

“Please, Alexander,” she said, “Take them. If you don’t, I’ll just leave them out in front of your door and let them go bad.”

So he did, taking the bag from her knobbly old hand into his strong young one, murmuring an awkward thanks that she could tell, for all its haste, was heartfelt. The Mackenzie boy had always been so terribly sincere. One of the many reasons that that Carla girl had been a poor match.

“I may be your landlady, Alexander, but I’m also a fellow Christian,” she said. “If you ever need help, you can always come down and ask me. No man is an island, as I’ve always believed.”

The Mackenzie boy nodded, apparently at a loss for words, which Mrs. Renquist thought might be good for him. The poor lad was always lost in his words, as if words were more important than the things they stood for. But it wasn’t bread the word that fed you, it was the grain itself, the bounty of the supermarket shelf. He at last managed a mumbled “Thank you,” and made his way up the stairs.

Mrs. Renquist watched him go, frowning slightly. He’d need tending to, of that there was no doubt. No man is an island.

Alexander frowned to himself as he closed the door behind him and breathed in the distinctive odor of his apartment. Nine agonizing hours ago he’d stepped out through that same door, leaving the smell, stale and sour but familiar, behind him. Now he had returned, and he was glad. Glad to be back in this dimly lit, poorly aired apartment. It wasn’t ever supposed to happen like this. To while away the last days of his twentyhood in a dank apartment that was the preferable alternative to his arduous job. Jesus, he sounded like Carla.

While she had been with him it hadn’t seemed like that. The entropy that gripped the world seemed to have been put on hold, the dark slush outside a mere reminder instead of an omen. The days passed, but not really. Funny how coming home to a place that has someone else’s mark as well as your own can make you feel that much more secure. To have someone to rely on. The fear of treachery was so much less than the fear of loneliness, in the end. With Carla he’d felt safer, even if he was, in truth, not.

Then why had she left? Didn’t she think along the same basic human lines? Wasn’t she bonded to the same collective unconscious, the same fundamental needs? What sort of cold heartless bitch was she? Had the long years of absorbing the laws of physics taught her just how immutable the entropic forces were? Was that it? That which he had forgotten, was she incapable of forgetting,
that life went on and everyone grows old and dies. So many works of literature end before the forces of decay can assert themselves, but Carla prayed only to the Most Holy Laws of Physics.

That is why she left after all. Because she couldn’t stand to rot in the apartment any longer. Couldn’t be tied to some stick-in-the-mud, would-be, pot-bellied writer.

Fuck her. He would show her. He’d show her, that smug essay writer and his professor whose half-hidden pity for Alexander had quietly and completely driven him up the wall.

Alexander tore off his winter gear, hurling the wooly cap Carla had always laughed about clear over the couch. He dropped the grocery bag as he walked across the room, and leaned over the faux leather top of his work desk, situated between the two living area windows, shaded from the dual glare of snow and overcast sky. His finger pushed the power button and the computer screen glowed into ugly grey life with a resonant gong sound. He pulled the chair up beneath him and his hands hung above the keys, fingertips brushing the black letters marked upon small, dingy blocks. Computers, Alexander often thought, were only so ugly because they were designed by those function-at-the-cost-of-form people who designed the software. Math people. People like Carla.

This machine was four years old, a relic from the Iron Age of computers, a machine capable of thousands of colors and that could manage Excel and Word but would likely choke and die on Photoshop. But that was exactly what Alexander needed. It was the latter program he now accessed and after a brief pause was face to face with one of his oldest, most wily enemies: a blank page.

Here it was, the beginning. All he needed to do was start.

It was 10:00 PM when Alexander’s hunger managed to overcome his frantic excitement.

Inspiration is an evasive force. For centuries artists had spoken of muses doing their best to find and court their own. Like superstitious athletes, carrying out their little rituals, trying to keep up their own equivalent of the winning streak. Alexander thought of this as he drank a tall glass of skim milk. His eyes, unable to keep still, swept across the electric kettle he rarely had time to use and he recalled his favorite example. The one British writer who, believing tea was his muse, downed fifty strong cups in his attempt to snatch up a great idea, and died of a heart palpitation.

Alexander tried to keep himself from such extreme measures, but he wondered what it was that had made him do what he had just done. It had been hard at first, it always was, but then it just... came. Poured out of him like, well, he didn’t know what. He couldn’t think of the metaphor, but he didn’t need to. It was enough that it was happening. A story was emerging, a long one. A novel, just as he’d always hoped it would.
His rational self insisted that he mustn’t get his hopes up. Even if he actually managed the impossible and finished a novel, it would be an act of God if it were actually published. But, luckily, he was able to ignore this cynical, unhelpful voice. What the hell sort of good did it do to think like that? None Alexander could fathom.

The grocery bag that his landlady had forced upon him now sat on the thin counter of his kitchenette, right next to his fridge. He was glad he’d accepted it now. Or rather, he was glad Ms. Renquist had forced him to accept it. Without Carla to keep the house stocked with real food, three days had exhausted his supply of bread and peanut butter. Ms. Renquist had saved him from dining on Oreos tonight, and he was thankful for it. He made a mental note to offer his thanks to her when they next bumped into each other.

But that could wait. Once he was done eating he’d get right back to work. He couldn’t stop now. Sleeping might kill his groove and he couldn’t have that, not now. True, he had work tomorrow, but grading the rest of those insipid papers could most definitely be done while in a sleep deprived stupor. Hell, they’d likely be more tolerable that way. Why hadn’t he done this before?

Well, that was simple enough. He’d never felt the need to, never felt the impulse. And then it hit him: Carla had done that to him. She’d slowed him down, doped him up on the illusion of safety and sexual satisfaction. All the truly great writers wrote in the midst of depressed fits, at the mercy of mental illness or, according to Freud at least, when feeling the greatest need to sublime their lust. Well-being was his foe, the foe of creativity. Because nothing he had written before was quite like what he was writing now. He could feel it, the sheer energy beneath the text. This time it was real. He hardly dared give the feeling words, but it was there all the same: magnum opus. The real deal. The big one.

And there was one more thing he was sure of. That the best part had yet to come.

…

Alexander awoke the next morning on the couch. It took him a moment to realize how he had gotten there, and what, in fact, had even gone on last night. But as the bits and pieces of his consciousness fell back into proper order he realized why it was he felt so goddamn miserable. He had been up ‘til four in the morning writing before he noticed how clumsy his stabs at the keyboard were becoming and, not wanting to make the job of proofreading any more painful than it had to be, he had hauled himself over to the couch to sleep.

It was not until he managed to squint out the time on the cable box that he realized, with a gut-wrenching suddenness, that he hadn’t set an alarm. It was three oh eight, and Alexander was terribly, horribly late to work. All the excitement of last night was gone, replaced by a desperate regret.
It was all too easy to go ahead and abuse yourself, saying you’d rough it out the next day, but it’d come around to bite him in the ass in the end. He should have known better.

A shower could wait. He wasn’t around for his appearance. Alexander rose from the couch, his bones aching in that way that sleep deprivation always made them ache. Glancing down at his clothes he found no food stains and ruled that he could go to work without changing either. What the hell did it matter, and really, he’d look more genuine if he came in disheveled and unkempt to apologize for being late. Poor Alexander, he didn’t set his alarm, came as soon as he could. Provoke sympathy instead of resentment; that was the key. People were very different, but they were almost always the same.

It took him five minutes to brush his teeth, don his jacket and boots, and be out the door. As he boarded the bus he fished clumsily for his wallet and, finding he had only three nickels and a penny in his change pouch, grudgingly gave up an entire dollar bill to pay his way. He wondered how much money, in total, had been wasted by paying for the bus with dollars. He bet the chairman of the public transportation department could put a wing on his house with the sum.

Alexander had to be careful with his balance as the bus jolted into movement. He gripped one of the vertical bars and swung precariously, almost crashing into a very pretty, very slim brunette. He mumbled an apology, which she accepted with a friendly smile, and sat down to avoid any similar mishaps. He chose a seat a good ten feet away from the young woman. She was eye-catchingly pretty, the kind of person you can’t help but steal glances of, with almond eyes that betrayed an ancestry of mixed race. Alexander never liked to sit too near to someone he didn’t know but found attractive, as if being near them could be interpreted, along with some subconscious understanding of his attraction, as a sleazy come-on or frotteuristic impulse.

Carla and he had been having sex steadily even through the end of their relationship. Now, only four days after the fact, he was feeling the effects of its lack. Stealing furtive glances he hoped to God would not be spotted he felt a poignant longing for the smooth skin and supple limbs of the woman he had bumped into. He shook his head, trying to clear it. What the hell was he thinking, ogling this woman like some crass, cat calling cad? She was just another unreachable woman, the kind he could only ever go up to and woo in dreams and fantasies. For people like Alex, seduction was a long, lengthy process that required both situation and a lot of luck.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost missed his stop. He hastily pressed the yellow tape, clambering up from the seat and giving the pretty woman a quick, awkward smile and nod before stepping out into the cold street. The bus doors slid shut behind him and the vehicle rolled away, leaving a grayish cloud of exhaust in its wake. Alex coughed, waving at his face, his feet already taking him along the well worn path to the school. Class would have already started, he realized with a pit in his stomach, and he would have to make his late appearance, have to bear
the stares of the cocky students, either wondering what he was doing as TA, sorry, unwashed thing that he was, or, possibly worse, just not noticing, forgetting about his existence.

Alexander paused in mid stride. He looked up at the clock above the bank across the street. Three fifty-seven. What the fuck was the point? He might as well call in sick, take the day off and...

He could write then. Alexander felt a sudden throb of excitement in his gut, only aided by the thrilling feeling of being naughty and playing hooky. He had missed that, missed not having to be a fully responsible adult. And really, he had much more important things to do. Being a writer meant he should write, dammit, and that’s what he’d do. All this other stuff, college, graduate school, it was all a way of putting it off. But not anymore. He didn’t have to put it off anymore. It was happening for him.

He had to wait twenty minutes for the bus to take him back home, but it felt like hours.

Alexander was thankful that Ms. Renquist wasn’t there to bother him with small talk when he got back. He bounded up the first flight of stairs, but then had to stop to catch his breath. Underneath those layers of clothes he was burning up, sweating madly, and his body was still aching from the need for sleep. The rest of his ascent was considerably slower paced, and he was glad to get rid of all his winter gear once inside. The heating in the apartment had never been phenomenal, but now, hot as he was, the fact that the air inside was a little chilly came as a blessing. He crashed on the couch to recuperate for a minute or two, but his mind was on the computer by the windows.

While he lay on the couch he thought of the girl on the bus. So lovely. That was the right world: lovely. To say she was ‘hot’ would not do her justice. Hot was a crass term made by crass men with crass minds. No, she was lovely, and she was gone. Mad that someone could enter your life, preoccupy your thoughts, and then just be gone. Gone forever. And even if he did see her again, he wouldn’t likely recognize her, and she certainly wouldn’t recognize him.

How strange, that a total stranger could linger so in his mind.

Alexander rose from the couch and made his way to the computer. He drew the chair out and settled down before the screen. It was darkened in that vivid way of a computer that has gone to sleep. He hadn’t taken the time to shut it off last night. A quick flourish of the mouse and the screen blinked back into wakefulness, revealing the manuscript he had burned himself out over last night. He scrolled up its length, then back down to the bottom, where the blinking line bid him continue. There was a moment’s hesitation, and with that hesitation, dread. Could he continue? Had it just stopped here. Alexander’s brow furrowed and he stabbed at the keys with his index fingers.
‘He first saw her on the bus going to work.’

Alexander paused as he took in what he had just written. It had been just what he was thinking of before, and that felt somehow like cheating. But what the hell. We write from life, don’t we? That girl had stepped into his life for just a brief bus ride, and now he was moments away from immortalizing her in writing. He liked the idea somehow. It wasn’t cheating. It was just right.

As he wrote he found himself easily falling back into the groove. His main character experienced the same feelings Alexander had experienced. You cannot write from a point of view wholly unlike your own. It can only be skewed so much before you’re not writing fiction, but instead writing lies. ‘All writers are liars’ was something he’d been told, but he preferred to think of writing as retelling the truth to make it more compelling, more powerful. He’d also read a book, a short one by Mario Vargas Llosa, which said that writers are primarily engaged in creating the worlds they’d rather live in, that literature is the dreams of the times, and timeless works were those that were composed of timeless dreams. Alexander took this to heart as he continued to write. In this reality, the woman on the bus didn’t disappear forever. The main character saw her again. And again. And again.

Alexander had enough self-control to stop himself at twelve o’clock, saving the document three times over and then shutting down the computer. He did this out of habit, as opposed to any conscious consideration of the electric bill. As he settled to sleep he paused to thing of the work he had accomplished today. He knew much more about his story than he had before. He knew why it existed, what its purpose was. It was a romance, a story of love, a dream more timeless than any other in Alexander’s estimation. It was also a drama of the common man in the modern world. He didn’t think that this would date the piece later on. It wasn’t about the period, it was just in the period. He also knew that the woman on the bus, the one in his story, was the heart of the matter, the goal his protagonist would seek. In a strange cascade of coincidence and karma, they would meet over and over, their paths entwining, creating a tapestry of interconnected meaning from what would otherwise be meaningless events. It was wonderful, to have all this work set before him, all ready to be done. The main character was a facet of himself, someone he could sympathize with, feel the plight of, and his opposite number, the girl on the bus, who would become the girl in the coffee shop, the girl at the train station and the girl at the move theater, she did the same to Alexander as she did to Alexander’s character. She enchanted him. Even as he wrote her he knew so little of her, save what she looked like, what coffee she preferred and the fact that she always wore a thistledown scarf. Yet he was drawn by her mysterious allure, only made more powerful by the sheer commonality of the places she is seen.

And he knew one more thing about her. Her name: Isabella.
Alexander woke up right on time the next morning. Still, he groaned as he got out of bed, pitching his legs over one edge and rubbing at his eyes. The alarm was silenced with a bat of his hand and he slowly stumbled into a standing position, his legs trembling as he stretched them. The morning autopilot set in, bearing him to the little bathroom with it’s stall shower and it’s tube of toothpaste, so far gone that he almost sprained his thumb getting a sufficient blob on his brush. Scrubbing at his teeth, hair tousled and eyes still gritty with sleep crud, Alexander had already begun to think about when he’d be able to get back home so he could get to work on his book again. Far from giving him the spunk and joy he needed to get through the day, his new project made facing grading papers and sitting through lectures seem even more painful.

He paused with the toothbrush still in his mouth, the foam gathering in the backs of his cheeks. “Fug id,” he gurgled, and then smiled before spitting it all out into the sink. He looked back at the mirror, speaking now with exaggerated annunciation, “Fuck it.”

Alexander took his shower, donned a pair of khakis and a turtleneck sweater and then sat down before his computer, turning it on with a very satisfying press of the power button. He summoned up the word application, and then selected ‘recent items’ from the file menu. But the document wasn’t there.

Sick panic welled up in Alex’s stomach. Where had it gone? His work? He couldn’t repeat it, couldn’t possibly begin again, and if he didn’t have where he had left off, how could he continue? The feeling of loss was draining in a horrible way, the way he thought those investors had felt just before plummeting to their deaths on Black Monday. Only that was only money. This had been more. So much more!

He desperately activated the search program, looking for the document by title. The fifteen seconds it spent filing though the contents of his hard drive were, Alexander estimated, amongst the most anxious he had experienced since finding out his father had suffered cardiac arrest. It seemed an unfair comparison but he reckoned it was the case. And then the filename appeared in the little window. Alexander let out a massive sigh of relief. “Don’t ever do that again...” he breathed, double clicking on the icon and shaking his head as the text filled page flickered into being before him. Fine business it would have been to skip work only to find his manuscript was gone. In a sudden fit of caution he ordered the printer to make a hardcopy. He’d need it anyways, and it was harder to lose a physical text than it was to lose a digital one. Computers, especially old ones like his, seemed to have rapacious appetites. As the printer growled unpleasantly Alexander began to write again. The next scene was the one where the protagonist would touch Isabella for the first time. Alexander was very, very excited at the prospect.
He could imagine the feeling of her skin, strikingly smooth even in the momentary contact that this would be. Alexander closed his eyes, wondering how long it would be until that contact could be prolonged, how long until the first kiss, and all that lay beyond. He felt a mild tickling sensation in his groin, a testament to the honesty of what he was about to write.

He started to type.

...Alexander received the phone call on the third day he skipped work. He was perched over his computer, from which he had not strayed save to eat, sleep and, on one occasion, bathe. The phone let out its obnoxious ring and Alexander gave it a dirty look before rising from the chair and crossing over to the wall to take it off its cradle.

“Hello?” he asked, and at once noticed how cracked his voice sounded. He hadn’t used it since he had begun his fast from work, except for the occasional self-directed comment, and these too had become infrequent.

“Alexander?” He blanched. It was the professor, “Christ you sound terrible. I was just wondering if you were sick. You haven’t been coming to class and you hadn’t called to say why.”

Suddenly Alexander was very pleased he sounded the way he did. He sneered a little as the professor spoke. Like he needed to be told he hadn’t been coming to class. Funny thing, prof, but he sort of had figured that out himself already. But thanks for the reminder. Good thing you’re putting your Ph.D. to such effective use. Asshole.

Alexander made his voice even more ragged, adding in a single cough for effect, “Sor...” cough, “Sorry, professor. I’ve come down with something and I totally forgot to call in. It’s been pretty bad and... Well, my girlfriend split so I’ve been doing my crippled male best to take care of myself.” That’s right. Self-deprecating humor. No way he could get nailed now.

“Oh, well I understand,” the professor said. Alexander smirked as the teacher continued, “You take care of yourself. ’Tis the season to get hack-cough. I’ll have the other TA pick up the slack until you get back. Feel better, Alex. We need you.”

Alexander wondered if the professor fertilized his lawn with golden moments like this when he wasn’t distributing them. Still, had to keep up the act.

“That’s nice to know. I’ll try my...” another cough, “my best. Thanks. See you soon, I hope.” Alexander waited for the professor to say goodbye and hang up before placing the phone back on the wall again. He scowled at the device for a long moment. He hadn’t lost his groove, he didn’t think, but the phone was too great a risk. He reached out and pulled the wire from the phone jack, doing to the phone what Alexander thought of with a satisfied smirk as ‘telemasculation.’

Now, to get back to what really mattered. Alexander returned to the computer, taking his
seat and rereading the last paragraph quickly. His heart sped up. He remembered now. It was getting close, the first kiss. He couldn’t wait, just couldn’t. Just the thought of meeting lips with the exotic Isabella did what nude pictures had done to him in early adolescence. He began to type again, feverishly plowing ahead through narration and description, scenic elements and dialogue, keeping his eyes on the prize. It was all just means to an end, really, paths to a final destination.

Alexander wanted to get there so badly now.

... 

Ms. Renquist couldn’t have picked a worse time to come knocking at his door. Alexander was on a roll. Of course, it was all relative now. This whole past week had been a long roll, but within the high there were places that were even higher. And of all fucking places that she had to come calling she had to choose one of them.

After a night at the Moroccan restaurant, the protagonist and the lovely Isabella had begun to walk home in the blustery chill of early spring. This had been their first true ‘date’, the first time their meeting had been planned. The beauty of the romance with Isabella was the surprise. You never knew where she would next appear, all you knew is that she would, and then your day would be wonderful. There was a strange inner magic to her. God, Alexander adored her. He had stopped thinking about the fact that he had created her. She had outgrown him, it was clear, granted life of her own by some higher power, and he was simply privileged to be the recorder of her swanlike movement from time to time and place to place. And the next destination was exciting. She was going to the protagonist’s own home, with all the promise it suggested. Alexander had also given up on predicting what Isabella would do. She was too clever and too elusive for him to determine what she would do next, which was a great part of her charm. Still, there was possibility here, possibility both Alexander and the protagonist viewed with an eagerness tempered only slightly by the knowledge that everything with Isabella was far from certain.

So, when the first three taps came at the door, Alexander ignored them, hoping the caller would just go away. Who the hell wanted to visit anyways? Still, when another three taps came at the door, Alexander decided he ought to go check it out. Not knowing who it was might cause dissonance and there was no way he’d risk that at this juncture in his work. He got up from the chair, his legs cramped and aching, and went to the door. As he cracked it open he saw the wrinkled face of his landlady. She smiled her creepy old person’s smile at him and he tried to smile back.

“Ms. Renquist,” he said, “What do... what is it?” Alexander snatched at some reason why
she’d be calling, “Do I owe you this month’s rent?”

Ms. Renquist waved a knotty hand at him, causing Alexander to pray for either superb voice to text technology or death in his sleep when he got that old.

“Nothing so grim, Alexander,” she said, “I just wondered if you wanted me to get you some groceries while I was out. You haven’t been out of your apartment in some time and I don’t think what I gave you last time could possibly be holding up.”

Alexander wanted to smack the old woman. Why was she bothering him over groceries? If she knew he’d been in his apartment couldn’t she put two and fucking two together and figure out he didn’t want to be disturbed? Another thing he wished for by the time he was as old as Ms. Renquist: a cure to Alzheimer’s or death in his sleep.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.” Alexander said, maybe a little more curtly than was polite, but then again it wasn’t her important business he was disturbing. He was about to close the door when she spoke up again. It was a battle not to roll his eyes.

“I insist,” Ms. Renquist said, “You’ll starve in there, without a little something to tide you over. Don’t worry about it, I’ll just get you some and put them outside your door so you can pick them up when you’re less busy.”

Damn fucking straight. He was busy, very busy.

“Thank you. Very much. Now, I have to go. Writing.” This seemed to get through to Ms. Renquist through the fog old age had thrown up around her mind. She gave a little birdish dip of the head and turned to head back downstairs. Alexander had a momentary pang of pity as he realized what scaling the stairs must have cost her in time and energy, but it was short lived. He had been interrupted, and talking to that shriveled old widow was hardly going to help the mood of this scene. Still, this was his great work. He figured he could manage it.

…

It had finally come. The kiss had come and passed, as lovely and ethereal as Isabella herself. Life’s complications had unsuccessfully tried to block the protagonist’s course to Isabella, the busy-bodying of his mother and the contempt disguised as concern of his employer overcome in the search for the beautiful vision first behind on a grimy bus ride placed in the middle of an empty, slowly decaying life. The rules didn’t apply to Isabella. They didn’t tie her down. She soared above it all, and the protagonist, with Alex at his shoulder to share the joy, was finally going to see her truly unveiled.

Alexander’s typing was frantic, feverish and his eyes hardly blinked. He couldn’t miss a single word that his hands were forming. It wasn’t him that was writing anymore. It was the story. It was Isabella. His groin throbbed as he stepped into Isabella’s curtained bedroom, silks and muslins
draped across windows and gliding from bedposts.

On impulse he fumbled at the button of his boxers. He had long stopped bothering to change dress from bed to chair, had realized that even showers didn’t matter much. He didn’t sweat in the apartment, and he couldn’t recall what he’d eaten besides crackers and peanut butter recently, both of which weren’t likely to stain clothes. And moreover, who did he have to impress? Isabella did not care. If he wanted to be dapper and well dressed for her, he need only write the creased pants and double Windsor knot tie.

He fished his penis from the opening in his underwear, and began to rub at the erect member as his left hand continued typing. This was the only true way to understand the feelings of the protagonist at this moment, caught in the heat of passion, the rip tide of desire. In this way he slowly crept towards climax along with his protagonist, and as he met it the name on his lips was the same as that on his written other’s.

‘Isabella.’

Mrs. Renquist ascended the last flight to Alexander’s floor, breath coming heavily. She leaned against the banister, trying to regain her wind. In one hand she held a copy of her evening edition. She had seen an article on a book signing by some author she swore had been a favorite of the Mackenzie boy’s, and she was certain that it would stir him from the hermit hole his apartment had become. If only that Carla girl could see what she had done to the poor boy, she’d be sorry. Locked away up there, never even going out for a walk. She didn’t blame him. He was young and his heart was still stronger than his mind, so heartbreak was truly earth shattering for him. She couldn’t blame him. When Adam had died she refused to leave the building for weeks. It had taken her friend Irene’s fiercest effort to pull her from her misery, and she was forever grateful both to her and to Jesus for that mercy. She wanted to pass on the blessing.

As Mrs. Renquist topped the last few stairs she caught an awful smell on the air, like poorly turned compost. The source became clear very quickly. The groceries she had placed outside Alexander’s door were still sitting there. Mrs. Renquist’s eyes began to water as a bloated, black-bodied fly crawled into sight over the edge of the brown paper bag, and fluttered its shiny wings before taking flight.
**about the authors**

dorothy bandura is a sophomore, double-majoring in Sociology and French. She super psyched to be studying abroad next year in Paris, where she will eat lots of crepes and become fabulously fashionable. She likes to write (when she has the time), but this is her first time in Outbreath, so if this bio statement sounds awful, then you know why!

phillip lobo is a freshman majoring in English. Phillip is thrilled to have his first story in Outbreath and hopes it bodes well for the brevity of his certain unemployment/poverty after college when he seeks to make it as a fiction writer. Here’s to hoping, huh?

sara kaplan is a sophomore majoring in psychology and minoring in math. She spends most of her time skipping class, knitting, and watching "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Wait...that’s her roommate. When she’s not at the gym, she’s at the gym, and when she’s not at the gym, she’s rowing. Wait...that’s another friend. Who is Sara Kaplan?

evan taylor is a senior majoring in English. It was not his first choice. He would like to thank his parents for always telling him he could be anything he wanted, even if years later he discovered this was not actually the case. If he could have, he would have been an astronaut. Like the mongoose, he has no natural predators.

victor john is a freshman. This is his first story in Outbreath.