OUR MISSION

*Mountain Laurels: The NGCSU Art & Literature Magazine* was founded to display the creative work of NGCSU students, faculty, and staff. The magazine is a recognized student organization, published by and for students.

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Staring up at the nearly opaque white netting above me, I prayed the only thing alive in this bed was me. I pulled the threadbare blanket up closer to my chin and shifted on top of the two-inch thick mattress. Not for the first time, the thought ran through my head: Why am I here?

With the sound of rain pelting against the tin roof and confused roosters crowing at three o’clock in the morning, Ban Rak Thai was not what I had expected. I’d heard “guest house” and thought something along the lines of a bed and breakfast, not a hovel.

I crawled out from beneath the mosquito net and pulled on a pair of sandals, then shuffled my way across the muddy tiled floor to the bathroom. I paused just outside. Pecking around the doorframe, I inspected the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, casting foggy light on the rusty shower spigot that probably produced water with eight different diseases swimming in it. Grasshoppers the size of my fist flew in through the gaping holes between the wall’s wooden slats and perched atop the white ceramic “squatty pot.” When I inched closer, I spotted a spider worthy of a National Geographic episode hovering just above the hole.

Looked like I’d be holding it for a while.

Slipping back into bed, I curled up on my side and listened to the chirping songs of the ever-present insects that haunted me in this country. My lips formed the native words: “malaing yai”—“big bug.”

As I calculated how many more hours I’d have to spend atop Thailand’s China Mountain, my thoughts drifted back to the afternoon. Even now, my heart-beat kicked into overdrive.

“Have your passports ready,” they’d said. “Hide all your money. Don’t take pictures.”

As we’d bumped along the windy dirt roads, I gripped my backpack to my chest and pressed my ankle against the pile of supplies we’d spent so long preparing. When our trucks came to a halt, we all piled out and stepped into the red mud.

An unarmed soldier met us at the bottom of the hill, where we gazed down into the valley below. Myanmar. We called it Burma. I couldn’t see the land mines, hear the screams of exploding children, or taste the acrid smoke of villages burning. Statistics swirled inside my head—150,000 refugees live in camps on the Thai/Burmese border, many families live on less than three US dollars a day. But I couldn’t see the poverty—just the jungle.

The soldiers didn’t care enough to check our IDs. Who wants to go into Burma, anyway? So with no passport, no truck, and no camera, I followed our translator down the road on foot. Slipping over the huge ruts that had formed
from water run-off, I held tight to the heavy plastic bag full of supplies. The $1100 we’d raised in the States had come a long way:

Across the Pacific.
Into a small mountain town in northern Thailand.
Over the Burmese border.
And soon to be in the hands of refugees in the form of soap, toothbrushes, flip-flops, deodorant, and any other necessity we could think of.

An arch stretched across the road, Burmese script written across it in peeling paint. I stared up at the loopy writing. Probably said something like “Welcome to Burma.” Or maybe “Beware! Turn back now!” Both were equally likely.

As we descended down into the valley, I gazed out at the thatched roofs dotting the landscape. I wiped away the sweat beading at my forehead but did nothing for what rolled down my back. I couldn’t keep myself from shooting a glance over my shoulder, half expecting to see a group of Thai soldiers chasing us with machine guns. It’d be in the papers back home the next day: “Americans killed at Burmese border, carrying illegal toiletries to refugees.”

There was no line separating the two countries. I couldn’t hold my breath as I stepped over the border or take a picture by a sign that read “You are now entering Burma.” It didn’t even feel different. Still hot. Humid. Bugs everywhere. The only
indication that we were now in a refugee camp was the growing amount of rudely built bamboo shelters.

Our arrival in the village brought out the whole community. They stared at us with curious faces, bemusement coloring their features and wariness in the way they shied away from getting too close. Children hid behind their mothers’ skirts, their wide, dark eyes peering from behind hand-woven fabric. I offered a tiny wave but received only open stares.

Our team split into our assigned groups. While the village’s children had their hearts listened to, ears cleaned, and open wounds treated by our medical crew, I helped three other team members pack the supplies packages. We sorted the items and piled them onto three wooden tables. I listened to another of our team’s group fitting villagers with new shoes and clothes:

“Come here, sweetheart. That looks like your size. Okay, now go over to Mr. John and try on a pair of shoes. Perfect!”

They couldn’t understand, of course, but the tone and smile got the message across.

I dumped a toothbrush and bit of candy into a bag and brushed back my hair, frizzy in the humidity. We didn’t have much time left to get everything sorted, packed, and readied for dispersal amongst the village’s children. I couldn’t help but envy our team members who got to sing songs with the kids or hand out new
shoes. What was I doing? Tying up plastic bags.

With a huff, I took a second to glance up. And startled. Their babies hanging in slings around their necks, women peered over the waist-high railing and into the thatch-covered “building.” Their gazes followed our hands as we transferred sweets into the bags. Toddlers with new shoes hanging from their hooked fingers stood on tiptoes to look in on us, their eyes growing wide at the sight of the trinket toys we’d brought.

I stared back, all frustration draining from my body like blood pooling beneath the bodies of murdered refugees. I couldn’t look at them any longer, the hunger screaming through those eyes, surrounded by long, dark lashes. Grumblings now dead on my lips, I returned to sorting.

We finished dividing up all the supplies before the medical team returned from down the hill, and we watched our team members handing out shoes. Children filed in one at a time, hesitant at first, but more confident with each step. Mothers came in behind them, pressing their hands together as if in prayer and bowing their heads to us in thanks.

“Kob kun kaa,” they whispered—“Thank you.”

The men of the village wouldn’t come inside, choosing instead to look in through a window. They chuckled at the children trying on shoes that were too big.

One of our male team members went up to the window and held a shirt up to the nearest man, stretching it up in front of his chest to see if it would fit. He placed it in the man’s hand with a smile. More of the men came up to the window.

When the rest of our team joined us, the leader of the village rounded up all the children, and they fell into lines facing us. They stood just beneath a flagpole, which flew the Burmese flag beside that of the Shan people—their people.

One of the boys marched to the front, hands clasped at the small of his back and feet wide. He screamed out words, and the rest of the children screamed back. Two more boys marched forward and began to take down the flag while all the others stood by in respectful silence.

A chill rippled through me, watching these tiny soldiers. The voice of our translator reverberated through my head: “They want to take back their country from the government who tries to kill them, so they train. The children will be soldiers.”

“Why can’t we have cameras?” we’d asked. “We want to show everyone in America what these people look like.”

“If the Burmese government saw the pictures, they would know where these people are. They would come attack this village. So just in case they come, the village prepares itself.”

How could these mothers stand by and watch their children train to be soldiers, killers? There were toddlers here. Babies. Wasn’t war what had forced them into living like this in the first place?
I spotted the men who had come to the window and accepted the free shirts with grins and bows—many had legs missing or their arms in slings. I knew where they’d gotten those wounds: land mines, Burmese soldiers bent on total eradication of the Shan people from the jungles of Southeast Asia. These mothers had no other choice but to watch their children grow into soldiers. Fighting back was all these people had left.

I swallowed all words of protest.

After the kids saluted the flag, we gathered up our bags of supplies to hand out. Some of our team members pulled out cameras from coat pockets and snapped a few shots of the dirty children waiting in military rows for the hygiene products provided by American teenagers.

It all felt like a movie, like I was a character acting as the puppet of some omniscient writer. When the movie faded to the credits and the lights went up in the theater, I would be able to leave this place and return home to America—to my soft bed and twelve different kinds of toothbrushes. But these kids were stuck here like used gum to the underside of a theater seat.

I hefted four bags into my arms and made my way down a line. With each bag placed into a child’s hands, I received a bow in response. It made my throat tight, watching them. I moved through the rows, reaching the older kids the farther I got. Their eyes widened when I handed them a bag, but they only smiled at me. A real smile. Not one filled with longing or hunger. Just a smile.

And it hit me. Staring at them, seeing their grins. It was like they silently spoke to me: “Remember this. Remember my face. When you go home, remember me.”

As I lay in bed, a chill rippled down my spine. The humid darkness pressed down on me like a physical weight, but I knew I was free. I might run from the six-inch cockroaches and miss “normal” food, but I could leave this place. And I would bring something with me, a part of this land I had grown to love in only a few hours: I’d seen bondage, and it had the face of a malnourished Burmese child. A flood of peace washed over me while I listened to the rain plunking against the roof, and I took a deep breath.

Again, I wondered: Why am I here?
But this time I smiled. I knew why—to see their faces.
And to remember.
MICHAEL D. WALKER "A WASTE"

We climb into mirrors,
Picked apart by the shards of glass
And led along the edge,

Until we fall.
Crystalline teardrops that shatter
Into a thousand pieces.

And this is how we live:
In a thousand pieces.

But I,
I want to find place in forever.

So that when I shatter,
My pieces are held into place
By invisible strings of eternity.
And the passersby can look on
And say, "What a beautiful tragedy,
What a waste of life."

MICHAEL D. WALKER "CITALOPRAM"

Contort your many thoughts on pain
Into a vial, filled to brim
With red response to razorblades
And blackened floods of kerosene.
    Tomorrow, darling, we can swim.

Down beyond the cypress tree,
    Where Mary Caylor met the noose,
We’ll find that pain, just you and me
While dancing on the winter breeze.
    We’ll play the game of teenage life and lose.
ASHLEY C. BENNETT  "CHEERFUL LIGHTS"
Oh! how the classics depress me so,
Straight to the Kleenexes, I always go.
‘SNAP’ the book shuts and lands on the floor,
“They just aren’t made like that anymore!”

Why didn’t Shakespeare think of me,
When penning Romeo’s love-to-be?
Lively would I finish his duet,
If he could forget that wretched Capulet!

And Cleopatra, with her asps,
Let Marc Antony slip her grasp.
He will find in me a better version
Of that dramatic Nile diversion.
What a better wife I could be
Than that age-worn Penelope!
Not in Ithaca, but at his side,
Taking Adventure in our stride.

Competition I may find in Helen,
But my face is a more worldly heaven.
So Paris, if your heart is true,
Save your men and take me with you.

Oh! and Mr. Thornton, all covered in ice,
Ask for me, that is my price.
Overlook the ever-distant Ms. Hale,
My love for you will always prevail.

Elizabeth Bennett, please step aside,
My love for Darcy I cannot hide.
Pride nor prejudice stands in my way,
As you will see on my wedding day!

My dear Edmond awaits behind bars,
There can be no bond stronger than ours.
I'll tunnel to you and revenge we will find,
Your story, and mine, will be redefined.

My precious Peter, so young and brave,
I am the damsel you yearn to save.
Moonlight walks along white sands,
Forever together in Never Never Land.

Oh! how the classics depress me so,
Straight to the Kleenexes I always go.
'SNAP' the book shuts and lands on the floor,
"They just aren't made like that anymore!"
CRACK.
The axe passed through the wood as though it were doing an old friend a
favor—effortlessly, and without need of a sense of recompense.

Sweat and corded muscle stood out on the back of the man wielding the
blade, his grimy tan making him somewhat difficult to distinguish from the earth
itself as he bent down to place another log on the chopping block. His faded jeans
and work boots looked older than the rocks on the ground. There was only one
thing he wore that I was too far away to see yet, but I knew it would be there—a
small golden band on a thin chain around his neck. A large black dog kept vigil
beside his master, too old to care about chasing small animals and too familiar with
me to bark.

The man’s hands spread apart as he gripped the handle and raised the axe
again in a motion that would seem haphazard to the untrained eye, then brought it
down swiftly into the heart of the thick cut of wood.
CRACK. Another perfect strike that would soon be lost amidst its thou-
sands of brethren.

The birds and other woodland creatures carried on chirping, chattering
and foraging for food, treating the man in the clearing and the noise he was making
the same as they treated the old oak tree that had been struck by lightning. Both
always there, never changing, perhaps a bit worn but with the ability to cling to
vitality still intact.

It had been years since I had visited this place, yet time had made no
advance upon it. The same trees stood guard, the same smell (a mixture of freshly
plowed dirt, wild grass, and a crisp wind from the north) hung in the air, and the
same old dirt road served as the only way in or out. The dust from my arrival
would likely still be there when I left if the meeting went the way I expected it
would.

I felt the ring in my pocket, a ready if painful sense of comfort that
helped me prepare for what lay ahead.

As I approached the dog gave a low grunt and got to his feet, his tail wav-
ing lazily back and forth as he plodded toward me.

“Hey Badge,” I said softly as I kneeled to pat him. My nickname for him
made his tail wag harder for a few seconds before slipping back into a more pon-
derous sway.

Knowing the man had already heard my car, I made no attempt to gain his
attention without startling him, and instead walked up to within a few paces behind
him, looking at the large pile of firewood and the equally large pile of roughly
hewn limbs, logs, and pieces of trunk awaiting their turn.

“Badger, come.”
I had always been struck by how well the voice fit the man—deep and rumbling with a tone that made it clear respect would be given when and if it was earned.

Badger walked back to his master’s side and sat, his eyes remaining on me as if fearing I would leave and be gone again for years.

CRACK. “What do you want?”

I guess there could be worse greetings, I thought. Badger whined, clearly aware of the charged atmosphere and unhappy about it.

“It’s been a while,” I said. “I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“It’s not been long enough, and you wouldn’t come this far just to check on me,” he said, ending the sentence with a grunt of exertion as he swung again.

“Maybe I would if I felt more welcome,” I countered.

“Maybe you’d be more welcome if I had anything to say to you,” he said, once again twisting my own words around to make it clear he didn’t want to see me.

“Has so much changed since you would have shaken my hand and began talking to me about how the weather’s been?”

He paused before setting up another log. “You actually have the nerve to ask me that?”

“It’s not nerve when the person asking is innocent of his perceived
crime.”

I expected him to face me, but he instead brought the axe down as if I were only another tree slightly out of line from the rest of the forest. I would have thought he hadn’t heard me at all if a few muffled words hadn’t barely made it to my ears. The only one I could clearly make out was “self-delusional.”

This was a far cry from what I had hoped would transpire, so I tried to change tactics. “The crops look good.”

He said nothing.

“Are you going to plant any tomatoes next year? If you are, I’d—”

“How much longer are you going to pretend this is just a social visit?” he interrupted with another chop.

The wind that had been barely stirring the tops of the trees died suddenly, making the silence even heavier. There was no avoiding it, but I had hoped to soften the blows coming by at least melting some of the ice that had formed between us. I steel myself and spoke firmly. “She left you something.”

His blade found its mark again, the irrepressible rhythm driving ever forward. “I don’t want it.” He said it as though he had been expecting this moment and had the words prepared, but I could still hear the pain underneath them.

“She made it quite clear you were to have it anyway.”

“I don’t want it.”

One deep breath did little to ease my own discomfort, so I took two. “It’s your mother’s wedding band.”

For a moment he seemed to falter, but it must have been a trick of the light because an instant later another log split apart, straight down the middle.

“Why did she leave it to me?”

“Why wouldn’t she leave it to you? Do you really think she hated you?”

“If she didn’t she did a good job pretending.”

My uneasiness began turning to anger. “That was as much your fault as it was hers.”

“I was only trying to protect her. You were the one who was too afraid to tell her no.”

“Charlie, I’m not having this conversation again,” I ground out, straining to keep my voice civil. “You know exactly how she was.”

He finally turned to face me, his good eye glaring at me with inhuman sharpness, the other closed forever by a stray piece of shrapnel. The front of his jeans bore several patches from where the same axe he held now had slashed through the fabric and into his flesh as he had adjusted to the lack of depth perception after the war. His left leg supported the bulk of his weight, the right too injured to hold him since one mistake had nearly cost him everything from the shin down. “Of course I know how she was!” he thundered as he pointed the axe at me. “Do you? Are you the one who took care of her after our parents died?” Who
raised her? Who protected her for eighteen years and then gave her to a man in trust that he would do the same?"

“No,” I said. “I’m the man who decided she should live life rather than watch it go by from the shadows.”

He took a step toward me. “Is that what you call it? ‘Letting her live?’ Odd choice of words for the one responsible for her death.”

“No one is responsible. You and I both know she didn’t have long to begin with. She wanted to experience all she could before the end.”

“The end could have been five or maybe even ten years away for all we knew. You hastened it by letting her go there, and she said she wanted to go because you made her feel guilty.”

“What!?” I exploded. “I told her that nothing should hold her back, and that anything she wanted to do in this wide world I would help her!”

“A clear indication you thought she wasn’t doing enough!”

I bit my tongue as my fingernails dug into the palms of my hands and stared at him. “Are you accusing me of killing my own wife?” I could only imagine what he would think if he knew the whole story.

“No. I’m accusing you of killing my sister. No man would be so careless with his wife.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. I had known he resented me, but to know he blamed me directly...even though I knew I had been right guilt still pressed down on me.

Did he already know what I had hidden from him on some level? Was it because I had taken so long to come see him, or had he been keeping a closer eye on her than I had suspected?

It doesn’t matter, I thought. This has to be the last time. Everything has to be said now, before I lose my nerve and so that we can both have complete closure.

“arly you’re right,” I said slowly, exhaling. “You just don’t know why you’re right.”

He didn’t move for a moment, then turned back to his work. “Anyone could see that I was right. Anyone except you.”

CRACK.

I continued as he got back into his rhythm, knowing he would listen to every word. “I wasn’t careful enough. Carol—”

“Don’t say her name,” he snarled.

“She had a doctor’s appointment a week before we left for the mountains. He asked what we would be doing, and she told him it was a ski resort, but that we would only be walking a few trails and taking in the air.” I hesitated. “He warned her not to try anything overly physical because the disease had weakened her body to the point where a sharp impact could fracture multiple bones.”
KAITLYN KLUCZNIK “THE REALITY”
The axe came down at a shallow angle, clipped the standing log and drove into Charlie's right leg, a few inches below the old scar. The scream that tore loose from his throat was honed by the sudden pain, but the ferocity was meant for me. He wheeled so fast that the twice-injured leg collapsed underneath him, and he caught himself on his hands, one still clenching the axe so hard I could hear his knuckles popping. Badger leaped to his side and barked, confused and scared by the sudden outburst and smell of blood. Charlie pushed him away and looked up at me.

"You," he gasped, "son...of..."

I cut him off. "I shouldn't have let her. But knowing that she shouldn't ever do anything besides sit still was killing her as much as the sickness itself. It would have been a long, painful death compared to what happened."

"You don't know that!" he yelled slamming his fists into the ground.

"We both do! It was time to stop protecting her and to start helping her! Do you honestly think it didn't hurt me?" I asked, the sudden stab of pain in my chest making my voice break.

"I hope it did," he spat at me. "And I hope it eats you alive, knowing that you as good as murdered her."

All the air in my lungs left me as my body went numb. I was only dimly aware of Charlie tying a dingy rag around the new gash on his leg. He then struggled to his feet, still holding the crimson-tipped axe. Whether he meant for my blood to be on it next or to go back and lose himself in the monotony of chopping made no difference to me.

I drew a golden band out of my pocket, a smaller, thinner version of the one that hung just below his collarbone. Holding it up where he could clearly see it, I set it down on top of the stack of firewood, gave Badger one last scratch behind the ears, then turned away.

The walk back to my car seemed infinitely longer than the one that had taken me to the confrontation—a feat I wouldn't have believed possible just moments ago. There were no birds calling, no squirrels barking. Only the wind continued to blow steadily, rattling the dry leaves in a way that made me think of gossips whispering as the self-righteous town troublemaker makes his way through the square.

"Don't come back!" The words rang out clear and hard, leaving nothing to the imagination of what would happen if I did ever find myself in this small clearing again.

I got into my car and sat there, letting the 'what if' scenarios run freely through my mind once again. What if I hadn't let her insist on learning? What if we had gone down a different path? What if that rock hadn't been there? What if I hadn't listened to her when she told me to let go of her hand?

CRACK! Though I was further away from the cutting block now, the ex-
tra force behind the blow made me jerk as it sent my mind reeling back. Though I knew another log had just been prepared for the fire, in my mind all I could see was the flash of two overturned skis in the cold sunlight, and the finger of judgment pointing at me underneath the icy gray eye of a man I once called brother.

LISA ERTMER “IN TRANSITION”
General Lee answered and spoke and planned, but his inner self, his quiet self, was distracted by the light reflecting off the spiraling wails of the spirits of men, ruffled from their bodies, a teeming, turning column between his headquarters on Seminary Ridge and the enemy on Cemetery Ridge.

Charles, his aide-de-camp, withdrew, researching a rumor of enemy movements near Gettysburg. General Lee, alone with the gunpowder in his nostrils and the weary ache in his spine, tilted his head and saw the shimmer of the ghastly pillar. He could not tear his eyes away from the lattice of souls to study the messenger who slouched toward him. The man said, "A day's harvest, General Lee?"

"Ghastly," he replied. He stared at the vortex.

"The Bible says, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive,' General. The men gave as much as they took today."

Something in the timbre of that voice resonated within Lee. The man's hat slumped low and his uniform was worn through in places, nearly bereft of buttons, the empty left sleeve pinned across his chest to his right shoulder.

Lee hesitated. It was madness to suggest that he saw clearly, but he could not help asking, "Thomas?" Preposterous. He immediately wished he had not asked.

General Thomas Jackson, whom the men called Stonewall, dead two months, shoved his hat up with a finger. The shimmer of the pillar of souls played in his eyes.

General Lee almost inquired after Jackson's health, as came naturally when greeting an old friend. Lee laughed nervously. A corner of Jackson's mouth edged upward, hinting at a rare smile.

Jackson said, "I am pressed by the enemy on the other side of the river. The trees have been torn asunder by the war."

"The war?" Lee said, "There is war in the life after?"

Jackson nodded, eyes locked on Lee. "You led us well in this world. The land beyond is teeming with Yankees. As you conquer in this world, my side fails in eternity."

"That well? We have prevailed in battle... but surely not... Do you command the army, Thomas?"

"Albert Johnston commands competently. He could not exceed your own abilities, but you will not be ours for seven years."

The moans of the dead mounted. "I will not? You are saying that you perceive the future—of this war?"

Jackson nodded.

A thousand questions spun in Lee's mind. He asked, "How will we fare on this field? Can you foresee?"
Jackson said, “You have decided to quit this field. James Longstreet has convinced you to position your force between the Union army and their capitol, to dig in and invite them to come to you. That would not end well. The enemy’s reinforcements would disrupt your march. You would never dig your trenches—only your graves.”

Lee’s heart leapt. “Then you know. You can tell me. On which course will we prevail, Thomas? I beg you...”

Jackson raised his hand for silence. Lee heard the certainty of the grave when Jackson said, “It can end here.” He pointed back to the Union lines. “That can be their graveyard. They are thinned and weak. One push and they will flee. You would be on Lincoln’s doorstep in a fortnight.”

Lee nodded. “I had entertained such thoughts. But their position is well established. You are certain?”

Jackson nodded and reached to shake Lee’s hand. “I must go. I am torn away.”

Lee extended his hand to his most able general, but nothing of substance met him. Lee looked down and saw his own hand. When he looked up, he saw only the silhouette of Cemetery Ridge.

The next afternoon, Lee watched his line of men advance up the ridge. Northern guns, untouched by the earlier bombardment, roared, and the line gaping. The guns, mixed with Yankee rifles, thundered and his line tattered. The line straggled on. They would prevail. Surely they would. A worm in Lee’s stomach turned.

At nightfall, Lee sat astride Traveler, looking over the field as the men decamped. The vortex of souls roared, redoubled from the night before. He felt shame for the abject apologies he had earlier made to his men, but felt more shame that hundreds of husbands and sons would not return home. “Jackson,” he whispered.

“A long day for you,” Jackson answered, now mounted on Big Sorrell.

Lee swallowed. Struggling with a knot in his throat, he said, “Thomas, what went awry? I expected that we would chase them over Cemetery Ridge—that our only activity this night would be planning our pursuit. This is a setback from which it will be difficult to recover.”

Jackson shook his head. “It is a terrible thing—the end of this campaign.”

Lee found his voice. “How could you make such a mistake? How could you direct our armies into such a grave defeat?”

Jackson bowed his head. “The war will fare much better now, on my side.
Every Saturday morning was exactly the same for Faith. She would leave her parents house at eight on the dot, dressed in her nice clothes. She wasn’t exactly a fan of the long black skirt and prim white shirt, but her mother had insisted on buying them. She told them the same lie she’d been telling them for almost a year—that she was going with her church group to knock on doors and spread the gospel. Dressed in pressed clothes and armed with pamphlets, Faith’s church group would do just that: go door to door and talk to people who would rather be sleeping in than talking to a bunch of Church of God teenagers.

Once upon a time, Faith made the rounds with her church group every Saturday morning. But for months she had been calmly lying to her family each Saturday, promising to return as soon as the group was done. Instead of heading to the church, she drove her little green car to the next town, Paden, over forty minutes away.

Paden was quite a bit bigger than her hometown and made her feel like a tiny bird scuttling among hundreds of other birds. It was scary and exciting at the
same time. But she didn’t venture there to feel a rush of excitement. She went there every Saturday morning for a more important reason.

She stopped at a gas station that was old and shabby, but she knew they had the cheapest prices. She ignored the curious glances of the old truckers as she walked slowly up the aisles of the cramped store. She chose a small bag of chips, a smushed box of brownies, and a small bottle of orange juice. She carefully placed her wares on the counter and counted out her change. The old man working at the counter put her items in a paper bag and then handed it to her. “Take care now,” he grunted, turning back to his television set.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, clutching the bag as she hurried back to her car. She glanced at the time as she cranked the ignition. Perfect. Right on time. She flicked on her radio as she drove a little more, finally pulling in at her destination: the parking lot of the Ramada Inn.

The blaring music came to an abrupt close as she turned off her car, satisfied with her usual parking spot. She was far enough away from the door that no one would notice her sitting inside her car for four hours, but close enough to see everything that was going on in the lobby perfectly.

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw Rylan in the lobby. He was sitting behind the desk, twiddling a pencil between his fingers. He looked so bored, and so completely unaware that he was being watched so intently. A small smile spread across Faith’s face as she watched Rylan. Never taking her eyes off of him, she twisted open the bottle of orange juice and took a large gulp.

Rylan and Faith attended the same high school. They had AP English together. Their history classes were right next to each other. She passed him five or six times in the hallway every day. Yet they had never spoken to each other. Faith was pretty sure Rylan didn’t even know her name. He was always talking to someone, always laughing, always studying. Always too busy to notice her shy smiles from across the room.

But on Saturday mornings, none of that mattered. On Saturday mornings, she could watch him from her car. She could pretend he was smiling at her, noticing her. She felt like they almost knew each other. He didn’t know she was out there, but she found out more and more about him all the time. He was polite to the customers, even the ones who asked a million questions about their room. When he was alone, he would play with his cell phone or flip aimlessly through magazines about basketball. When he was bored he would roll a pencil back and forth across the large desk. On his breaks, he would go the McDonald’s next door and grab a burger and text people on his phone. All the while, he was gorgeous and cool and everything Faith wanted.

Faith’s best friend had told her that Rylan had a Saturday job at the hotel in Paden. Apparently, he needed the money so he could save up for college. Faith made a vow then and there to spend her Saturdays with him.
Well, she wasn’t exactly spending it with him. She would make the drive, hide out in her car and watch him all day. But it was kind of like spending the day with him, right?

Her parents had no idea. She knew they would be horrified that their beloved, well behaved, well mannered daughter was stalking a guy she barely knew. Her brother and sister would die of shock if they knew she was sitting in her little car for hours, eating stale brownies and scarcely daring to leave her car to use the bathroom. Any moment she was away from her post was a moment of watching Rylan she would never get back. What if she missed a smile, a laugh? What if he looked her way and saw her, locked eyes with her?

She had a plan to talk to Rylan. She had been developing the plan for months, mulling it over and over in her brain. She would wait until it was time for his shift to be over. Then she would calmly stroll inside the hotel and ask him where the nearest bookstore was (she knew it was down the street, but she needed an opening line). He would answer and she would ask “Aren’t you in my English class?” She would be coy, sexy, flirty. They would talk, go for coffee and live happily ever after. Never again would she be the invisible girl to him.

She simply hadn’t gathered up the nerve to approach him yet. Today will be the day. It’s only a month until graduation; it’s now or never.

Her stomach rumbled noisily and she grabbed the package of brownies. She barely tasted them as she chewed; her gaze focused on Rylan. She mentally rehearsed everything she would say to him once she had the chance. She wouldn’t stammer or trip over her words. She would say all of the right things.

Faith sat there for the next few hours, transfixed. Rylan rearranged the dusty magazines on top of the counter. He doodled on his newspaper. He watched the clock, waiting for his shift to finally end. Faith savored every moment.

The clock struck one and Rylan bolted up, hurrying to clock out. He pushed open the door to the lobby, stepping out into the bright sunlight.

Faith felt a wave of paralyzing anxiety rush over her. Now was her chance, her time to speak to him. She grabbed the door handle, her hand slick with sweat. Her heart pattered like a drum, threatening to break out of her chest. She sucked in a shallow breath, finding the air in her car suddenly stifling. She tried to move her legs, but they felt like jelly. She was all too aware of all the brownie crumbs clinging to her white shirt and the frumpiness of her practical brown shoes.

Rylan walked towards his Jeep, smiling happily. His Saturday afternoon had officially begun. He glanced her way for a fraction of a second. Everything inside of Faith screamed in joy and terror. He’ll see me; I’ll get out of this car and go to talk to him. We’ll go on a date tonight. It’ll be perfect.

The moment passed. Rylan slipped on his sunglasses as he jumped in the driver’s seat of his vehicle. He was still completely unaware of Faith’s presence as he drove away.
He didn’t see me. Faith’s heart slowed to a normal rhythm and sank into her shoes at the same time. He still had no clue that she was alive. She still hadn’t said a word to him.

She slumped down in her seat, watching as his Jeep sped out of sight. She wiped her sweaty palms on her neat black skirt. She cleared her throat, reaching for her keys. A small smile played across her lips as she cranked her car. Next week. Next week, I’ll definitely say something to him.

Until then, she would watch him from afar, as usual. Next Saturday, everything will be different. We’ll be together. I just have to wait until then.

**JEREMY BISHOP “THE INNOCENTS”**

“But Weston, we don’t have the money to buy the cars, so what’s the point in even getting the magazine?”

Weston glared at the smaller boy in disgust. “That’s the sorriest excuse I ever heard.” His voice was rough, almost raspy, and broke like he was in a perpetual state of puberty. “Just sorry.” He jabbed the boy above the pit of his arm with two fingers for emphasis.

“I think it’s a pretty good excuse. It’s a good excuse, isn’t it Don?”

Don grinned stupidly and said nothing.

“I’m saving my money. I’m not helping you buy that magazine,” Colin said. He struggled to match Weston’s stare.

“Look,” said Weston, “that’s just what you’re gonna have to do. Come on, Colin, you know how much I been wanting that mag, right?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

Weston slipped his arm around the younger boy’s shoulder and started walking down the magazine aisle. “You’re gonna give me that money, Colin, cause of all the stuff I helped you with, the advice about girls and such, and telling you about that stuff your parents was hiding from ya. If it weren’t for me, you’d still think your dick was just for pissing, wouldn’t ya?

He squirmed uneasily, his eyes darting to see if anyone was watching. Weston tightened his grip around the boy, squeezing his neck cruelly in the crook of his arm. Colin uttered a strangled honk of protest, but Weston slammed him up against a rack of books, still choking him with his arm.

“You’d better help us pay for it, you little piece of shit. I ain’t telling you again. You get up there, and you buy that magazine, you hear me?”

“Yessir,” Colin croaked, tears threatening to well in his eyes.

“What?”

I said, ’Yes sir,’” Colin repeated more loudly, staring red-faced up at the florescent lights.
Weston let the boy go, and stood there looking at him with a pained ex­pression on his face. “I was pretty sure that’s what you wanted to do. But what did you go and make me have to do all that for? You think I like having to hurt you and all?”

“No sir.”
He shoved the magazine in the boy’s hand, his face turning nasty again.
“Now you take this up there, and you pay for it, and you better not fuck this up. And stop your damn crying!”

A tall, angular young man who had stepped into the aisle a moment ago jerked slightly as his ear caught the profanity. He regarded the boys coolly.

“Don’t pay any attention to that dickwad,” Weston ordered and shoved Colin forward. The boys headed back up the aisle toward the register. Colin dimly noticed the dull shine of a plastic-covered item in Don’s hand.

They reached the counter, and the cashier looked down at them. “Can I help you boys?” Weston scowled, and nudged Colin, who meekly slid the sleek magazine towards the register. He stared down at its glossy cover, where a woman in a bikini leaned seductively over the hood of a red sports car. The cashier frowned slightly, but scanned the item and put it in a bag. “Will that be all for you?” Colin nodded his head, not even looking up. “That will be $6.43.” Colin looked at the other boys, and they each handed him a wadded-up one dollar bill.

“But...” Colin started to protest, but then caught the look in Weston’s eyes. He sighed in a shuddering heave and pulled out his wallet. He looked a minute at the crisp, clean bills, folded neatly in half, and then slipped a five out and pushed it across the counter along with the two wads. The cashier unfolded them distastefully, and he handed back the change, along with the bagged magazine. “Have a nice day,” he smirked.

Weston took the bag and, hidden below the counter, held it open to Don, who slipped something inside it. “Thanks, you too!” Weston called out cheerfully as they walked towards the exit. The alarm began to beep as they passed through the sensors, and they stopped, looking back at the cashier, who was ringing up another customer.

“Aw, it’s alright, just go on. You’re fine,” he said.

“Okay” said Weston. He led the boys over to a small enclave in the mall’s parking lot, and they sat behind a dumpster. They could hear the laughter and cat-calls of teenagers somewhere around the corner where the dollar theater was. Weston pulled the shiny magazine out of the bag, flipped through it, and then chucked it into the dumpster.

“Hey!” Colin yelled, jumping up. “What are you doing?”

Weston looked up at him. “You’d better sit your ass back down, and shut yer fuckin’ hole.”

Colin sunk back down to sit on the curb. Weston reached into the bag
and pulled out another magazine, wrapped in opaque plastic. He started to tear the covering off, but it just stretched, so he swore and started pulling again.

“Uh, what is that…” Colin began.

“You’ll see in a minute.” Weston finally ripped through the wrapping, yanking the contents out, shaking the thing with both hands. “There we go! Look at that! Isn’t it great!”

Colin stared down in shock at the magazine, PENTHOUSE spelled in large, yellow letters across the top. His eyes slowly moved down the length of the cover, a woman’s head, her shoulders, her — he snapped his head up. His mouth had gone dry. Weston was looking at him with an amused expression on his face.

“What, you never seen a pair of tits before? Well, that’s nothing. Wait ‘til you see some of this other stuff.” He began to rifle through the pages, and Don just sat there, grinning his big, stupid grin.

“You stole that! You made me steal that!” Colin cried angrily, his shrill voice carrying.

Weston snarled back at him. “Yeah, so? You wanna go back in and squeal on us? You wanna go back in and say, ‘I stole this here titty mag, here you go, have it back, I’m sorry?’”

Colin licked his parched lips. “No.”

“Well, then you had better just sit the fuck down and enjoy. That is unless you’re some kind of faggot. Are you a faggot, huh?” Weston’s eyes glistened with feral glee.

“No.” Colin sank to his knees again, utterly miserable. He watched the pages turn, and felt vaguely sick.

“Well, what is this? Bunch of babies getting a free look. Haven’t even got their peckers out yet.”

The boys jerked their heads up. A young teenager, maybe thirteen or fourteen, but big for his age, was leering down at them. He snatched the magazine out of Weston’s hands.

“I’d better just take this with me. Least I know what to do with it.”

He stood ignoring the boys, while he flipped through the pages.

Weston sat still a moment, and then flew to his feet, his hands balled in fists, driving them upward as hard as he could into the older boy’s stomach. The teenager woofed softly and bent double, dry-heaving. Weston shoved him hard, and he fell on the concrete. Don leapt to his feet and kicked him viciously in the torso.

Weston got down on his knees and started screaming at the fallen boy’s face, as he writhed in pain and nausea. “Guess I showed you, you fucker, you god-damn shit suckin’ bastard!”

The teenager reached out suddenly, grabbed Weston by the hair, and slammed his face down onto the concrete. Don reeled back in shock and ducked
behind the dumpster. The teen pulled himself to his feet, dragging Weston up with him.

“You miserable piece of shit!” He hit him hard, pushing Weston back up against the dumpster and beating him with both hands in a flurry of expletives. Weston collapsed down to the pavement, trying to shield his head, and sat sobbing in a sad little pile.

“I oughtta make you eat this curb, you little fucker! You little fucker.” The older boy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stooped down to pick up the magazine. He laughed and threw it at Weston, the corner hitting him just underneath his left eye. The boy walked off, still laughing to himself.

Colin ran over to Weston. His face was beginning to discolor, and his mouth hung loosely. The gouge underneath his eye was bleeding in a single thin stream, as if he were weeping blood.

“Oh Weston, Weston, are you alright? Are you okay?” Colin cried out in near panic, trying to help him sit up.

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