Do a self-portrait…

That’s not something an insecure person wants to be told to do.

A representation of mind, body and soul while using your own profile…

These were the parameters I was given. How do I make a work of art that is visually pleasing, satisfy my teacher’s guidelines and hide my image as much as possible while still showing who I am?

The piece is called Metamorphosis. It documents the changes I’ve been going through in the past few years, the ones that show, the ones that don’t and the ones people think they see. The origami birds represent the things to be, dreams that are still just that. The birds taking flight are the dreams that are fulfilling themselves. The branches with the seed pods on it are my thoughts, ideas, and actions that will one day grow into something much bigger than they are now. The head and torso reflect my physical condition and the decline in my health, while the Rorschach reflects the hope and possibilities I reassure myself with at the beginning and end of each day to keep myself going.

My silhouette at the bottom of the composition leaves the work open for the viewer’s interpretation, be it an omen, a dream, or a spirit leaving a body, it further embraces the piece’s title.

-Courtney Torres
“Success is not the result of spontaneous combustion. You must set yourself on fire.”
--Reggie Leach

I have always been inspired by quotes. When I was a child, I would tear into my mother’s copy of Reader’s Digest looking for the “Quotable Quotes” page, certain that these quips of wisdom could help shape me into the person I wanted to be. I clipped my favorites and carried them around like a talisman. I tucked them into books and pegged them to my walls. I outgrew them and replaced them with others, and randomly forgot them, internalized them, discarded and defied them. I came across Mr. Leach’s quote several years ago, looking for information on spontaneous combustion to include in a story I was writing. Rather than providing the case-study reports I was hoping for, Google gave me my new talisman.

Inspiration does not always come in such neat little packages. The authors featured in these pages have found inspiration through church choirs, determined little girls, and their own desire to “set themselves on fire.” Some have reached far into the past to wonder, what if? They have looked at the problems in current culture and told stories through the words of the troubled. They have presented arguments for solutions to today’s ills. They have shown us beauty in places where we might have missed it, in the depressed towns and downtrodden among us. Wherever the authors and artists found their inspiration, they did not idly sit on their thoughts and contemplations; they reached for success by writing it down and sending it to us, and we are honored to now share it with you.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to serve as editor for this edition of The Chestatee Review.

Cheryl Mills
### Poetry

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“dark and empty at noon; upturned chairs embraced by dust supervise.”

~Nathan Benjamin

“Summer In Winterville”

It’s summer, the sign reads Winterville. Small houses and municipal buildings checker the green landscape, there’s no pawnshops or liquor stores in sight. It’s quiet aside from the occasional car. Some buildings have stood here for nearly one hundred years. “Train station” one building claims but there’s no tracks, no train. What is it now? A coffee shop lies dark and empty at noon; upturned chairs embraced by dust supervise.

Did the owner have any clue when they first pulled the chain on the Open sign?

At the edge of the town square is an old folks’ home. They have an Alzheimer’s ward where people are losing themselves, some already gone. No tracks, no trains, who are they now?

From the free standing brick bank built in 1910 to Mrs. Dowd at the home born in 1931, the insides are no longer made of original parts. To ease time’s constant grasp on Winterville, the outsides are given a loving coat of paint to keep the insides at bay. Time ignores resistance, it’s summertime in Winterville again.
The girl lying on the bed
Closes her eyes again
After waking up
In the middle of the night.
It wasn’t a nightmare.
It’s just the monsters
who promised
To look away
When she was sad,
But they look anyway.
The light from somewhere
slides against her foot,
but she shrugs it off.
She wears the look of a beloved.
Her face says, I’m yours,
But no one’s there.
She lies there like a little girl in time out, but
She knows she’s not little anymore.
She knows no one brought her here.
Not a man or an angel or a friend,
But a longing. A longing
Unimportant now
In this bedroom
On this bed.
She says two words,
Love me,
But her eyes
Are two shut doors.
She does not open her eyes
For a long time.

Keeping vigil in the midst of plenty.
This shape of man can only want, but never taste.
His red, white, and blue shirt blows in the wind,
not enough stuffing to fill it out.
His worn khakis are held in place by twine.
Under his watchful eye the flocks descend on the plenty.
Eat and eat and eat.
Fear only takes them when he pleads,
“Spare change?”
Then they take flight as fast as they can.

In a crowded park
On a red and white checked blanket
A couple is kissing
Hands in each other’s hair
Ignoring the fireworks above them
In favor of the ones between them.
They treated us like gods.
No, we were gods.
To them, anyways.

I remember that morning
when the horizon was unclouded.
The breeze was blatant in that silent coast.
Sand had never felt so solid.

They all seemed confused.
Scared.
They stared at us in awe,
celebrated our arrival, and bowed down to us.

We replaced their dreams with faith in a god
whose existence I now doubt
and took their belongings
because that god commanded them not to be greedy.

We were proud, envious, and unleashed the wrath of the crown
Against the “savages” who would not do as we said.
“Well, goddamn.”
That’s what I heard.
Not a yes sir, not a no ma’am.

Years pass by like so many sands
That slip through your fingers, slip through your hands.
“Well, goddamn.”

There wasn’t ever a plan,
Never a diagram to rule the land,
Not a yes sir, not a no ma’am.

I needed to be heard, needed a soapbox on which to stand,
Ignored as a child, banned as a man.
“Well, goddamn.”

And if only I knew how fires grew when fanned,
Then maybe I’d have known better, but never…
Not a yes sir, not a no ma’am

Life is fleeting, like words repeating,
And try as I might, I’ll never understand.
Not a yes sir, not a no ma’am.
“Well, goddamn.”

I feel the cage, the gilded cage
With windows colored bright,
It bounds me so
With heaven’s glow
Which shimmers through the night.

In darkest room, such candles lit
To warm and light the soul,
Yet my eyes it blinds
And shrouds the minds
Of its people as a whole.

In sightless rage, I thrashed about
And from gilded cage did break
To find the sun
And night undone
As my sleeping eyes did wake.

So free was I in clearest world,
A Shepherd’s sheep no more,
I left the cage
Reborn a Sage
And felt the wiser evermore.
Not Just a Woman
Emmy Dixon

I am the rain,
I am the thunder.
Imperfect design,
Plan torn asunder.
I am the moon,
I am the mother.
White wedding dress,
Black dove undercover.

I am your dream,
And I am tonight.
A psychotropic drug,
An unholy light.
I am the river,
And I am rebirth.
A sister of man,
A child of Earth.

To The Ears They Were Created For
Nicole Klink

Crisp, white pages, hand gliding upon the silk. Words only a warm heart can feel when read aloud. Yes, the words are perfect, but only to the ears they were created for.

The gray hair is tucked neatly now, and the crisp, white pages returned. A memory is spoken, gently now, so that the words can speak to the ears they were created for.

The lips read aloud, and the eyes move swiftly back and forth. The quiet after finishing is almost unbearable. The eyes meet to show their understanding.
We’re All a Little Nutty
Ryan Woods

My Own Bubble
Christopher Stowers
"Their ships weren't saucers or orbs of flashing light like we'd imagined. They looked terrestrial. Almost human."

~Jasun Pina, “Keep”
The following is a transcript taken from a reel-to-reel recording found at the R.G. Munn auction house in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Obtained the tape ninety days ago and efforts to authenticate the details of its contents are underway at this time. Has confirmed the possibility of a signal, potentially originating from that could have been intercepted sometime in The unspooled cassette was restored to a usable condition and cut together, but some parts of its transmission were lost due to extensive wear. Most of the recording, however, was well preserved. All latent sounds -- static, background noises, and dead spaces -- have been logged in the transcription to maintain the tape’s integrity.

I. 0730

[Man’s voice: older, deep, grated/Background: a heart monitor]

I checked the time. Harold the Happy Hatter smiled up at me from my old Ingersole watch face and pointed his fat little fingers to half-past seven. That’s when it happened. That’s when They came. It’s been almost forty years since then, but I remember it like it was yesterday. And I, uh…

[00:07 papers rustling]

Wait, am I doing this right? Is this thing on? Hello… Hello…

Okay, so it was early. I guess that’s about as good a place as any to start this thing. I’m just going to try and keep this simple. Tell it like it is. Or was. You get the idea.

[00:03 clears throat]

I was on my way to work. Now, something you have to understand about that day is that we didn’t know what was about to happen. To us, it was just another day -- a Wednesday. We didn’t know They were coming until They were here. And it all happened so fast, a lot faster than you’d think. It was like a backhanded magic trick. They weren’t there one second, and then bam! Just like that, They were floating over the city. Abracadabra! The trick’s on you. Or us. You know what I mean. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that They didn’t shoot through the sky in a fiery rain of meteorites or ride the lightning. They just appeared.

If you’d have asked me before They arrived what I believed the odds of an invasion were, I’d of told you they were about a trillion to one. Which is to say I thought it was total bullshit. Those lights in the sky were weather balloons or sewer gases. The videos being plastered all over the Internet were fakes. Close encounters were manufactured in Hollyweird, not played out in the streets of New York. Sure, there were nut jobs who’d made the news talking about crop circles, sightings, and abductions. But that was just the dregs of some mind-blown, addle-brained crackhead’s imagination. They were liars and addicts. Their stories were about as believable as Mother Goose Gables’. Or so I th…hou…ugh…ght…
Captions exhausted every possible headline: *Not Alone! Visitors! Arrival!* It got to the point where a guy couldn’t even check on the Yankees without there being something about aliens in the article. Sure, it was all fun and games for the hippies, but I hated being wrong.

I-I’m sorry. I’ll try to keep the hacking down. I know it’s distracting. I hate being old. My skin is paper and my body is on fire half the time. Sleep doesn’t even help anymore. No rest for the weary. Food lost its luster the day the tube was put in. The docs cut a hole in my gut and shoved that plastic hose down into my stomach. It was sore for two weeks. You get used to those kinds of things, though. The taste lingers. I never thought you could get indigestion from liquid food, but you can. And when that crap backs up into your gullet it’s damn near impossible to scrape the film off your tongue. The last time I tasted anything but polyurethane-laden spit-vomit was over six years ago: pot roast with scalloped potatoes and buttered bread. You’d think I would’ve been able to come up with something more imaginative for my last meal. But I liked pot roast. I liked scalloped potatoes. I’d kill to have one more rich, salty, sweet taste of fresh bread. Not that I could chew it. I can’t even get up to take a piss anymore. The catheter hurt for three days. You get used to those kinds of things, though.

Where was I? Oh, right.

Their ships weren’t saucers or orbs of flashing light like we’d imagined. They looked terrestrial. Almost human. Like *Made in China* should’ve been stamped on the ass-end of each rocket.

The Hattan UFO, which was almost as big as the entire city, hung in the air a half-mile above the tallest skyscrapers and sat motionless. The design of the ship was almost identical to the B-2 Spirit Stealth Bomber, which didn’t do much to still the shock its appearance caused. The exterior of the craft was a slick, solid black material. Hundreds of enormous engines hummed along its underbelly as flames shot toward the ground. I assume that’s what kept it hovering in place.

As for us, the schmucks scrambling down below, their arrival caused a lot of panic and confusion. Who wants a death-machine the size of Amityville floating above them? The whole city -- people stuck in traffic, kids out kicking rocks, and commuters in every mass transit vehicle you could imagine -- evacuated the streets. They hunkered down; they took shelter and hid; they tucked tail and headed for the hills. It was chaos in the streets and mayhem in the fiel…d…s…s.

O…Oh, and the stories people used to tell.

Everyone had stories about that day. And the ones about where they were when the ships materialized were often the funniest. He was on the subway. She was hung-over. The guy in 66D was screwing his brother’s girlfriend. Stories all.

Even I’ve got a story, which is why I’m doing this, I guess. It’s not the best of the bunch, but it’s the only one I’ve got. I’m not even sure if anyone will ever get to hear this.

My coffee was still hot and the toasted bagel in my hand had just melted the thick layer of cream cheese between its slices into a perfectly soft, velvet consistency. The Deli on 7th had the best bagels. And I’m not talking about that delicatessen next to the 7-Way Café. I think that one was called Deli-1. No, you had to go up the street a few more blocks toward the lakes to get the good stuff. I remember the skin of each bagel was crunchy and the meat was delicate. The char on each side was a golden-wheat color and the slice was perfect. But I’m getting distracted. Let me get back on track here.

It was cold and the wind blew bitter. Each breath I took made it
feel like my insides were icing over. Thankfully, it was only a ten-minute walk from the corner deli to my job. There I could sit in my office and enjoy my meal as the old radiator under the window rattled. Or so I thought. Having a giant aircraft suddenly appear in the sky ruined any chance I had of crunching into the bagel or sipping my steaming, black cup of joe. Both the drink and the doughy-O would instead wind up in a heap at my feet.

There are a few major responses to fear -- the three F’s – and, like animals, people generally do one of these three things when they’re afraid: they stand up and fight; they run like Hell, taking flight; or they freeze. Apparently, I freeze. And I don’t skimp on the amount of freezing I do. When I freeze, I stay frozen. While everybody else in the South Village screamed and took off, I clammed up and went stiff as a board. A stampede of people flew past me. Young couples held hands. Husbands shielded wives. Mothers dragged children. They shrieked. They cried. Some shouted accusatorially: —It’s the Russians! The Koreans! The Iranians! PETA!

I wanted to join in the charge, to make a mad dash for shelter, but I couldn’t move my body. My legs felt like overcooked linguini and my stomach was hovering somewhere around my ankles. I probably would’ve pissed myself, but, like I said, I never got to finish my breakfast so my bladder was empty.

I’m not exactly sure what happened next. From what I was told, I got flattened by a 1,000 lb. roach coach. I just remember standing stuck-still one moment and flying through the air the next. A loud, hollow thud boomed from where I stood, and I tried to throw my arms out to shield myself but I couldn’t react fast enough. It felt like I was floating through Jell-O. My landing was about as graceful as my takeoff. Luckily a steel trashcan was there to cushion my fall. When the left side of my face smashed into its rim, my head wheeled around to the right in a swift, violent jerk and the world went dark. My teeth ground together as I ricocheted off the can. There wasn’t much I remember after bouncing off the pavement. A warm stream of fluid trickled down my eye socket to my cheek, and I picked up the faint scent of blood.

II. 0936

I awoke in the ER at Mount Sinai.

A chubby, overly chipper man dashed to my bedside before I could get my eyes open wide enough to see more than his chunky cheeks.

“Hey there, buddy!” he yelled. My temples throbbed in a heavy thump, which resounded in my jaw as a painful bang, bang, bang.

I had to squint to try and get a glimpse of who was screaming at me. He was a goofy looking guy wearing red flannel jacket with matching gloves and a green hat. It was the kind of cap with earflaps that hung down around his face and had faux fur lining.

“The name’s Jonas! Jonas J. Miller. How ya doin’ there?”

“I, uh… Wait. What? Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital, good buddy.”

“Why am I in a hospital?” My voice was meek and strained.

“I ran you over with my hotdog cart. It was a total accident. I was runnin’ from those, well, those things.”

“What things?” I asked, trying to copy his tone.

“The aliens, man. You saw the aliens, right?” I thought I’d misheard him. The thick southern accent dripping from his every word made him hard to understand. He couldn’t have said aliens. “Everybody thought it was some kind of foreign attack at first, but them’re aliens. They came down in those spacedships. They’re all over the place, too. There’re UFOs just like the one here in the city all over the world.”

I looked around the room and tried to get my bearings. It was a small, grey observation cell with an old television mounted in the corner. The sheets were stark and the gauze wrapped around my forehead was far too tight. A dime store wall clock flashed the time: 9:36 a.m. I’d been out for more than two hours. Jonas scooped up the remote and tried to turn on the TV. The screen flashed and hummed, but there was no picture.

“Dang, They must’ve got to the TV stations, too.” I gazed at Jonas with a confused expression and he took a deep breath. “Okay now, everythin’s stopped workin’: radios, cell phones, land lines, not even my antennae works. It’s like They’ve gone and shut everythin’ down. Like They turned off the world.”

I scanned his face for any sign of deception or humor. He could’ve been drunk. Stoned maybe. Then it hit me like a kick in the nuts.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” I said, tossing the over-starched, cardboard linens off of me.

“Wait, uh, the nurses said you might have a concussion.”

I turned to look at Jonas. “A what?”

“A concussion, or concustered, or somethin’.”

“A concussion?”
“Yeah! That’s it!”

“Well concussion or not, I’m leaving.” I stood. My legs trembled, threatening to drop me. After two shaky steps, I felt a sudden, sharp sting in my arm. It was only then that I noticed the IV. Movies like to make a scene over people in hospitals ripping tubes from their veins. I wouldn’t advise it. Removing a needle from your own flesh should be done slowly and with finesse, which was not how I tore the hose out of my skin. It hurt. I bled. You get used to those kinds of things, though.

A cool breeze blew open my gown and chilled my naked rear a little more than I was comfortable with. “Where are my clothes?”

“Oh, yeah. They’re on that chair,” Jonas said, pointing to a small plastic seat positioned diagonally in the corner.

“Thanks, uh, could you wait outside while I get dressed?”

“Oh crap! Yeah man. Sorry, this must be kinda weird.”

“Yeah, kind of.” I threw my jeans and shirt on quickly and unwrapped my head. Using the tiny sink in the room, I washed my face and patted dry the stitches that followed my hairline. They were numb. “Great,” I said, surveying the gash. “That’ll leave a nice big scar. Chicks dig scars. Alice does…” My tongue suddenly felt like sandpaper in my mouth and an apple-sized lump grew in my throat. “Alice!”

Jonas nearly tackled me as I darted from the room. He’d obviously been waiting around. “Whoa!” he said. “Slow down there, man. You’ve got to take it easy.”

As frazzled as I was, seeing him was a relief. I needed a lift and fast. “Look, uh, Jonas, right?”

“Yes, Jonas J. Miller, like the beer not the actor.”

“The actor? Yeah, well, Jonas.”

“Call me Jo.”

Okay, Jo. I need to get out of here.”

The trip from the hospital to our apartment on 1st Street, which takes any sane person fifteen to twenty minutes to drive, was the scariest four minutes of my life. I’m surprised I didn’t wind up back in the hospital. Jo swerved his rusted Chevy POS 4x4 out of the parking lot and onto the street where he began dodging rows of abandon cars. For a city that claimed to never rest, New York looked like a ghost town. Not that I had much time to take in the sights before Jonas jumped the curb and stomped on the gas. Central Park, with its trees covered in a light dusting of snow, flew by in streaks of brown, green, and white. The park’s gold-leaved, copper statue of Lady Victory shot past the window like a bolt. After sliding onto East 59th Street at 30 miles an hour faster than he should’ve been driving, and almost drifting into the ten foot tall glass pyramid in front of the T-Einstein store, I began to pray the rosary. I hadn’t seen the inside of a church in almost ten years, and I was a bit rusty when it came to praying, but I gave it my all. With my eyes shut and my butt hole clenched to a waterproof seal, I repeated the words, “O Jesus, O Clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.” We flew through a red light. Hundreds of cars sat empty on Park Avenue, but Jo floored it.

“O Jesus, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!”

Jonas’ barely functional horn rang out as we slid onto 2nd Avenue.

“O Jesus, O sweet Virgin Mary!”

A lone homeless man barely ducked behind a box truck before Jo scraped along the side of it.

“Jesus! Sweet Mary!”

The Chevy hopped another sidewalk, demolished a newsstand, and finally stopped. Jo’s armrest had a permanent indentation of my hand stamped in it. He was lucky I hadn’t ripped it clean off the door.

“We’re here,” he said, pleased with himself. “24 East 1st Street. That’s what you said, right?” I was trying not to retch so an answer would have to wait. Silently thanking God was about all I was capable of. I’d never been so happy we’d moved to Hattan. The $3000 rent was worth every penny. If we’d of stayed in Midwood, I’d have been dead for sure.

“Th-Thanks for the ride.”

“Hey, no problem. I owed you for the bump on the noggin.” I took a moment to settle my nerves and glanced over at Jo. He was an odd looking guy. His skin was bright pink and he was heavyset. The more I thought about it then, the more I realized he actually looked kind of like a hotdog. He definitely smelled like one, which was the least appetizing odor I could’ve wanted trapped with me inside the truck cabin. I couldn’t tell you much more about him, though. I never saw the color of his hair. That ghastly hat of his covered his head. But he did have the deepest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. They glowed like LED lights stuck in his face.

“Who’re you here to see again?” he asked.

“Alice, she’s my fiancé.”

“Fiancée, huh? I had one of them a few years back. But then she became a vegatarian and I had to break it off. Can’t trust a woman who won’t swallow a foot long.” He laughed at his little joke while nudging me with his elbow. “Am I right?”
I smiled back.

The Chevy’s door was heavy and it flung open as I pulled on the handle and hopped out. Trembling, I tried to get my feet under me.

Jo, being the sensitive guy that he was, leaned over the bench seat and shouted, “Don’t go slippin’ into no cocoon now, you hear.”

“A what?” I took a second. “You mean a coma?”

“Yeah! That’s it.” I closed the door, thanked him again, and he sped off. Harold’s hands told me it was 9:42. It was time to find Ali.

The elevator ride was short and the music wasn’t half bad. I’ll never forget that tune. It always reminded me of the theme song to Welcome Back Porter. I fished around in my pockets and found my keys. I pulled them out as the doors opened, then stepped forward and slipped into blackness.

III. 1100

Officially, it was called the Unconscious Communal Event, or UCE (pronounced yüs). It became more commonly known as the Sleep. You might have heard of the phenomenon of shared dreams where two people have a similar dream at the same time: a husband and wife both dream about a vacation or twin sisters dream about being princesses together. This was kind of like that, only bigger. A lot bigger -- 9.7 billion people had the same dream at the same time. And it wasn’t similar; it wasn’t almost alike. These dreams were identical. Can you imagine? It probably sounds nuts, but hand to God it happened. And you’d think with every person in the world snoozing, it would be dangerous, right? But it’s not like there were airplanes flying around; the FAA grounded everything as soon as They arrived. Not that it would’ve mattered. Cars parked. Runners stopped running. Swimmers beached themselves. Every man, woman, and child stopped what they were doing, got to a safe location, laid their heads down, and slept. Not one accident was reported. Not one death.

[01:13 coughing/monitor erratic]

So-sorry, I-I just can’t seem to stop c-coughing. The Sleep w… wa…as…

[04:13 static]

…I…It was 11. In an hour, They would be gone forever.

I was the first one awake in our building. When my eyes popped open, I was laying in the doorway of the elevator. After rising to my elbows and struggling to shake the fog from my mind, I tried to gauge the situation. My head was spinning. I didn’t know why I’d collapsed. It could’ve been from my skull-crushing dive into the sidewalk earlier in the day, but I wasn’t sure.

Harold was mocking me. I was trying to focus. The last thing I remembered before keeling over was my desire to find Ali. So I staggered to my feet and moved down the hall. It felt good to see 58A’s plaque, even if I was seeing it through a kaleidoscope of door numbers.

The locks clicked and popped as I turned the various keys. The hinges squealed when the door swung open. Ali was asleep on the couch. I admit, seeing her made me laugh for the first time all day. I sat down beside her and gave her arm a shake. She slowly came to.

“Hey,” I said, cooing softly. Her eyes bulged and she shot upright.

“Whoa baby, it’s alright. It’s just me.”

“Christ, babe,” she said.

“It’s okay. You were just sleeping.” It took her a few moments to adjust, but she seemed to cope with the haziness better than I had.

She knit her brow and looked at me closely. “What happened to your face?”

I explained everything to her: the hotdog stand, my visit to the hospital, and my near death experience in Jonas’ truck. She laughed. A lot. I can’t say it didn’t damage my ego. I can’t say it didn’t hurt my feelings. You get used to those kinds of things, though.

I didn’t quite know how to start talking about the invasion with Ali. What was I supposed to say? I’ve never been great with words.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to say much.

“So what do you think we should do about the aliens?” Alice asked. She was bold and so matter-of-a-fact about the whole thing. I tried to come up with something inspirational to say. I failed. I think I said something like, “I-I, I mean, we—” Alice really responded to my conviction. She punched me in the arm. You get used to those kinds of things, though.

We talked about the Sleep and the dream we’d had. We compared...
notes and argued. We debated and rationalized. The truth was we had no idea what we were going to do. Ali kept rubbing her midsection with the palms of her hands. It was something I wasn't used to yet. It was the movement of a mother and not one of my lover.

The Sleep was one of those things you'd have to experience to understand, but the message behind the images, the meaning behind the visions, boiled down to a few main points: our world was dying; we'd killed it; and the only way to survive was to abandon the planet. That's why They were here. If you believed Them, then this wasn't an invasion. It was an evacuation. And the UFOs weren't bombers; they were life rafts. You're probably wondering what was in it for Them. What They wanted out of all of this. It's a good question. One I've never gotten an answer to. A...an... and...

[03:34 skipping]

C...Cen...ntral Park was packed with people as we walked up. It was standing room only for at least forty blocks. Those who'd chosen to trust the visitors and who wanted to depart our world in hopes of a better life elsewhere were walking towards the carousel in the middle of the park. It was one of the thousands of evacuation sites shown to us during the Sleep. Everyone else stood around the edge of the park gazing up at the electric blue skies. There was a column of light extending from the ship to the ground and when a person stepped into it they vanished. I remember thinking it looked like something straight out of a Sci-Fi show like Battlestar Gate or Space Trex. Beam me up, Robbie.

They'd said noon. That's when They said They would leave. At first, I wondered if They meant eastern standard time. But then somehow I knew it didn't matter where you were. We were all on the same time. No one would miss their launch.

Harold's second hand was ticking away furiously: less than a minute till liftoff. With moments left, the Hattan crowd suddenly erupted. It was like everyone in the six boroughs had the same idea at the same time, and the mob broke out into the loudest countdown I've ever heard. Five! Everyone yelled. Four! Three! Two! One! And They were gone, disappearing as fast as They'd come.

IV. Noon

Four hours and thirty minutes exactly. That was my close encounter. You might think it was anticlimactic. The aliens weren't hostile. There was no fighting; there were no wars.

They had come to offer us a choice: choose to stay or choose to go. Nothing more. Nothing less. And, honestly, that was the best possible outcome for us. Once we'd lost our ability to communicate, we were helpless. If They'd wanted to take over the planet, They easily could have. We were sitting ducks.

[00:13 coughing]

You might ask me why we didn't leave, why Ali and I chose to stay. It's another good question. It might seem like we jumped the gun a bit. Like we didn't give it much thought before we made a decision. But let me ask you: Would you go?

What if They told you the only way They would take you to the new world was if you were willing to completely abandon your life? What if you had to give up everything? And I mean e-v-e-r-y-thing: running water, electricity, clothes, medicine. Would you go then? Could you? What if you were going to have a baby? Would you risk your child's life to start over on an unfamiliar world? More importantly, would you have the confidence in an alien species you'd never seen before to safely take you and your family across the universe in some kind of galactic Noah's Arc?

If you said no, then you're in the majority. When given the choice, most people stayed. Only about 90,000 left.

[00:57 coughing—violent]

It's those 90,000 people I'm doing this for, though; they're why I'm on this old radio broadcasting my story out into the universe. I had to bribe the orderly to sneak this antique in here. It's the only bit of fun I've had in a long time. I'd almost forgotten fun.

[00:13 cough]

Anyway, if what They said was true, then one day those who left would wind up just like us. It sounds far-fetched, I know. But if you're listening to this, then maybe They weren't far off the mark. If you think about it, I'm sure you've had déjà vu so real it scared you. Or you said
something and you could swear you were the first person to ever say it. Or you had an idea, then you saw it on a TV show or someone used your concept in a book. It’s like that. The details. We can see ourselves, all of our past lives and lost worlds, in the details. And it’s usually the smallest things we notice the most: people, places, things, pop culture.

Now, I don’t know if I believe all of it. I don’t know if on that small, blue dot where they took you that you’ll keep the planets’ names the same. Or the countries. Or the cities. I can’t be certain you’ll always call that rock you’re on Earth, like we did. I don’t know if you’ll ever have a ball club as good as the Yankees. I don’t know a lot of things.

I do know this transmission will probably bounce around for a long time. Who knows, it may never even get heard.

[00:32 coughing—violent]

I regret not going sometimes. When things get hard, I always think back to the day They came. That was the day I realized life isn’t about what you take with you; it’s about what you keep.

For me, it’s my family: Ali and Connor. I keep them with me always. You might wonder about them, about my little family. You might want me to tell you a tale or two about our lives. But if I told you about Alice and our son -- if I talked about them the way I would have to in order to tell you our story -- then I would have to let them go, and I can’t do that. So you’ll just have to settle for this story. It’s not the best of the bunch, but it’s the only one I’ve got.

I’m getting tired now. I’m almost out of time and my chest hurts. You get used to those kinds of things, though. I just hope there’s somebody out there who’s paying attention.

[00:40 cough—violent/vomiting]

It’s all ending, you know, just the way They said it would. The end was near...

[01:34 cough—violent]

D-don’t be like us. Break the cycle. Be better. And if alien ships appear in your skies one day and they offer to rescue you, give Them the benefit of the doubt. I think if someone had sent us a signal like this one, we could’ve made different choices. We could’ve changed our fates. We could’ve tried. Hoped. Dreamed. Worked. Strove. And maybe, just maybe, we could’ve kept ourselves alive. We could’ve salvaged that small, red dot in your sky. We could have saved life on Mars…

[01:34 labored breathing, groaning]

[32:01 monitor steady -- flat line]

[End]
“Where the hell is he?” Glen wondered. He scanned the terrain looking for any movement. It was just the two of them left. Glen had combed every inch of the shack before he went for the exit. He crouched as he moved into the alley for fear that the bastard would take his head off. The seconds were ticking by and Glen’s heart was racing. With each step the tension grew more and more unbearable. He slowly stepped over the bodies that lined the narrow street. Glen had taken out nearly half of them on his own; his target had claimed the majority.

“Stop hiding wherever you are and fight like a man!” Glen yelled, but before he could inhale he heard a succession of shots ring out from behind.

Glen stared at the screen in disbelief and threw his controller against the wall. It clung to the freshly made hole and then fell to the hardwood floor. Fear seized Glen as he realized what he had done; he had to see if he had broken his controller, but it was now in the no man’s land across the room. He hadn’t seen that side of the room for himself in over a year and a half.

“Mother!” he cried out. “I need you to grab my controller!”
He waited to hear a response or movement. He geared up to yell again but relented as he heard her heavy footsteps creak in the hallway.

“What do you need Glenny?” Mother asked.

“I got mad at a guy who was cheating at this game online, and I threw my controller across the room.”
She began to look about, moving stray pizza boxes and bags of soda cans. “Was it over here?”

“No, it’s over to the left,” he remarked impatiently.

His mother finally found the controller among the boxes and walked toward her boy. She inspected it as she walked, having no idea what to look for. Glen reached out his heavy arm and snatched the controller out of her hand. There was no external damage, which was a good sign. He gave it a light shake. It rattled. He tried to control his Xbox, but it did nothing. He shook it again a little harder to see if the loose wires could reconnect. Nothing.

“Is it broken?” Mother asked.

“Yes, it’s broken mother!” He held the controller out towards her and mashed the buttons under his meaty fingers. “See?”

After a quiet moment when Glen had calmed down she ventured, “I could go down to GamezLand tomorrow and see if they could fix it.”

Glen was incensed by her ignorance. Even though he hadn’t set foot in the store himself in nearly two years, he knew that GamezLand didn’t repair equipment.

“They don’t do that, Mother. GamezLand just sells and trades,” he said sharply, as if it were obvious.

“I just thought that they could at least take a look and--”

“They don’t do repairs, Mother. What did I just say?”

“I’m sorry, Glenny. I just thought that they could help,” she said.

She was looking at the floor now. Glen had gone too far and he knew it, and by doing so he realized that he had nearly ruined his chances of getting a replacement controller tonight.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I was still really upset about losing that game to that guy who cheated. I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” he said, while displaying the penitent face that he had been honing for seventeen years.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around his head, as there was no neck to hug.

“You need to be nice to your dear old mother. No one loves you like I love you; you know that right?”

“Yes,” he responded, muffled by her fluffy arms.

“You’re my Earth Angel, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied, freeing himself.

“One in Heaven, one on Earth,” she said wistfully.

Glen never knew how to respond when she said that. He knew that she was referring to his father; Glen had no memory of him. He felt she always dropped the phrase on him to elicit a response that he was incapable of giving.

His mother was almost out of his bedroom when he asked, “Do you think you could pick me up another controller?”

“Yes,” he responded, muffled by her fluffy arms.

“You’re my Earth Angel, right?” she asked.

“Yep,” he replied, freeing himself.

“Sure hon. I’ll grab it tomorrow. First thing,” she said, as she leaned back into the room.

Glen knew he had to play this just right.

“Well, Glenny, it’s a mess out there, and GamezLand isn’t open this late,” she said.

Glen looked over at the window, something he didn’t do very often, and under the small slit in his window shade he could see drops of
As the hours passed, “She’ll be home any minute,” became harder and harder to believe. Glen repeated the same nervous routine over and over again. Call, watch, laugh, check, repeat. After a number of rotations of the cycle, Glen realized two needs that he had forgotten while worrying: he was hungry, and his piss bucket was almost full. He realized the first by looking at his alarm clock to see the time and the fact that he had missed his evening “snack” jumped to the front of his mind. It was typically around 9:00 when his mother would bring him chicken or ice cream. Even though he had dinner prior to sending his mother on the errand, he found himself ravishingly hungry. The idea of getting up to get some food crossed his mind and was quickly dismissed. Glen had not left this bed in almost two years. Though he brushed aside the possibility of getting up, he realized with some degree of shock how long he had been in this bed. The last time he had been out of it was when he had left the clinic.

“I promised,” he sighed to no one.

He had gone to the Marcos Weaver Clinic to get some control of his weight; the doctors had told him that he would need to lose at least five hundred pounds before gastric bypass was even an option. Glen remembered his first day there. Walking down the hall, he had felt an overwhelming sense of normality. The doctors and nurses didn’t stare and everybody else was either a patient or a family member of a patient. It hadn’t been like school or GamezLand; he hadn’t felt that happy in a long time. Glen’s nostalgia for that day quickly faded as he remembered the following weeks of tears and calls begging to come home. It had been harder than he anticipated, and the nice doctors and nurses turned from friendly to downright condescending. Memories of Chet, his personal trainer, dominated Glen’s mind.

“He always had that stupid, smug grin when he would knock on my door frame, ‘Are we ready to stop the pity party and give it 110% today?’” Glen said this in his best impression of Chet’s voice. He continued this dialogue with this ghost of fitness past. “What the hell, Chet?” The name leaped venomously from his lips. “I tried the best I could and you were always giving me crap about it. Let’s not forget that I was the one who had to carry around this body every day. But oh, I remember you had been like me once.” Tears filled Glen’s eyes. “You told me that on my first day when you showed me that picture of you from high school. Bullshit, I outweighed the ‘you’ in that picture by at least 250 pounds and to think--” Glen was pissed but he didn’t want to think about it anymore. Any of it: the clinic, Chet, the broken promise, the day that he finally wore...
his mother down and she took him home, the second broken promise of losing the weight at home now that he had learned some good techniques.

Glen took his TV remote in his hand and furiously changed the channels, looking for anything to distract him from the pain and hunger that he was feeling. He suppressed sobs almost in time with the flashing of the screen. He settled on some late night cartoon as the thunder crashed. The lighting struck close, and while the sound of the thunder was still reverberating in the room all the lights flickered and then went out.

Glen sat stunned in the darkness, holding the remote in the dark room. He mashed the buttons on the remote, hoping the TV would turn back on. It would not, so he sat alone in the darkness. Although Glen could not see his hand before his face, with his distractions gone he could see himself better than he had in a long time.

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In the mass grave of scholarly rhetoric lies the untold execution of thousands of intimate details. Lost to the reveling of heroes or the disdain of tyrants are details that reach beyond the menagerie of popular opinion or hard evidence. Hidden among the ruins of the American Civil War one will find the heart and soul of the common man and woman. When looking past the crack of a master’s whip or the fire breathing rants of secessionist senators, a history can be found, a crown jewel called the human experience. These are the experiences that take the tragedy of the Civil War and fashion an internal war of civility. It is the soul searching for an answer that is intangible to the very cusp of life and death. Such is the story of four well-read, enlightened boys from the Chattahoochee farming communities of greater Atlanta. Henry, Thomas, Richard and Robert Bellah are sons of an Emory educated Methodist clergyman. These four brothers face the inevitabilities of war both within and without. If the souls of these boys, as well as the many who perished amid this great scourge, could speak beyond the grave, this great war may then be seen as more a war of persons and less a war of vast social and political consequence. Instead of the great memoir of a General or President, what if there was a letter penned by the common soul of the tumult?

My dear brother Robert,

I know it has been many months since our last correspondence and for that I beg your forgiveness. The campaign has grown with the fury of hellfire and it seems time itself has lost touch with the earth. I have now only taken the time to write because of the letter I received from Ma last week. She is terribly sorrowful over the loss of Henry, as she had only recently mended from the death of our brother Thomas at Bull Run. Ma says you have inquired among our neighbors of the whereabouts of Phillip and made inclination toward enlistment. I must tell you this is most grievous news to me. I understand the desire to take up arms for the cause as I did after Thomas died, but many things have changed while I labored under Col. Phillip’s Legion. I joined, of course, to be with Henry; he was always the strong arm of us, the anchor so to speak. I found him to be quite foolhardy, as he was brave. I had to hold the man down once while surgeons pulled a ball from his shoulder. Then at Chancellorsville he got a bit of cheek torn from grape shot, I think; nevertheless he made it through without the fever. It was at Chancellorsville where command began pulling boys out of picket duty to pull skirmishing and sharpshooting walks, way.

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seemed like the shooting stopped while I ran wildly in the direction of his and Henry was gone. Just gone, like he was only a dream to begin with. It went out and I felt I could not hear for a good minute. I looked to my right I thought that God himself struck us with lightning, because my knees became more and more inhumane as it progressed. This time we were seeing the poor fellow’s face in the glass before pulling the trigger. Many times we placed our shots in the quiet, when the fire of batteries weren’t around to cover the sound of our reports. Now every time I execute my duty I know I am breaking the heart of some young miss or causing some boy to go home to his mama like a lifeless piece of freight. You know, we were not really sure, most of us, why we joined up. I hear it was the doing of all those senators with the big farms, trying to keep their slaves and what not. I never knew a Negro slave and had no offense toward any. I just figured we would fight so we would have a place to come home to when it was over. Now many wonder if it will end with any of us alive to see it. I pray every day I wake up that God would just forgive us. All of us, both yanks and grey backs. Just let us go home. That is all I wanted for me and Henry. I reckon no one really told you and Ma what happened, how Henry died. Those casualty reports seem to me just names and numbers, not really talking about the boys who lie here in the mud, forgotten while scavengers pick at their bones. You must know, Robert, how much Henry was there for us. Not just tending crops and running the house while Pa was on circuit preaching. He was there for us always, even here in the war. He never lost hope, even when sipping water like a feral dog from wheel cuts in the road or pitching camp on a barren stomach. He kept me believing that we would walk barefoot in the cold Chattahoochee again. That we would see Pa preach on Sundays and that our grandchildren would one day talk about the war like a fable that never really happened. I never believed that my big brother would be taken from my very sight like some sleight of hand. We were spread out with the other shooters in the dugouts and Henry was near fifty feet to my right at Cedar Creek. We were heavily engaged and the Union battery found our shooting position. Henry and four others from the third shooters got a square hit from a percussion ball. I thought that God himself struck us with lightning, because my knees went out and I felt I could not hear for a good minute. I looked to my right and Henry was gone. Just gone, like he was only a dream to begin with. It seemed like the shooting stopped while I ran wildly in the direction of his dugout spot. Then I noticed him about thirty or so steps behind where I stood and I scrambled to him as fast as I could blink. I grabbed his coat, sticky and hot with blood and my hands stuck to it like it was tree sap. I shook him in a panic and he breathed out a little; he had blood pouring out from his collar and ears, and his hair was soaked black from the mess. I wept so fiercely and never in my life had I hurt so. My tears pooled up on his dark, bloody coat. He kept saying ‘Richard, Richard,’ over and over. I leaned down to tell him that we would go home soon. He just smiled at me, like no war had gone on and nothing in the world could hurt him. My ears were still ringing but I could hear Henry say again ‘Richard… I ain’t the first one home.’ His eyes stopped looking at me and simply stared through me. Henry was gone. Gone from all this mess. I just wanted to be gone too. Death does not seem so fearsome to me anymore. Any judgment from God would be a pleasant mercy after all of this, Robert, every day I keep walking these long roads and keep on with my detail, continuing one march to the next. I pray every day that God will forgive us all and just let us go home. I roll my bed out every night and sometimes drift from one dream to another, looking at the purple current of clouds floating like a river over the stars. The trees around me in the dark are like ghosts standing guard. Remembering. Seeing all that we do and have done. I know there isn’t much I can do to turn you aside from this, but please know the answer to one simple thing… how will we then meet death? Just know that dying is not as scary as we once thought. Know that it is like being birthed into something we simply don’t understand, but should not fear. It is now a friend to me and many other boys in this war. It will break many hearts for generations to come but we must not be afraid. Death is that stranger on the highway that simply passes us by when our time comes. Death is just the close of our story here. Robert, I will end this letter with one thought… please don’t be too zealous to pass that stranger on the highway. I don’t need your company and I sure know that Thomas and Henry don’t need it either. I will try with earnest to walk the roads that lead me back to the Chattahoochee. We will break ground together again one day Robert, and talk about things less sorrowful. The air will no longer reek of burning flesh and animal waste and I will finally wash the powder burns from my hands. I will cast off my pack and place my Whitworth on whatever alter I can find. My sins will finally be forgiven. God bless you all your days Robert. Just stay there at home and I will see you soon enough.

Your always faithful brother,

Richard
On April 6th, 1865, Confederate sharpshooter Richard Watson Bellab was captured by Union forces at the Battle of Sailor’s Creek. Richard was taken as a prisoner of war to Point Look Out Prison in Maryland, accompanied by his newly enlisted, seventeen-year-old brother Robert Pollock Bellab. Richard and Robert were both released three months following the surrender of Lee at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia and returned safely home together. Richard Bellab lived to be ninety-two years old and plowed his own fields to the last day of his life on this earth, drifting soundly to sleep only to be born once more.

“I’m not allowed to tell you who I am.”

~Tiffany Bennett, “The Happy Hostel”
Characters:

ANNA: a somewhat shy and unsure teenage girl who loves her boyfriend and desperately wants to fit in, but is often torn between her own morals and those of her peers.
ART: Anna’s boyfriend - a confident musician who is handsome, popular, and unafraid to speak his mind.
MIKE: Art’s best friend, the jock and class clown who often finds himself in trouble.
RYAN: Art’s girl-crazy friend, one of Mike’s followers.
AMY: Anna’s best friend, outgoing, flirty, free spirited.
SARAH: Anna’s friend, outspoken, very conservative, and judgmental.

Setting: A Senior Prom

Characters off stage, a circular front table down stage, and a punch bowl sitting on a rectangle-shaped table up stage. ART and ANNA enter doorway upstage, walk on stage looking around the room nervously.

ANNA: Oh no! No one is here yet…let’s go wait in the car! (grabs ART’s hand, trying to yank him back to the door)
ART: (pulls hand out of her grasp) Why?
ANNA: (grabs his hand again) Because! We look like absolute dorks, that’s why!
ART: (pulls hand away again) Anna…my name is Art…How much dorkier can I get? (He laughs) Besides…I need to talk to you.
ANNA: (frowns and looks in the other direction)
ART: It’s about tonight….

MIKE and AMY walk on stage arm in arm while RYAN and SARAH follow. RYAN tries to grab SARAH’s hand but she pulls away and smacks his arm with a smug look on her face.

MIKE: (playfully punches ART’s arm) Dude! There’s like nobody here…we look like total dorks. (laughs)

ANNA: (glares at ART and turns to talk to her friends while the guys are making jokes and shoving each other around. Light on girls.) You look gorgeous, Amy.
AMY: (fluffs her hair) Thanks, doll. You don’t look so bad yourself. (She turns to SARAH) Though you look like you belong in a nunnery. (She laughs and SARAH throws her hands on her hips and glares at her. She turns back to ANNA.) So…any word on the festivities to follow this overrated high school milestone…such as another kind of milestone? (She giggles and ANNA slouches)
ANNA: I don’t want to talk about it.
SARAH: (looking at AMY) She shouldn’t do it if she isn’t ready yet.
AMY: Maybe she’s just nervous but really wants to. Ever think of that, prude?
SARAH: Hey, being a prude is better than being a slut!
AMY: (gasps) Take that back. You didn’t mean it!
SARAH: Oh yes I did. (light fades on the girls as AMY and SARAH shove each other around and argue. Light up on guys.)

ART: (waves off stage) Oh, hi Jasmine! Good to see ya! (boys nudge each other as they are checking out girls walking in)
RYAN: Man, I could really go for some of that!
MIKE: Yeah, like you have the swag to pull that off!
ART: Oh, burn. (laughs)
RYAN: I have swag, loads of it. (ART and MIKE laugh. RYAN waves to girls passing by) Hey there cutie.

ART and MIKE point at someone off stage and begin laughing and nudging each other as RYAN notices who they’re looking at and he looks disgusted.

ART: Wow. That is…I have no words.
MIKE: A stuffed sausage in a dress?
RYAN: Those are some busted biscuits.
ART: Speaking of biscuits…I’m dyin here, dude. Anna is gonna kill me. I can barely think straight these days. I think I’m getting…what’s it called…blue…”

(Voice heard offstage): Balls, balls! Come get your popcorn balls!
MIKE: Dude, that sucks. Have you tried the whole romancing thing?
RYAN: Yeah, you need to get her like flowers and stuff.
MIKE: And tell her you love her a lot.
RYAN: Yeah, yeah, like fifty times a day. And watch those chick flicks with her, try to cry and stuff. It works every time.
MIKE: Like you’d know.
RYAN: Hellz yeah, I do. I’ve had stupid luck with the ladies. (He waves again off stage)

Lights fade on guys and come up on girls in the restroom. Amy is fixing her makeup in the mirror downstage and Sarah is washing her hands in the sink. Sounds of bathroom noises from offstage.

AMY: Did you see Jessica? Oh my God.
SARAH: I thought she looked pretty.
AMY: Compared to what? Willem Defoe? (They all laugh)
ANNA: (sits on a bench in the bathroom watching SARAH and AMY fixing their makeup in the mirror) Amy…does….does it hurt?
AMY: (pauses and looks straight ahead in the mirror) It burns a little, kinda like a bee sting on your crotch.

SARAH: She wasn’t asking you what it feels like to contract an STD.
AMY: Shut it, Sarah.
ANNA: But then what? It feels good, right?
AMY: Would there be so many teen Moms if it didn’t?
SARAH: Ugh. Do you even want to, Anna? Or are you just trying to keep Art?
ANNA: Well, I’d like to think that Art wouldn’t dump me. That would certainly put a damper on graduation.
AMY: If he dumped you for that, then he’s a jerk and you don’t want him anyway.
SARAH: Wow, who knew you contained such wisdom?
AMY: I really am going to jam this eyeliner up your nose if you keep it up.
SARAH: I happen to have a second-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do.
AMY: Oh yeah? Well, I hope they taught you how to pull a compact out of your--
ANNA: Will you two please stop? I have less than an hour to decide whether or not I’m going to lose my virginity tonight! This is kind of a big deal!

AMY and SARAH walk over towards ANNA and sit down on the bench next to her. ANNA begins wiping tears off of her cheek and tries to keep herself together.

ANNA: You know, before everyone started to do it, Art was different. Now this is all he focuses on and I…I don’t know. I just don’t know if I’m ready. I mean, what if my Dad found out. He’d kill him. He would drag Art through an abandoned field, shoot him in the head, bury the body, and then Art would be dead, my Dad would be arrested, and I’d end up without a boyfriend and fatherless.
AMY: Well, that’s a little dramatic.
SARAH: Not really. Have you met her Dad?
AMY: Anna, Art is always harping on you about standing up for yourself. Don’t you think he’d back off if you told him how you really feel? I bet you haven’t even said a word, have you?
ANNA: Well, no. I just don’t want to lose him. I mean, you saw Jasmine. And you know how she gets around.
AMY: Screw Jasmine.
SARAH: She really is quite distasteful.

AMY and ANNA cut SARAH a look and giggle. Light fades and comes up on guys.

MIKE: This party is kinda lame. What do you say (he pulls a small flask from behind his back) we spike the punch?
ART: I’d say Mrs. Frazier will be having a good time, with as much as she’s pounded down already.
RYAN: You kept that flask in your back pocket all this time? Isn’t that uncomfortable? (ART and MIKE ignore him)
MIKE: Let’s do this.

Boys sneak around stage whispering and giggling as they quickly pour some alcohol into the punch. They then stand to the side and observe as they laugh and point at the people pouring glasses.

RYAN: Oh, Jasmine is gettin’ some! She’ll be givin even more goodness
away now!

ART: Goodness meaning herpes.
MIKE: Yeah, you better go on over there; you might actually have a shot now. (RYAN punches his arm)

The girls walk out of the bathroom. ANNA gasps as she sees ART looking over at Jasmine.

ANNA: I knew it! You’re just out for one thing.
ART: What are you talking about?
ANNA: I see you checking her out.
ART: What the balls? I didn’t do anything.
ANNA: Oh yeah, reference your balls. It’s always about your balls.
MIKE: Well, that’s where our brains are you know. (He snickers and ART punches his arm)
ART: Really, Anna? What’s your problem? You’re acting like a psycho.
AMY: Oh, don’t you dare go there, douche! (points to SARAH) She has a second-degree black belt!

ART shrugs with his hands in the air, looking confused as MIKE starts laughing and RYAN is over at the punch bowl chatting with Jasmine. AMY and SARAH jump to the side at the same time, looking offstage annoyed.

AMY: Is Mrs. Frazier (pause) drunk?

ART and MIKE laugh but ANNA still has her hands on her hips glaring at ART.

AMY: Oh my god, did you guys spike the punch? That is totally rad.

SARAH shakes her head at the boys while ANNA gently slaps AMY on the arm whispering.

ANNA: Hey, pick a side.
AMY: Oh, right. Sorry. Can we hash it out sitting down? These heels are killing me.

RYAN waves goodbye to Jasmine and joins the group as they all sit down at the round table front stage.

AMY: (leans towards ANNA) Are you going to Rachel’s party next Friday? I heard it’s gonna be awesome. More beer than we could possibly drink.
ANNA: I don’t know.
ART: You were thinking about going to a party without me?
MIKE: What are you worried about, man? If she’s not givin it to you, she won’t be givin it to anyone else. (He laughs while ANNA smacks ART’s shoulder and ART shrugs his arm. MIKE leans over, looking at ANNA) Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it. You know, just sayin he has nothing to worry about, that’s all.
RYAN: She could always get so plastered that she loses all her inhibitions though.
AMY: Thanks for that, Ryan. That’s really helpful, Dingle.
SARAH: Alcohol poisons your mind.

The whole group sighs.

MIKE: Thank you, sister Sarah.
AMY: Oh, what would we do without your moral obligations?
MIKE: Feel no remorse. It’d be quite nice, actually.

SARAH folds her arms.

SARAH: Just because I’m around a bunch of heathens, doesn’t mean I need to lower myself to your worldly standards.
MIKE: (laughs) So why hang out with us then? Why not (he points) hang out with the nerdy Asians who do trig instead of pot on the weekends?
AMY: Being a goody goody doesn’t necessarily mean she’s good at math, Mike.

The group laughs and SARAH glares at AMY.

SARAH: I happen to be very good at math, Amy. I don’t spend class time propositioning the football team. I actually pay attention.

MIKE laughs. AMY slaps his arm. RYAN stands up and walks to the
punch bowl. He waits in line behind Mrs. Frazier and starts air humping close to her as the group laughs.

SARAH: He is so disgusting.

(Voice from backstage): Be sure to stick around. Five more minutes until we crown the King and Queen of Riverside High!

AMY: (clapping) Oh, I can’t wait! I hope Jasmine loses this year!
SARAH: May the best hooker win.

AMY reaches over the table to shove SARAH but MIKE pulls her back.

MIKE: You’re only a hooker if you get paid to sleep with people, Sarah.

AMY pouts, folding her arms.

ANNA: (turning to AMY) Speaking of that, let’s go to the bathroom.
ART: Didn’t you just go to the bathroom?
RYAN: Psh, girls.
MIKE: Yeah, go on, Amy. Go powder your face and talk about how stinky and immature we are.
AMY: I don’t use powder, Michael.
MIKE: Then what is that stinky crap that gets all over my shirts all the time?
AMY: It’s called foundation.
RYAN: (Leans over towards SARAH and in a flirty voice says) I’m learning so much.
SARAH: (Stands up abruptly and leans towards AMY) I’ll join you in the restroom.

AMY, ANNA, and SARAH walk to the restroom and the light fades on the guys. Girls fix their hair and apply make up in the mirror.

ANNA: So, what all do I need to make this happen?
AMY: (laughs) What do you mean? You guys have the right parts. Kind of works like puzzle pieces, you know?
ANNA: (nervous laugh) No, I mean, like, if it hurts and stuff. Isn’t there something you use? And I’m not on birth control yet, so obviously I need something. Do I just walk into a store to get that stuff?
SARAH: I personally think Art should be the one to buy his own items to keep from impregnating you. Any gentleman would.
AMY: (sighs and reaches in her purse pulling out a bottle and small wrapped item) Here’s some KY jelly and a condom, okay? It isn’t rocket science.
SARAH: You keep KY jelly in your purse? You’re a bigger slut than I thought!
AMY: Shut UP, Sarah! I’ve had enough of your criticism for one day. I’m sorry we can’t all be as perfect as you are.

(SARAH sits down on the bench looking forlorn.)

SARAH: I’m not perfect, unfortunately.
AMY: Um, yeah, you pretty much are. You never do anything wrong.
SARAH: That’s not true. I’ve….I’ve had sexual intercourse before.

AMY and ANNA gasp.

ANNA: What?? When?
AMY: (laughing) No way! This isn’t even remotely believable.
SARAH: It’s true. Two years ago.
ANNA: With that church boy? What was his name, Brian?
SARAH: Yep.
AMY: (walks quickly to the bench and sits next to SARAH) Oh, I’ve gotta hear this!
SARAH: (looking at ANNA) I’ve never regretted anything more.
AMY: (sighs, leans back and folds arms) Ugh. Maybe not.
SARAH: He dumped me the next day, said I was leading him astray from God or something.
AMY: (laughs) Was he gay?
SARAH: (snapping at AMY) No, he was not a homosexual.
AMY: Well, was he good in the sack or not?
SARAH: Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said, Amy? It was a mistake.
AMY: (looking at ANNA) That pretty much answers it.

ANNA looks down at the items in her hand.
ANNA: Um, this condom… it says ‘magnum.’ Isn’t that for overly, well, what if Art isn’t, you know, will it still work?

AMY: (laughs) Do you even know anything about his nether regions?

ANNA: Well, I’ve seen him a couple of times, but I don’t have anything to compare it to.

AMY: (sighing and digging in her purse again) That’s kind of tragic. Here, this is a regular just in case. Use whatever fits best. Oh, and that one is flavored.

SARAH: Good gracious, Amy.

AMY: What? You want the girl to be prepared, don’t you? Wouldn’t want to add to the teen pregnancy statistics, not that getting something like crabs would be any more fun than popping out 8lbs of larvae.

ANNA: What exactly is crabs?

AMY: I’m not really sure; something nasty. Despite what Miss Priss seems to think, I’ve never had any STDs. Jasmine on the other hand… (laughs) Oh never mind. That’s just cruel.

Loud knock on the bathroom door.

ART: Everything okay in there, ladies? They’re about to announce the Prom royalty.

AMY: Oh, let’s go!

ANNA: Wait! I had--

AMY: Later, later! C’mon! (grabs ANNA’s hand and drags her out of the bathroom with SARAH following behind them.)

AMY stands looking nervous, rubbing her hands together waiting to hear the announcement as the rest of the group sits down at the table looking uninterested.

ART: (leaning over toward ANNA) Are you having a good time, babe?

ANNA: (twiddling her thumbs) Yeah, sure.

ART: What’s wrong?

ANNA: You know what’s wrong.

ART: No, I really don’t.

ANNA: Don’t play dumb, Art.

ART: (laughs) I’m not. Would it seriously serve any purpose for me to play… (he pauses, noticing a pretty girl walking by and checks her out to the annoyance of ANNA, who sighs loudly.)

ANNA: You know what? My Dad was right; boys are pigs. (she stands up and slams her chair into the table as she walks off stage and SARAH runs after her)

ART: (turns towards MIKE shrugging) What did I do? She’s being an overly emotional freak tonight, dude. I didn’t even say anything.

RYAN: Yeah, but you gave that hot chick a come-hither look, man. Girlfriends don’t like that kind of insensitivity, dude. (laughs)

MIKE: Shockingly, he’s right, bro. You need to write Anna a song or something, get all mushy and she’ll give it up.

ART: It’s not just about that, Mike, alright? It’s… she… I don’t know… she’s different. Not as fun anymore. She’s just pissy and mean all of the time.

RYAN: Is she on her period or something?

(Pause as ART and MIKE shake their heads at RYAN)

MIKE: Why don’t you just tell her that then? You guys have like the worst communication ever. (laughs)

ART: Like you know anything about communicating.

MIKE: Amy and I get along just fine most of the time.

ART: That’s because you’re not even in a friggin’ relationship, she’s just the girl you… it’s different.

(Voice from backstage): And now for the Mr. and Miss Prom King and Queen of Riverside High!! Mr. Michael Oates and Miss Amy Jackson!!

MIKE stands up, getting high fives from the guys while AMY jumps up and down, excitedly cheering for herself, and then looking around for the girls before turning to the guys.

AMY: Where’s Anna?

ART: She… I’m not sure. She ran out.

AMY: Ugh! That girl better not ruin my moment. (runs off yelling offstage) ANNA!! ANNA!!

MIKE walks downstage, stepping up on platform towards audience. Loud cheers as his friends clap and shout for him.

MIKE: Thank you, thank you. I’d like to take this time to thank all of you for your generous vote. This is probably the best trophy I’ll ever...
receive and I have my stunning good looks, undying charm, and lack of respect for authority figures to thank for that! Thanks again! (He holds crown up cheering himself on as he walks off stage)

**AMY** runs in dragging **ANNA** behind her with **SARAH** following and then she runs downstage to stand on platform.

**AMY:** Thank you so much, everyone. I never thought I’d beat…I mean, be in this position. Prom Queen. Wow. What a great ending to my Senior Year. Thanks again, you guys rock!

**AMY** walks up stage to hug **ANNA** and then she and **MIKE** start the King and Queen dance as **ANNA** and **SARAH** sit back down at the table. **RYAN** is leaning in on **SARAH** as she leans in the opposite direction, looking disgusted while the lights are on **ART** and **ANNA** talking.

**ART:** Look, whatever I did, I’m sorry. You’re not yourself lately, Anna.

**ANNA:** Well, neither are you; you’ve turned into this horn dog and I don’t even recognize you anymore. (she sniffs)

**ART:** (laughing a little) Oh, c’mon, babe. That’s not true. You know I… I…

**ANNA:** You what?

**ART:** You know I care about you.

**ANNA:** (sighs and folds her arms) I certainly don’t want to give my virginity away to a guy that just cares about me. No, thank you. Why don’t you just call Jasmine?

**ART:** And, what? Get Chlamydia or something? I don’t think so.

**ANNA:** Uh, is that the only reason you wouldn’t?

**ART:** Do I need to write you a poem or something to prove otherwise?

**ANNA:** You’re such a jerk.

**ART:** Yeah.

**SARAH** glares at **RYAN** as he shrugs.

**ART:** You should probably go after her, Anna. She deserves an apology.

**ANNA:** (sighs as she walks off stage) I’ll be right back.

**RYAN:** Lucky dog.

**ART:** Yeah.

**ANNA** sits down, looking defeated.
RYAN: (laughing) Look at Jasmine over there passed out in the corner! This party totally sucks.

ART: You wouldn’t want to go there anyway dude, trust me.
ANNA: What does that mean?
ART: It means that girls are trouble, simple as that.
ANNA: So I’m not worth it, then? Is that what you think?
ART: Worth what? What exactly am I getting out of this, Anna?

ANNA crying and pulling the KY and condoms out of her purse, showing them to ART.

ANNA: Fine, I’ll give you what you want, okay? I have everything we need right here.

ART grabs the bottle and wrapper and throws it down stage as he stands up,

ART: I’m not talking about SEX, it isn’t always about SEX! I’m saying that you’ve gone so ballistic that I can’t even see straight anymore. Instead of having a fun, sweet girlfriend like I used to have, I now have a sex-obsessed jealous FREAK who does nothing more than raise my blood pressure!

ART stomps off stage as ANNA cries harder and SARAH tries to comfort her. RYAN is trying not to laugh as SARAH glares at him.

ANNA: I’m sorry. I’m trying not to...I just...you know...it is kind of funny, like a tragic kind of funny. Sorry.

He walks off stage and AMY walks back in, fixing her dress and hair as she sits down at the table.

AMY: What’s wrong, Anna?
SARAH: I think Art might have broken up with her.
AMY: What?!? Why?
SARAH: He thinks she’s been so obsessed with fornication that she is no longer herself and, well, I can’t really disagree with him, Anna.

AMY: (laughs) Anna? Obsessed with? Oh, c’mon, that’s the worst break up excuse I’ve ever heard. Want me to talk some sense into him, doll?

ANNA shakes her head as she wipes tears off of her cheek.

ANNA: I just want to go home.
AMY: Okay, we’ll take you home.

Just as the girls begin standing, ART walks onto the stage.

ART: Wait. Can I have a moment?

AMY and SARAH look at each other and then shrug.

AMY: Sure. (as she walks by him pointing her finger in his face) You better get your act together, buddy.
ART: (nods)

AMY and SARAH walk off stage as ART slowly approaches ANNA. They stand face to face and he grabs both of her hands.

ART: I love you, Anna.
ANNA: (pause) I love you too, Art.
ART: You know, this whole thing...I don’t know what happened, how we got here.
ANNA: Me either.
ART: I mean, we’re great together, you know? We don’t have to be...if you’re not ready, that’s fine.
ANNA: You mean, you’d wait for me? You wouldn’t go after someone else if I didn’t--
ART: Of course not!
ANNA: So you...you’ll stick around even if I don’t want to yet?
ART: (laughs) Didn’t I just say that, crazy?
ANNA: Yeah, I guess you did.

They turn to walk offstage as ART stops and looks back over towards the table.

ART: Hey, wait a second.
One-Act Plays

ANNA: What is it?

He walks over to where he threw the KY bottle and condom and bends down picking them up.

ANNA: What are you--?
ART: Look, I plan on being with you for a long long time, so, at some point, we’re gonna need this.
ANNA: (laughs) Ok, fair enough.

ART stops and stares at ANNA smiling.

ANNA: (giggles shyly) What is it?
ART: You’re really beautiful, you know.
ANNA: Oh yeah?
ART: Yeah. It should have been you up on that stage. Prom Queen.
ANNA: And you should have been King.
ART: Nah, that’s a heavy crown.
ANNA: It’s actually made of plastic. (laughs)
ART: (laughs) Well, it’s stupid no matter what it’s made out of. I don’t care what the rest of the school thinks about me. You’re all that matters.
ANNA: Then I won’t care either.

They kiss. ART looks down at the condom wrapper in his hand and laughs a little.

ART: Magnum, huh?

ANNA shrugs.

ART: Close enough.

As they walk off stage, ART wraps his right arm around ANNA’s shoulders and turns his head over his right shoulder giving the audience a smile and a wink. Lights dim.

Cast of Characters:

CODY: 22-year-old Army Corporal, on weekend leave from Oklahoma, thick Southern accent.
JENNY: 20-year-old college student, CODY’S ex-girlfriend and best friends with AMANDA and SCOTTY.
AMANDA: 21-year-old, JENNY’S best friend.
SCOTTY: 21-year-old Army PFC Reserve, CODY’S best friend, taking classes with JENNY.

Setting: JENNY’S apartment kitchen and SCOTTY’S apartment living room.
Time: The present.

Scene

JENNY’S apartment kitchen is brightly lit stage right, JENNY is standing in front of the sink, a kitchen table is in front of the counter with four chairs, her phone is between her shoulder and ear while she washes dishes; SCOTTY’S apartment living room is dimly lit stage left, SCOTTY and CODY are seated on the couch, a low table in front of them with beers and assorted bags of snacks, a TV on a stand is angled off to the left.

JENNY: Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god OH. MY. GOD! Amanda, that boy is here. Like, he is physically here. In town. The same town that I am in right now. He is here. Oh my god, I felt like such an idiot.
AMANDA: (voiceover) Oh my god, I can’t believe it! When did you see him? Did you talk to him? Tell. Me. Everything.
JENNY: I was just coming out of class, like, literally right after I talked to you this afternoon. I bumped into him and I was like, “Oh my God, what are you doing here?” God, I felt like such an idiot.
AMANDA: Oh please, I’m sure you weren’t an idiot. I’m sure you were totally normal, playing the whole “I’m-your-ex-and-can’t-be-bothered-to-be-anything-but-nervous-cause-I’m-still-completely-in-love-with-you” card.
One-Act Plays

JENNY: That's really not helping, Mandy.
AMANDA: Sorry, lovey. Okay, then what happened?
JENNY: I dunno. I mean, we talked for a little and then Scotty came up and he asked if I wanted to go get food with them—
AMANDA: Oh my god, did you?
JENNY: Um, no.
AMANDA: Aw, why not?
JENNY: Seriously? I cannot just up and go have lunch with my ex-boyfriend.
AMANDA: (pause) Why not?
JENNY: He isn't just an ex boyfriend, Amanda! He is . . . (frantically gesticulates with a soapy plate in her left hand) . . . you know, him.
AMANDA: Whoa, great use of description there, Miss majoring-in-English.
JENNY: Mandy! Come on, this is serious. It's not like running into some guy you had a thing with a while back. This was beyond awkward. I mean, come on, you know what he means to me. This is . . . (looks off into the distance) . . . this is the first guy I ever dated. The first guy I ever really liked or went out with or kissed or loved or—
AMANDA: Got totally freaky with in his truck after prom.
JENNY: (mouth drops, then closes) I, well, um . . . that is so not the point here. He was my first love, Mandy.
AMANDA: (sighs) Baby, I know, I'm just kidding with you. I know how much he means to you. I was there, after all, for most of your relationship.
JENNY: (empties water from sink, dries hands and goes around island to sit at the table) I, well, um . . . that is so not the point here. He was my first love, Mandy.
AMANDA: (sighs) Baby, I know, I’m just kidding with you. I know how much he means to you. I was there, after all, for most of your relationship.
JENNY: (empties water from sink, dries hands and goes around island to sit at the table) I, well, um . . . that is so not the point here. He was my first love, Mandy.

Lights dim in JENNY’S kitchen, lights up in SCOTTY’S living room, low sounds are heard from the TV)

SCOTTY: (takes a sip of beer) How’s it feel being back?
CODY: (sips his beer and shrugs) It’s alright. Weird being around fuckin’ civilians again. Haven’t been back since graduation.
SCOTTY: Four years, man. Things are pretty much the same around here, though.
CODY: (looks at him for a minute) Any particular damn reason you didn’t tell me she was back? A little warning woulda been nice.
SCOTTY: (sheepish) Sorry, man. I didn’t think it’d matter. You’re only here for the weekend right?
CODY: Yeah, and I ran into her in the first few minutes of being here. (Takes long sip of beer)
SCOTTY: That was pretty awkward.
CODY: Yeah, it was. She was uncomfortable with the small talk. (Pause) Me too.
SCOTTY: (sips beer and chuckles) What’d you expect, man? She just got back and I don’t think she was expecting to see you either.
CODY: Where was she? It’s been awhile. We kinda left things weird after graduation.
SCOTTY: (shrugs) I think she was traveling some, some study abroad stuff, get her mind off things. She was pretty broken up.
CODY: (sips beer) Yeah, I know. (Pause)
SCOTTY: So, you gonna see her again?
CODY: (shrugs) Shit, I don’t know.
SCOTTY: (laughs) Do you want to see her?
CODY: I don’t know that either, man. Things are pretty fucked up.
SCOTTY: (more serious) Dude, what the hell happened that night?
CODY: (sips beer and thinks) She left me.

Lights fade on apartment and brighten in kitchen.

JENNY: I mean, he just left! All these years of virtually no contact. Well, okay, I may have stalked his Facebook page a few times, but that’s Ex-Girlfriend 101. But he just shows up out of nowhere and talks to me and I’m supposed to act like it’s all okay?
AMANDA: Oh, honey, that’s not what I’m saying. You have total permission to be the pissed-off ex and show him what he’s been missing.
JENNY: (frustrated) Mandy! God, no! I mean, he’s only here for the weekend anyway. Besides, things between us... (sigh) ...things are just too different now.
Lights dim and brighten in SCOTTY’S apartment

CODY: Still feels the same though.

SCOTTY: What’dya mean?

CODY: Kinda feels like I never left.

SCOTTY: (confused) How so? You’ve been gone for four years, been active.

CODY: I know, man, but, fuck, that was easy compared to this.

SCOTTY: To seeing Jenny?

CODY: (sighs) We had a huge fuckin’ fight.

SCOTTY: (laughs) That ain’t new, man. Y’all fought like an old married couple.

CODY: (looks at SCOTTY sternly) This was different. Hell, it fucked everything up.

SCOTTY: (still confused) Dude, what the hell was this fight about? I’ve seen y’all after fights and it wasn’t nothin’ compared to this.

CODY: (finishes beer and sets it on table, leans back against couch and sighs) She was pissed I was going Active.

SCOTTY: (a little shocked) Huh? Wasn’t that the plan? You and I were always going Active. We were just gonna do that first year of college Reserve. Hell, if the Army is gonna pay for it—

CODY: Fuck school. I wanted out of here. Guess she changed her mind.

SCOTTY: (a little shocked) Huh? Wasn’t that the plan? You and I were always going Active. We were just gonna do that first year of college Reserve. Hell, if the Army is gonna pay for it—

CODY: (laughs) That’s the trouble with girls.

SCOTTY: (scoffs) Wasn’t that bad? We were screaming at each other at Lauren’s graduation party!

CODY: (looks at SCOTTY sternly) This was different. Hell, it fucked everything up.

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CODY: (laughs) That’s the trouble with girls.

SCOTTY: (scoffs) Wasn’t that bad? We were screaming at each other at Lauren’s graduation party!

AMANDA: What’dya mean ‘too different’? God, your life is such a soap opera! (dramatic voice)

Breaking News! Army Corporal returns to find his broken-hearted ex about to take comfort in the arms of his best friend! Will he grow a pair and finally tell the stupid bitch that he’s still in love with her and ride off into the sunset in his standard size Army tank? Or will the best friend fight to save the girl of his dreams?

JENNY: You are totally delusional! He doesn’t even drive a tank, Mandy. I’m only a stupid bitch once a month and he is not still in love with me. And where the hell do you get the idea that Scotty likes me? In what universe do you see that?

AMANDA: Oh, please, you are so counting on the fact that he still likes you.

JENNY: I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer.

AMANDA: (laughs) Cause you know I’m right. Trust me, though, Scotty totally likes you. Why do you think he didn’t tell Cody you were back in town?

JENNY: Um, maybe because he was stuck in the middle of the World’s Worst Breakup?

AMANDA: Oh, it wasn’t that bad.

JENNY: (scoffs) Wasn’t that bad? We were screaming at each other at Lauren’s graduation party!

AMANDA: Oh, please, that was like an everyday occurrence with you two. You were just mad because he wanted to go Active instead of stay in town with you.

JENNY: (very frustrated) I had a right to be, Mandy! We had a plan! He was going to go to boot camp over the summer, go reserve with Scotty and we’d go to college together. Then, he’d go Active, we’d get married and, and . . . that was the plan.

AMANDA: Control Freak, listen to me. You can’t always plan your life out. Sure, that’s what you wanted to happen, but life changes. As much as I love you and as much as I know you loved him, you are not seeing it here. He was going Active for you, kiddo, so you could get a jump on that plan of yours.

JENNY: He didn’t have to. I told him—

AMANDA: Yeah, yeah, but he’s a big boy, Jen. He has to make his own decisions once in a while.

JENNY: But he didn’t even consult me about it!

AMANDA: That’s what you were mad about? Cause he didn’t ask you before doing the only thing he’s ever dreamed about doing?

JENNY: Mandy, that’s not what I’m saying. Believe me, I know all about his dreams. I was so proud of him, but that’s not what I was mad about.

AMANDA: Oh yeah? Then what was it?

JENNY: Mandy . . . I was pregnant.

Silence, lights fade.

End Scene
Characters:
ALAN HUMPHREY: A 27-year-old computer-smart Georgian man who is looking for a job.
MAGGIE: A 56-year-old southern redneck woman who runs the Happy Hostel.
VICTOR: A dead French phantom of the Happy Hostel.

Scene 1

Characters: MAGGIE, VICTOR

Setting: Present-day rural Georgia during the night.
(MAGGIE, standing behind a desk with a laptop computer on it, next to a white figure of a man holding dead flowers)

MAGGIE: (Giggling) Why Victor, you shouldn’t have!
VICTOR: Well Maggie, you have been so hospitable these past few years, I decided that it would be a polite gesture to get such a beautiful woman flowers.
MAGGIE: Well, I declare, I do like flowers. (Under her breath) Even if they are dead.
VICTOR: (Takes both hands and puts them across his chest) I heard that! I thought that it would be nice to give you dead flowers from a dead guy, get it? Huh? Huh? Oh my.
MAGGIE: (Laughing) You have a bad taste in humor, Victor.
VICTOR: (Under his breath and smiling) But a great sense in women.

(Computer makes a sizzle noise and MAGGIE and VICTOR both jump)

MAGGIE: That darn computer is at it again. Why don’t you see if you can fix it, Victor?
VICTOR: I would, mademoiselle, but back in my day we had books, maps, radios, and televisions that did the exact type of thing this MACHINE does. Why do you even bother with it?
MAGGIE: Because everything relies on computers nowadays, Victor. If I had my way, I wouldn’t use it, but business is business. Plus, it’s a great way to advertise for the Happy Hostel. Well, it would be if I could figure out this Craig’s Notepad, Mybook, thing!
VICTOR: Even if I had enough blood and sweat in me to work on it, I wouldn’t know how to turn it on much less fix it.
MAGGIE: I suppose you are right. It’s quite a dreary night isn’t it? I’m sad to say that we will not have any visitors in this sort of weather.

(Lights go out, VICTOR exits)

Scene 2

Characters: MAGGIE, ALAN

(ALAN, walking in the lobby of the Happy Hostel. MAGGIE, with the desk and computer. Lights on ALAN as he is holding a tire iron and a bag, talking on his cell phone, walking towards where MAGGIE is fiddling with cards on her desk.)

ALAN: (Shifting the tire iron in his hands and walking towards MAGGIE) Yes, yes. I will be fine. I’m at some hotel. Goodbye mother. I will call you when I get settled in. (Groans) Yes I will brush my teeth. Goodbye! (To MAGGIE) Excuse me ma’am, do you have any vacancies?
MAGGIE: (Puts down her cards and looks up excited) Why, of course we have a vacancy. But not for that tire iron. What’s your name, child?
ALAN: Alan Hugh Humphrey. It’s quite nice to meet you. Um, may I rent a room for the night? My car broke down. I was out searching for a job today and I got a bit lost on a back road. (ALAN swings tire iron) So here I am.
MAGGIE: (Picks up a stray card, looks surprised to see the image and quickly throws it down on the desk) Oh, pardon me. The room is $45 a night, $55 if you want two beds.
ALAN: I’ll take a single room, thank you. Do you have bathroom accommodations in each room? (Looks uneasily around the room) And may I ask why it is decorated for Halloween? It’s the middle of March. (Cell phone rings, ALAN picks it up) Hello? Hello? (Cuts phone off) And can you tell me why I have such bad service in this place?

(Loud noise comes from Stage Right)

ALAN: What was that? Aren’t you going to check it out?
MAGGIE: Nothing, nothing. Don’t you worry at all hon. It’s probably just a coon or something. No, we don’t have a bath in each room, but there is one right down the hall from where you will be tonight. And it’s not decorated for Halloween!
ALAN: But it—
MAGGIE: It’s gothic motif. It’s all the rage now for small inns and hotels. Makes the guests feel more at home. I read about it in Woman’s Journal, the October edition.
ALAN: (Sets tire iron on the desk and holds out money) More at home? If you say so. It feels like we are going to see that Elvira lady or the Adams family. Do you have any other guests tonight?
MAGGIE: (Taking the money) No, not tonight. Thank you, Alan, what a shaman card as a good luck charm. Here, follow me to your room.

(ALAN waits impatiently. (Turns around quickly) Ok, here is the planetary spread. Seven cards. (Pause) Oh this is so fun. I’ll have to tell Victor that I got to read a nice young man’s future!)

ALAN: Who is Vic—Oh never mind. (Cell rings from desk, ALAN quickly reaches to get it)
MAGGIE: No, no, no. We have no use for these wretched devices! Such an annoyance. Can ya please turn it off? (Still flipping cards)
ALAN: No ma’am. It’s my lifeline. Don’t you have one? (Checking phone’s annoyance. Can ya please turn it off?)
MAGGIE: (Checks phone) We have no use for these wretched devices! Such an annoyance. Can ya please turn it off? (Still flipping cards)
ALAN: No ma’am. It’s my lifeline. Don’t you have one? (Checking phone’s signal)
MAGGIE: Have no use for one. Everyone I know can call up on my landline or holler out the window, too. (Begins touching each card) Card one is, well, the homebody card, but I’m sure that’s no surprise. Card two says you are materialism. You are going to be a better person after this fold comes true! Card three means, oh it’s not important. Card four, general… (Pauses)
MAGGIE: (Snaps fingers) Six is interesting as well. Card five says, well, don’t get offended, but it says that you are doing harm to your opportunities. Interesting.
ALAN: May I PLEASE go to my room now? I need to check to see if I can maximize my cell phone’s reception since I’m stuck out in podunk nowhere.
MAGGIE: (Ignores ALAN and shows him card six) Six is interesting as well. It’s the shaman. Oh child, this the epiphany card (Under breath) I think. (Louder) You will come to some great realization about yourself in coming days. Card seven concurs with this; it is the four of disks, the restriction of drive cool while it is processing. (Cell phone rings again and ALAN picks up) Hello? Hello? (Phone cuts out) Darn signal!

MAGGIE: (Grins) Well, can you take a look at it? I’ll give you an even better discount on your room if you can get it up and running again. How does half-off sound, child?
ALAN: (Sets down bag and tire iron, lays phone on desk and picks up the computer and starts messing around with the buttons on the keyboard) Sounds like a deal. See? All better. You just need to elevate it with a wire stand or something similar.
MAGGIE: You are my hero. You know, we are looking for someone who can help us with this technological gibbity goop. Oh I almost forgot! (Picks up cards and lays seven out in a circle on the desk, flipping them over one by one. ALAN waits impatiently.) Ok, here is the planetary spread. Seven cards.

ALAN: It’ll make me as happy as a coon in a cornfield with all the dogs tied.
MAGGIE: I just knew you would agree. Oh I declare, that darn computer again! I’m going to have to buy a new one!
ALAN: No you aren’t. It’s just overheating, and you can’t just sit it down like that. There is a fan on the bottom that draws the heat out, keeping the hard drive cool while it is processing. (Cell phone rings again and ALAN picks up) Hello? Hello? (Phone cuts out) Darn signal!

MAGGIE: Alright child, you have been such a help today. Here, keep the shaman card as a good luck charm. Here, follow me to your room.
ALAN: Finally. Thank you for your lovely reading of my future, Maggie. I’m
certain that all of those things will come true within a fortnight.

MAGGIE: That's the spirit, Alan! *(Digs in desk drawer and pulls out a skeleton key)* Here we go!

ALAN: *(So she can't hear him)* Spirit my foot. Bunch of bull honkey if you ask me.

*(MAGGIE and ALAN walk offstage, lights dim)*

Scene 3

Characters: MAGGIE, ALAN, VICTOR

*(ALAN is down center, next to the bed laying his things down, MAGGIE is down left, at the door. VICTOR stands on far stage right, unnoticed by the other characters)*

MAGGIE: *(Spreads arms out to show the room)* This is it. Isn't it great? It reminds me of that old shack that I used to play in when I was little. Now, let's get you settled in.

ALAN: *(Nervously coughs and sits on bed)* I'm settled. Thank you for your *(Pause)* hospitality. I will see you in the morning. Call me if the computer overheats again before you find a stand for it. Oh, one question, where is the bathroom again?

MAGGIE: *(Holds up tarot card)* Down the hall on the left. Now, I want you to dream of your new future! I'll make sure to find something to keep that old pile of metal and plastic overheating before I go to sleep.

ALAN: *(Under breath)* Sickening. Look at all the black décor and skulls lining this room. If I weren't so desperate I wouldn't-- *(Louder)* Thanks, I'll be sure to dream about *(Holds up tarot card)* shamans and stuff! Goodnight, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Don't let the bed bugs bite! *(Exits stage left)*

ALAN: *(Lays across bed)* Wow. What a woman, all that mumbo jumbo about future. What a waste of energy. She could program a computer in the time she fritters away with those cards. I sure do hope I can get my phone to start picking up. *(Sits up, plays with phone and scans the room)* Look at the walls! Black and red wallpaper, who does that? I could run a better inn. *(Overdramatic)* I have great people skills. At least I wouldn't have the place decorated for Halloween!

*(VICTOR makes a loud bump from stage right)*

ALAN: What? *(Who is there?)* Who is there? Maggie, this is not funny.

VICTOR: It's me! How dare you talk about my woman like that! She makes a great inn keeper.

ALAN: *(Another loud bump)* Who, who is it? What, who are you? How do you know Maggie?

VICTOR: I'm Victor, her lover.

ALAN: Who, who is it? What, who are you? How do you know Maggie?

VICTOR: I'm Victor, her lover.

ALAN: I've heard of you. Do you work here? Can you stop trying to scare me?

VICTOR: No, and no. Did my precious Maggie tell you that I'm handsome?

ALAN: Wait, what? No she didn't. She just said your name.
VICTOR: I’m not allowed to tell you who I am. Goodnight!
ALAN: Ok. Show yourself! What, are you scared? (Jumps over and walks to stage right, waving tire iron) I’m armed!

(ALAN puts ear to door and hears nothing. Phone rings from bed, ALAN runs to get it)

ALAN: Hello? Mom, I’m doing just fine. I think. Yes, I’ll call you when I brush my teeth. (Hangs up phone) Finally, a whole conversation on my phone. Maybe my persistence fixed the cell phone tower out here. (Laughs) Ha ha ha. And I bet that noise is just the television in the next room mixed in with my jitters. That’s all. I’m certain of it. Makes the most logical sense. (Digs through bag on bed and takes out computer magazine) Ah. Normal stuff. Computers. I can’t wait to get back home to work on my new modem. It’s going to be the talk of the town.

(VICTOR walks to center stage, standing behind ALAN’s bed)

VICTOR: Is that what you really believe? Is that the only logical thing you could come up with? Kind of sad really. Didn’t even think that it might have been your precious phone making a noise?
ALAN: My phone doesn’t make bumping noises. (Screams as he turns around to see the barely visible VICTOR) Whhhhhaaaa?! Who are you?! Get out of my room.
VICTOR: I can’t do that. This was my room first, garçon.
ALAN: (Squeezes eyes shut) NO such thing as ghosts. Victor is a stupid name. Ghosts don’t ha—
ALAN: I’m dreaming. (Squeals and gets off bed) This is a dream. Oh my. Dream world, why does it have to be a nightmare tonight? Wasn’t getting stuck in this dang hellhole enough? No more nightmares! (Pinches both arms at the same time)

VICTOR: Why don’t you come with me and see last year? I think you will find it interesting.
ALAN: I was there last year; I don’t need to know what happened again. (Screeches) Ahh! I can’t handle this dream. (Smacks himself repeatedly on the forehead then looks down at phone) Noooo! You killed it! It won’t turn on!
VICTOR: Maybe I’ll come back later; I think you need to calm down. (Lights Dim)

Scene 4

Characters: MAGGIE, ALAN
(ALAN is backstage, talking to himself)

ALAN: No more reading weird stories. No more driving in the dark. No more going out of the house. Computers are safe. They don’t go bump in the night or talk about the past without your consent. I’m going to that Maggie. I’m going to leave. I’ll sleep in my car. Maybe my phone will get better signal outside anyway.
(ALAN walks onstage, from stage right, towards MAGGIE who is sitting on the chair behind her desk)

MAGGIE: Why Alan, what are you doing up?
ALAN: (Punching buttons on phone) There is something seriously wrong with this place. Who is Victor?
MAGGIE: (Stands up) Victor used to live here with my uncle, before they both passed in an awful boating accident. But I’m not certain how that is relevant, honey child.
ALAN: He visited me tonight. Well, someone based on him in my nightmare visited me. I think that I have read, drank, and worried myself into a flustering mess. I just, I—

MAGGIE: Now, Alan. A nightmare is just the aftermath of a bad day. I know you need some sleep. Come child; drink some lavender tea with me. It will soothe your nerves.

ALAN: I know how stupid this seems. I know it, you know it, but that stupid dream of mine doesn’t. I can’t stay here, but I guess I have to. I can’t waste my money. I don’t know what came over me. I’m sorry Maggie. Forgive me for my rude behavior.

MAGGIE: (Pulls a teapot and two cups from under the desk and pours both cups) No need to be sorry. Being stuck in an unsavory situation does that to folks. Here drink this.

ALAN: (Taking a cup and sipping) Thank you. Maybe this is all just a dream. I just need to go to sleep. (Phone rings) Hello? Hello? Darn!

MAGGIE: Let me walk you back to your room. (Annoyed) Shouldn’t you leave that thing alone if it don’t work?

ALAN: That isn’t necessary. Thank you for the tea. Perhaps I can sleep now. This tea seems to have calmed me down. And I have to have my phone. It is vital!

(Stage goes dim, lights come on ALAN standing in his room with no furniture, VICTOR holding two pillows in the background unnoticed, with ten people dressed in all black standing behind him)

ALAN: I cannot believe I just let a complete stranger see me look like a fool! I wonder why she hates my phone so much?
VICTOR: (So only audience can hear him) Face it, you aren’t perfect and neither are your precious machines and gadgets. (Throws pillows at ALAN) Boo!

ALAN: That tea must have had opium in it. I’m hearing things again. I think Maggie is trying to induce psychopathic episodes in her guests. (Squeals as he gets hit with pillow)

ALAN: How in the world did those get there? No. No. NO. (Pinches arm) I’m going to get a bruise from all this outlandish business.
VICTOR: Are you that much of a fool, sir? Let me finish my job and I’ll leave you alone, pinkie promise!
ALAN: (Throws hands up in the air) Tea, stress, car breaking down, reading childish stories, this is where it gets me! Ok. (Takes a long breath) I’m going to pinkie promise with a figment of my imagination (Pause) but please leave me alone after that. Do you realize how badly I need sleep?
VICTOR: Oh boy! (Holds out pinkie) Here we go!

ALAN: Wait, my phone!

(Lights dim. VICTOR and ALAN are still holding each other’s pinkies while people in black run about the stage carelessly)

ALAN: Where are we? Where is my phone?
VICTOR: Last year. Don’t you see it? (Points to one of the people in black)
ALAN: See what?
VICTOR: You making a fool out of yourself. You see that girl over there? You have no romantic skills. Where are the flowers, the chocolates, the kisses?
ALAN: That’s impossible! I wonder if I still have her number in my cell?
VICTOR: Just thought that I would show you what you missed out on! You don’t have a romantic bone in your body. (Laughs) Now back to normal time!
ALAN: Wait. Aren’t you supposed to tell me how to fix it or something?
VICTOR: No. I’m not THAT kind of ghost. I’m just one here to show you
what you missed out on. Funny huh? Bye-bye now!

ALAN: Wai—

Scene 5

Characters: VICTOR, ALAN, MAGGIE

(Lights dim, MAGGIE is onstage with VICTOR)

MAGGIE: What are you doing?
VICTOR: Just sitting here, my dear. Do you want to sit with me? Let’s kiss!
MAGGIE: (Ignoring his advances) Stop harassing our only paying guest.
VICTOR: He started it. Said Victor was a stupid name. He insulted you, my lover. Please acknowledge my love, mademoiselle.
MAGGIE: Victor! I’m ashamed. Uncle wouldn’t be pleased to know that his dear old friend had not only come to haunt their establishment, but to drive away customers. And it is not appropriate for us to have a relationship Victor. We are almost kin!
VICTOR: I’m not driving away anyone. We are not family. We are adults, fighting for each other’s love. Let me win this battle, my dear, so we can ride off into the Parisian sunset on my bicycle of love.
MAGGIE: Victor! You brazen rascal you! What did you do to Alan?
VICTOR: I gave him a vision of his past love. I thought it would be amusing but this fellow is dry, no humor. And he can’t make a woman swoon nearly as well as I, my dear.
MAGGIE: If he leaves I’m going to kill you!
VICTOR: Too late, lover. (Does a little jig around her) I am not going to fall for your attempts sir! You need to get a handle on yourself.
VICTOR: I’m just having fun. That’s what the afterlife is all about! I want to spend it with a woman who brings the fervor back into my life!

(ALAN walks in carrying his bag and tire iron on stage left, talking on his phone. He sees MAGGIE and VICTOR talking to one another)

ALAN: Yes, Mom, I’m coming home. I already told you. I’m calling a cab or something, or I’ll stay in my car. It’s almost daylight anyway. Bye. (Cuts off phone and swings tire iron in the direction of VICTOR) What is this?!
MAGGIE: Victor is the Happy Hostel’s only recurring guest. I probably should have warned you about him, shouldn’t I?
ALAN: He has kept me up all night. I knew it wasn’t just a dream. (Holds out bruised arm) Look at my poor arm!
MAGGIE: Dear child! How did that happen? Victor, you didn’t hurt the poor boy, did you?
VICTOR: Don’t look at me. I didn’t do anything to him. He does need help, though.
ALAN: It’s from pinching myself trying to wake up and you have hurt me you, y—
MAGGIE: No name calling! I don’t run that kind of establishment.
VICTOR: (Sticks his tongue out) Ha!
ALAN: You pale freak!
VICTOR: Ouch! Can I give you advice on insults as well as romance? You need both in a dire way.
ALAN: I want my money back! I need to call a tow truck. (Presses buttons on the phone with no luck) AHH. I’m so tired of spotty service!
MAGGIE: No refunds. (Points to the right) See the sign? You don’t need a cell phone, boy. Use the land line.
ALAN: That’s ancient technology. No one uses those anymore. And so you are going to take my money, even though I helped you and I haven’t even been able to sleep in your wretched Happy Halloween Inn?
VICTOR: It’s the Happy Hostel. Do not poke fun at my woman’s business.
MAGGIE: I would rather that you stayed, Alan.
ALAN and VICTOR: (Together) No!
MAGGIE: That is quite enough. No need to get your invisible pants all in a twist honey.
VICTOR: They aren’t invisible! I’m not see-through. (Points to his pants)
MAGGIE: Why can’t we come to some kind of agreement then? I’m running an inn, not a wrestling arena. I don’t know what you two could possibly have to fight about in the first place.
ALAN: Hey!
One-Act Plays

MAGGIE: Boys!

ALAN: He said I had no chance with the ladies!

VICTOR: Did not!

MAGGIE: This child's romances are his own business! Now leave him alone so he can get some sleep.

ALAN: That's right, you tell him, Maggie! Now tell him to leave!

VICTOR: She can't. It's my establishment. I owned it first; I'm here to stay. Isn't that right, my sweet southern belle?

MAGGIE: Don't flatter yourself. It's mine. And I'm not—

VICTOR: But you are! You are my southern belle, my sugar cookie, my red rose!

ALAN: I don't care who loves who. I just want out of here before I get permanent nerve damage or something.

MAGGIE: You know honey, I... I was thinking about how good you are with computers and all that jazz. Do you want a job, child?

ALAN: Do I want a JOB? (Throws the shaman card at VICTOR) I just had my entire night ruined by this guy and you want me to work with him? Can you even work with a ghost?

VICTOR: It's possible, if you onl—

MAGGIE: Only if you say yes right this instant. You see, we were thinking about new management. You are the only person Victor here can stand for more than a few minutes. The place needs a fresh new face, and plus, we can certainly use the technological expertise. Victor and I are two old souls.

VICTOR: I'll only agree to this if you say yes to being mine, my Maggie.

MAGGIE: Will you stop trying to make me swoon over you?

VICTOR: I promise I won't be such a bother (ALAN laughs as VICTOR whispers) Can ghosts make promises?

ALAN: Ok. I'll agree. But you have to make that old ghost of yours mind his own business. No more taking me to the past or making things disappear. I do need a new change of scenery. And, I need to talk to the local phone company about this darn cell phone service before anything is permanent.

MAGGIE: Oh happy day! I get a new worker and a significant other. You know Victor, I always thought you were cuter than a bug's ear!

(Curtains close on VICTOR hugging MAGGIE and ALAN pushing buttons on his phone)

"Everyone falls at some time or another. The trouble with falling is that eventually you have to decide if you are going to stand back up or stay on the ground."

~Margaret Kellum, "Taking The Stairs"
My fingers are pounding hard on the keys, unable to stop as the ideas flow through my mind; the characters push themselves on me, trying to fight their way on to the blank pages of the screen. I cannot eat or sleep until it is done, until it is expressed, fulfilled, so that it will stop knocking on my door, so that I can finally rest. I am seven years old and full of dreams, ambition, and life! I live in my own world, the mirrors speak to me and wait for my tears; characters are comfortable at my side, waiting for me to write them away. Nothing matters when they are ready, not the homework that needs to be done, the room that needs to be cleaned, or the perfect weather that beckons every other child.

Fast forward twenty years; I throw the warm bed covers over my messy hair as my alarm sounds. Once I finally decide the annoying beeping will inevitably continue until I get up, I walk with eyes half-open, unable to see without my contacts, to my four year old daughter’s room. As I beg her to start waking up, I stumble into the kitchen to brew my morning joe—one of the few reasons I still get out of bed in the morning. As I get myself ready, I try to decide how to treat this day differently than I’ve treated the last three hundred. Every day I treat as if I have a million more; I’m unproductive, uncaring, and ultimately miserable. I have no purpose, no plan for my life or my career. You might wonder how I got this way—how unproductive, uncaring, and ultimately miserable. I want to be like everyone else, to not see or hear things that weren’t there, things that weren’t real. What was the point, anyway? I was already told that I would never make any money writing, that I should be a teacher, a lawyer, or a doctor, things I didn’t want to be! Writing was a reminder that I would fail no matter what.

It all started with reality. That ugly “friend” that slaps us in the face reminding us that our dreams are nothing more than childish ideas and that our beloved adventures are practically over, except for the two vacations we get to take each year, of course. I met reality early in life.

As I lay in my bed daydreaming of faraway lands to be explored and battles to be won, I heard my Mom calling me down for dinner. I tucked the notebook containing all of my dreams and fantasies underneath my bed and ran downstairs to see that we were having chicken for the fifth time that week. I sat there staring at my three year old brother who had more food on the table than in his mouth or on his plate, and then listened to my nine year old sister talk about all of the drama she had at school that day. My fork stayed planted in a flavorless bite of chicken breast, and at that moment it occurred to me that life may not get any better than this.

It didn’t take long for me to realize that I wasn’t a princess waiting for a prince to rescue me, I wasn’t always going to get a recess, and there sure as hell wasn’t a Santa Claus. The change happened slowly, but over time I became obsessed with things other than writing. I packed the typewriter away and only gave my seven-year-old self brief moments to daydream as I stood in front of a mirror or doodled in class.

As I entered puberty, writing went from being an escape to a harsh reminder that I was no longer a child and that it was time I grew up. Instead of facing my inevitable adulthood, I avoided it. I glared at the computer and mirror every time I walked by, laughed when my teachers told me how great my writing was, and came to resent my characters when they called to me. I resented the fact that no matter where I was walking I could find a story—the darkened woods next to my school, the bully who picked on the dorky kid who wore suspenders and glasses, the fight my parents had that night, the love life of my erratic friend. They were all there, wanting to be written, wanting me, and I became angry that I couldn’t be rid of them. I wanted to be like everyone else, to not see or hear things that weren’t there, things that weren’t real. What was the point, anyway? I was already told that I would never make any money writing, that I should be a teacher, a lawyer, or a doctor, things I didn’t want to be! Writing was a reminder that I would fail no matter what.

My seven-year-old self would have laughed at this notion. She would have rolled her eyes and avoided me and turned to the mirrors and picture books instead. She would be typing her little heart out as she grew annoyed with any inconvenient interruption. That girl had a dream, a future. She didn’t care what people thought of her or what they expected her to be. She could happily sit for hours drawing pictures and dreaming up worlds that didn’t exist. She was a celebrity, a believer.

I carried my pessimism into the adulthood that I so strongly tried to avoid. I had seventeen different jobs within a ten-year period. I quit college at least three times and quit jobs when I could no longer focus because I was off in “Neverland.” Despite my opposition to creative thinking, my characters followed me everywhere, unrelenting, never leaving me in peace. They stood at my doorstep while I had five deadbolts, two chain locks, and a burglar alarm between us. Looking back, it was the idea of failure that scared me, that lurking feeling that you will be rejected, made fun of, for something you hold so dear, something that is such a strong part of who you are. I was afraid that if my characters indwelled me, I would forever be the child that could not accept her fate.
as an adult. I’d turn right back into the seven-year-old who never kept her room clean, barely got her homework done, and couldn’t focus on anything that didn’t have to do with writing for more than five minutes.

So, I narcotized myself with boys, religion, movies, anything to escape who I was. I pretended that I didn’t know what I should be, what I could be. It was “easier” that way. In high school, I skipped my graduation to be with my boyfriend. I thought maybe God intended for me to be a teacher so I took that path because it could be “someone else’s” decision, it wasn’t something I had to take responsibility for; it was reality! I lost myself in films, trying to forget that I could be writing those characters. I was unsatisfied with life, knowing that I could be more than what I was.

And what was I? I’d been a receptionist, dental assistant, customer service representative, daycare worker, switchboard operator, student, and mother; even I couldn’t keep up. I cringed every time someone asked me what kind of place they held in my life. Again, I got into the cycle, mom/service representative, daycare worker, switchboard operator, student, and worker; even I couldn’t keep up. I cringed every time someone asked me what I did for a living, where I was working now, whether or not I was in my mother; even I couldn’t keep up. I cringed every time someone asked me what I did for a living, where I was working now, whether or not I was in my mother; even I couldn’t keep up. I cringed every time someone asked me what I did for a living, where I was working now, whether or not I was in

After giving birth to my beautiful daughter, I felt more alive than ever and I wanted to be something for her, to show her that I had worth aside from changing her stinky diapers and wiping vomit off of my newest shirt while I rocked her to sleep. She needed to know that there was more to life. I wanted her to believe in fairy tales, despite the fact that I didn’t. I didn’t want her to know that I was crushed after discovering that life wasn’t really my playground or my kingdom. I wanted her to play, to imagine, to believe. By wanting these things for her, I also awakened some of the dormant emotions that I had regarding my beliefs, my aspirations, and my life. Through her, I was able to be a child again.

As I discovered this, I began writing again, though not consistently enough. I was still lacking the confidence and the motivation to see it through. I would work full time in the day, be Mom at night while also trying to work on my writing. It was impossible. I was squeezing my creativity into this bubble that left me exhausted. It felt more like “work” than ever before. I wrote a couple of short stories that I had hoped would turn into novels, but they weren’t long enough, didn’t contain enough detail, and overall, they just weren’t any good. Tired of trying to juggle everything, I gave up. I got angry at my characters again and told them that we weren’t going to see each other for awhile, that I wasn’t really sure what kind of place they held in my life. Again, I got into the cycle, mom/student, mom/worker, mom/student, mom/worker. I had purpose, but it wasn’t enough purpose; I knew I could handle more.

When I got married almost seven years ago, I imagined a different life. Though I was far from my seven-year-old existence, I imagined myself in love, in a lucrative career that I enjoyed, and with a child that complimented my lifestyle. Instead, I felt that I was fighting to choose love, hunting for a lame job every few months only to be bored and miserable when I got it, and then dealing with an over-emotional toddler that I loved but ultimately caused so much stress in my life that I knew I’d be fully gray by the age of thirty. It was overwhelming and unexpected. I blamed everyone else but myself. I blamed my husband for not being good enough, I blamed the people who had tried to push me into certain careers for the fact that I didn’t even have one, and I blamed my daughter for acting like a four year old when I wanted her to act like an adult.

As long as I projected my problems on to everyone else, I was able to live with myself, to live with my failure and my disappointment.

When I read books like Harry Potter and Twilight, I imagined how wonderful life must be for JK Rowling and Stephenie Meyers. How they never could have thought that they might fail or might be wasting their time. How could they? They were brilliant! I could never be like them. I didn’t really have the gift, just some silly characters that wanted to be written down, that would scream and keep me up at night while I tried to hush them by yelling back at them to leave me alone. I guess I really shouldn’t have been surprised when they just yelled back even louder.

It wasn’t until I turned twenty-seven that I finally accepted that writing was a drug for me, something I couldn’t resist, couldn’t live without. There aren’t any AA type meetings for writing because there is no way to recover from it. You will never have a feeling like you have when your thoughts are formed on to a page, as they are finally able to escape you. There isn’t anything quite like holding two hundred crisp, white, printed pages in your hands and realizing that all of this information came from your brain.

Our writing becomes like our baby; we become obsessed with feeding it, allowing it to be its own, and then get angry and bitter if anyone else says anything negative about it. It is also impossible to deny that you have a baby once you have it and have experienced its love, its purpose. No matter how often I told my characters that I didn’t need them, they wouldn’t listen. They needed me, and I needed them, end of story. Without them, I fall into the silent background, I have no voice, and I’m tortured...
Informal Essays

with guilt when I don’t express what’s within me. I feel as if I’m betraying
myself, my life, my future. Writing is no longer just a joy, but a necessity.
My characters draw me in and won’t leave me until I’ve satisfied them, until
I’ve told their stories.

When people ask me what I am today, I’m not a receptionist, a
dental assistant, a daycare worker, a customer service representative, or just
a mom. I am a writer.

Looking in from the outside, this quaint, Baptist church isn’t much
different from the next little white church. Once inside, the similarities
continue, from the stained glass windows and the outdated brass light
fixtures, to the padded pews adorned with blue fabric. Between the pews,
all down the aisle that was once graced by beautiful hardwood floors, is a
layer of blue, industrial-grade polyester carpet. Congregation members call
it “the lighthouse by the road.” They come here to seek answers, to praise
God by singing hymns, and to fellowship with their church family. During
most church services, my little family can be found sitting on the left, about
halfway down the row of pews. As much as I enjoy it, I do not formally
join in the singing; as advised by my loving family, my singing voice sounds
like a coon dog. I am content with tapping my foot from the comfort of
my seat.

Half-seeking and half-habit, I make my way to the church by the
side of the road for Sunday evening service. Since my husband was at work
and Nana was ill, I found myself accompanied only by my children. Seated
alongside me with crayons, notebooks,
and fruit snacks are my two girls.

Shannah is the older of my girls. I have been told that she is a
smaller version of me. She has the same straight, thick, blonde hair and
is easily shy. She usually tucks herself away under my or her Nana’s arm
during church. Even for the children’s services, she has to be dragged down
the aisle to the front of the church. Surprisingly, this night a little friend
convinces her to join in the choir. My heart is touched as I watch closely
from the comfort of my seat as they skip hand in hand down the aisle to
join the other singers.

Amidst all the singing, Alaina, my toddler, begins to wind down.
Unlike her older sister, she is quite the wild child. She reminds me of my
older sister, Katie. They share the same brown hair and exhibit some of the
same cute-as-a-button faces. For Alaina to be calm during church is a rare
treat, so I gather her up in my arms and begin to soothe her. I brush her
hair away from her face and run my fingers through the tousled mess. As
usual, she sails off to sleep and is soon snoring. I hold her secure and kiss
her warm forehead and cheeks and continue playing with her hair. In those
few moments of stroking her hair, I am reminded of my childhood and the
bond that sisters share.

In that memory, my small hands were caressing the same tousled brown hair found on my sister Katie’s head. With a mere eighteen month’s difference between us, my older sister and I shared a small bedroom and slept in the same bed. Like most of the rooms in our house, our tiny bedroom had been added on. Off of the kitchen, our room bore a white, twin-sized bed, and the walls were covered with faded, floral wallpaper. If Katie and I weren’t too mad at each other, we would lay awake at night and talk. This modest bedroom was where my sister first shared with me the news of salvation, her version of the birds-and-the-bees, and every Christmas Eve she tried to convince me that Rudolf had just flown over. After never-ending chatting and many warnings, when sleep was almost upon us, Katie always had one last request.

“If you’ll play with my hair, I’ll scratch your back?” she used to ask.

Despite the fact that I knew I would get the short end of the stick, I always gave in. She always fell asleep, as did I; however, I scarcely ever got my back scratched.

While sitting in church reminiscing about my childhood, another scene makes it way into my mind. Saddened, I can see my mom’s weathered hands entwined lovingly in my sister’s brown locks. Mama’s hands were combing and twirling the same way my small hands used to, and the same way I now do to my girls.

Returning to the present, I become flush and warm all over as I try to push away the memories. The church choir service is nearly over. As each person turns, places their hymn books in their seats and starts to step down, someone speaks up. This woman must have thought it a blessing to have the girls come to choir and requested that everyone stand up and join in the singing Jesus Loves Me. However, I couldn’t stand up to “howl like a coon dog” because of the little head and messy heap of brown hair still adorning my lap. So, again I remain in my seat. A few words into the song, I am, yet again, taken back in time.

I am reminded of Katie’s hair, only she was not sleeping; she was lifeless. My mom can no longer kiss her warm face. Just as everyone stood tonight to sing Jesus Loves Me, I am reminded of how everyone stood and sang it at my sister’s memorial service. I weep for Katie. I picture her screaming as she held a lifeless, little Isaiah. His innocent voice has been silenced by death. I am taken back to his funeral. As he was laid to rest, everyone stood to sing Jesus Loves Me.

Just like the hair wrapped around my fingers, the song has intertwined itself into my life. My memories came together and stirred my emotions. I was given a chance to feel the past instead of simply remembering it.
If you are at all like me, every new morning brings with it a lengthy “to do” list. Adding complexity to the work load are family and relationship issues that require attention, and personal goals that we struggle to remain committed to. Overwhelmed by the perpetual cycle of daunting duties and deadlines, accomplishment of a strenuous goal appears so unattainable that the temptation to surrender is great. Whether the challenge is maintaining physical fitness, breaking a habit, or achieving academic excellence, feelings of discouragement and defeat are inevitable. Everyone falls at some time or another. The trouble with falling is that eventually you have to decide if you are going to stand back up or stay on the ground. Occasionally, someone or something steps into our path and awakens us to the fact that it is time to stand up and break the cycle of unattained goals and slavery to the insanely busy life. Whenever I am faced with a seemingly impossible goal, I remember Karah. Difficult times are not the only occasions I think of her, however; because of her, I smile every time I climb a flight of stairs.

Karah was introduced to me through an opportunity I had during the summers of my junior and senior years of high school. A small company called A Step to Independence (ASTI) employed me part time. ASTI’s purpose was to facilitate a teaching method called Conductive Education. Conductive Ed. (a specific type of physical therapy) is designed for children with Cerebral Palsy and other special needs. Remarkable children of varying ages and abilities attended ASTI for two months in a summer day camp setting. Focusing on developing a child’s social, emotional, and physical strength, the children did activities with the purpose of using muscles the brain had “forgotten” how to use. This was done because if and when the mind could effectively communicate to the body, the muscle would not be useless. Rigorous exercises and exhaustive stretches combined with the learning of practical skills such as dressing and feeding one’s self made up the core of the program. By challenging the kids to push themselves to increase their physical abilities, these activities helped the children make improvements and take a step towards becoming independent.

I instantly bonded with the children with whom I worked. Every one of them had leg braces and difficulty walking, if they could walk at all. Fragile bones formed thin arms and legs that bent at awkward angles. Although it was extremely challenging and they might fall a few times, they had the ability to do their tasks, so I cheered them on. Never have I experienced a job so emotionally taxing or one so rewarding. “Encourager” best describes my roll at ASTI. “Don’t give up!” “You’re almost there!” “Don’t say the word ‘can’t.’” “You can do this.” And “I won’t let you fall,” were phrases I must have said at least a thousand times. Step by step, the bits of encouragement made a difference in the lives of those children.

All of the children who attended camp at ASTI had unique personalities, but none of them could hope to be as dramatic as one outstanding pupil, Karah. She was about eight years old when I met her and tall for her age. At first glance Karah did not appear to have any physical challenges. Slender features made her glassy blue eyes appear even larger than they were. Karah had sandy colored hair that hung down to her hips and a deep, nasally sound to her voice. Tones did not detract from the content of her conversation, however; in fact, all who worked at ASTI found her to be hilarious, caring, and enthusiastic. Her pink lips were always either smiling broadly or held together tightly as she sat deep in thought. I knew that she was doing serious pondering during those times rather than staring vacantly into space, because whenever she returned to reality she would, without fail, have a statement to make or question to ask. The lower half of her face was wet with a stream of saliva most of the time, and this was usually one of the first things you noticed about affectionate Karah. Unsuspecting friends in the hallway often received loving, yet sticky, kisses. She was one of the more mobile members of our little group, able to walk good distances without much trouble. Challenges arose for Karah when she needed to bend her knees. When she walked, her legs stuck out to the sides, so she swung them out in front of her to make her way forward, an act which made inclines difficult, and the thought of ascending stairs was simply inconceivable. Her arms had a tendency to bend and remain across her chest; I constantly had to tell her to practice keeping her hands at her sides. Frustrated outbursts from her usually resulted from her slight vision impairment, which made it difficult for her to see her own feet.

As far as Karah was concerned, there was no middle ground. She either absolutely loved or completely hated a thing, but she usually chose to love. Karah quickly grew attached to everyone at camp, and although she had just as many emotional struggles as the other children, she always tried to put a positive spin on things. Frequently she would cease all activity to
give herself a rather impressive motivational speech, a habit which I think she picked up from listening to self-help speakers with her mother. I do not think Karah's parents quite knew how to handle their only daughter being born with special needs. Certainly they loved her, but it was evident that they saw her as a precious baby, and not a growing girl. When I met her she was eight, but still wearing clothes that would have better suited a younger child. The family must have been quite wealthy, however, because not only could they afford to invest in many programs for Karah, but since both parents worked constantly, they could afford to leave their daughter in the care of a nanny who was lovingly christened “Mama Kim.”

Mama Kim was there to watch her progress every day at camp, and Karah grew increasingly dependent on her coaching. The last few days of the program, however, Mama Kim could not be there. Therefore, Karah required a great deal more of my attention than she had needed during the past few days. At the bidding of the conductor, I began working with Karah as she learned to climb stairs. As I mentioned earlier, her knees did not bend easily. Each movement up the little three-step staircase took incredible concentration and strength. Placing the first foot onto the next stair was simple enough, but at that point fear nearly overtook her. Balance was not my little friend’s strong point, and she was horrified to find herself wobbling at the edge of the two-foot drop. Through much coaching from me, countless failed attempts to drag that second foot up, and valiant efforts from Karah, she made it up two of the three stairs. Beaming up at me with her sparkling smile and blue eyes, Karah celebrated her victory with profuse hugs. The third step, which she was unable to set foot on, was far higher than an average stair; in fact, it was a bit of an effort for me to bend easily. Each movement up the little three-step staircase took incredible concentration and strength. Placing the first foot onto the next stair was simple enough, but at that point fear nearly overtook her. Balance was not my little friend’s strong point, and she was horrified to find herself wobbling at the edge of the two-foot drop. Through much coaching from me, countless failed attempts to drag that second foot up, and valiant efforts from Karah, she made it up two of the three stairs. Beaming up at me with her sparkling smile and blue eyes, Karah celebrated her victory with profuse hugs. The third step, which she was unable to set foot on, was far higher than an average stair; in fact, it was a bit of an effort for me (a perfectly healthy teenager) to climb. So, the two stairs were counted as a huge victory, and soon it would be time to exhibit her abilities in for the graduation ceremony at the end of every camp, as a way to show off what the children had learned to do over the summer. Some walked through a narrow maze of blocks to show how well they could walk in a straight line, others modeled the new walker they had begun to use, and they all got to participate in singing a few songs and collecting all of their artwork. Eager parents, siblings, grandparents, and even a few aunts and uncles showed up for this event. Still, only about twenty-five people attended; it was not a huge audience by any means. The previous week was spent preparing each individual child to show off his or her best skill, and for Karah this meant stepping up onto three wide, wooden blocks and back down again. These were not quite as daunting as the actual stairs, but they were just as challenging. Rising to the occasion, she had reached the goal of climbing the stairs, but during our practices she was tripping and falling apart emotionally as often as she was keeping her balance. No one was certain how the dramatic Karah would do, performing for a classroom full of adults. Mentally, the fear could be enough to keep her from being able to accomplish her task.

The big graduation day arrived rapidly, and our humble audience gazed in undivided rapture as each child walked (some with assistance, some without) into the room. Somehow, observing the fruits of both coach’s and child’s diligent efforts enabled the onlookers to experience the mental, emotional, and physical strain each student was feeling. Gradually, each one took their turn at their specific task, and suddenly all eyes were on Karah. Bravely, she stood and took her place at the front of the room and began walking toward the blocks. Her trembling limbs and high emotional stress might not have registered to some of the others in the room, but it was painfully obvious to me. From my position at the end of her obstacle, I silently tried to communicate to her not to be afraid and to do her best. Every movement took her total concentration, and she pushed on in slow motion, deliberately calculating every inch her braced foot must travel. Tension mounted in the room as Karah tried to place her foot on top of the block and keep her balance. After several minutes of attempting to get her first foot up (during which she both stepped too far and accidentally kicked the block), she finally felt confident about its placement and undertook the more difficult second-half of the task.

At this point, I sincerely wished my brain would send the telepathic instructions I had called out during the previous days. “Don’t take so long in bringing that second leg up. You’ve got this, but you’ll slide backwards if you don’t push up fast enough. Come on, you can do it!” By her fifth attempt at pulling her second foot up, everyone was completely silent. The stillness was partly out of consideration for Karah’s ability to think clearly, but it really had more to do with the fact that every individual in the room was enthralled, willing Karah to succeed. At one point, the Conductors began exchanging glances, wondering what was the appropriate number of failed attempts before we told Karah, “Good try, let’s move on to the next student.” Sensing a shift in the mood, Karah’s eyes began to shine with tears as she prepared to step back and return to her seat. At that moment she met my gaze. Returning her look, I nodded almost imperceptibly, hoping she would give it another try. Abruptly, she swung her foot up
again with all her strength, stepping perfectly on to the block. I have been
to countless concerts, ceremonies, and sporting events since that day, and
none of those volume levels compared to the explosion of applause that
issued from that meager audience. Karah continued to hold my gaze as
she stood triumphantly on top of the step for a moment, grinned, and
gracefully dismounted.

I have not taken my physical abilities for granted since that
experience. Walking, running, and dancing are absolutely incredible gifts
when compared to the strenuous efforts it requires some to take a single
step. Watching Karah taught me volumes about facing challenges and
reaching my goals. Problems are best tackled one step at a time, and goals
are reached to their fullest extent when I put forth all of my efforts and
strength. Karah not only revealed to me how to face challenges, but also
encouraged me to treasure each moment and take pride in every victory.
Each individual step draws me nearer to an end goal, and every success is
worth celebrating.

“Absolute equality sounds great, in theory. The problem arises from
one innate fact: people are not, and likely never will be, equal”

~Jordan Burnett,
“Equal Inhibition: The Invisible Ceiling and the Fallacious Floor”
Equality is a topic that has been vigorously debated in the United States for centuries. From America’s very conception, equality arose as a fundamental motif for the formation of the country and was touted throughout the American Revolution—emanating the concept that “All men are created equal,” which is concretely transcribed in the Declaration of Independence. However, many warn that the formation of a culture based on unmitigated equality will not only dampen the progress of society enjoyed by Americans today—it will downright asphyxiate it. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. portrays such a society in his 1960s short story “Harrison Bergeron.”

Vonnegut wastes no time setting the scene for a futuristic American society in which absolute equality is not just idealized, but literally enforced by the government. Here, the narrator gives background on the society with omnipresent equality:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General. (Vonnegut 216)

The narrator’s reference to people not only being “equal before God and the law” is significant because it refers to one of the most influential and foundational documents of United States, the Declaration of Independence. This futuristic view suggests that America has progressed, or rather regressed, to a point where equivalence is essentially universal—a vision far different than was first proposed by Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers of the United States. In this supposed utopia, the original intents of the Declaration were expanded through Constitutional amendments and now encompass not only equal opportunity before the law, but equality in every aspect.

At this point, Vonnegut’s society may not sound all that atrocious. Equality for all—how bad can it possibly be? If one is not bothered by draconian handicaps strictly enforced on anybody even sparsely above average—not too bad. The narrator describes able-minded George’s thoughts while watching the awkwardly attenuated ballerinas perform on television: “They weren’t really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in” (216). Perhaps the most ironic part of this society is the fact that they have to use rudimentary handicaps to prevent inequality—if everyone is “finally equal,” why are handicaps needed?

Moreover, the impediments were not limited solely to physical elites; they were chained to mentally agile victims, like George, as well. While explaining further the intricacies of the handicaps, the narrator depicts George’s predicament: “And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times….to keep people like [him] from taking unfair advantage of their brains” (216). In the name of equality, the better and brighter in this society suffer. Faulkner would be chastised for his complex use of symbolism—his stories burned, lest they be read by someone who could not understand them. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have his fantastic oratorical skills stripped away; perhaps a volume control would be affixed to him so that he could be silenced at the will of the Handicapper General. While striving for ultimate political correctness, this society reaches all-out absentmindedness.

Through his artful use of satire and exaggeration, Vonnegut clearly construes the theme of this story: absolute equality is not as glamorous in reality as it may seem beforehand. Absolute equality sounds great, in theory. The problem arises from one innate fact: people are not, and likely never will be, equal. Everyone is not made equal for every task—some will always be better than others for one reason or another. There is a reason basketball players are tall while horse jockeys remain small—just like there is a reason seven-foot, three-hundred and twenty-five pound Shaquille O’Neal is not found competing in the Kentucky Derby. If people are not born equal, they must be made equal. As usual, in Vonnegut’s fictional society, the mindless politicians choose the path of easiest equality and minimal effort: to prevent anyone from feeling inadequate, they completely hinder those above par from utilizing their skills so that everyone remains subpar. In an effort to establish a floor under which no one can fall, they establish a ceiling over which no one can reach.
While “Harrison Bergeron” is undoubtedly a powerful illustration of what can happen to society when parity takes precedence over progress, the question still remains whether the story and its message are relevant to society in the twenty-first century. After America’s continued success without societal chaos and the advent of a Handicapper General, is Vonnegut’s warning still useful?

In Malvern, Arizona, an eleven year-old boy named Demias Jimerson has a very special talent for one of America’s favorite sports: football. Demias is young, but when he receives the ball, he looks as if he already has a six-figure contract with the NFL—spinning, stiff-arming, and sprinting his way to tons of touchdowns for his team. When Demias is in the game, it appears no thing or no one can stop him from reaching the goal line—that is, except for one thing: the Madre Hill rule. Demias is so superb that the Wilson Intermediate Football League evoked the seldom-used Madre Hill rule on him which states that if Demias scores three touchdowns in a game and his team is ahead by fourteen points, he is banned from scoring touchdowns for the remainder of the game. Supporters of the rule argue that the rule is used to benefit the other players so they can sharpen their skills without Demias interfering with his superior talent. Opponents, on the other hand, say it greatly weakens Demias’s ability to strengthen his own proficiency, and that if the other children truly want to improve their skills, they should play with the best.

In a similar, more national effort, schools around the United States are debating whether or not to continue the practice of various honors for high school graduates at their graduation ceremonies. Honor graduate, valedictorian, and salutatorian statuses are being challenged along with the practice of order by class rank. Honor abolitionists claim that the abolishment of these various forms of recognition will keep other students from feeling left out, or inadequate, at the ceremony. Again, opponents argue that the lack of some recognition for the honor graduates will discourage success and leave the overachievers feeling duped after all of their hard work.

Clearly, the notions portrayed in Vonnegut’s short story are still actively debated and discussed. While modern examples are far from the actual punishment of talent, skill, and intelligence that is portrayed in Vonnegut’s story, the beliefs remain prevalent in modern-day society. Still today, “Harrison Bergeron” remains a staunch warning for those who salivate at the idea of consummate equality, regardless of the consequences. Equality in every way is an aberration, and perhaps rightly so. Differences should be celebrated, not degraded—and that goes for both ends of the spectrum, not just the elite-and-able corner. The elite should work to help elevate the less privileged in society, but should not be reprimanded for their superiority or held back in order to prevent subsidiaries from feeling inferior. In fact, that very second-string awareness which the Handicapper General aims to destroy should be the most abounding encouragement to elevate oneself to greater heights. With that kind of motivation, paired with hard work and dedication, one may find him or herself on top—hopefully without the presence of a Handicapper General.

Works Cited
Many presidents have chosen the education of our nation’s children as a focal point of their administration, and this is not without good reason. Our public education is truly in the toilet with nearly half of all students entering, failing to leave with a diploma. In fact, according to a report by the Education Trust, “the U.S. is the only industrialized nation in the world where children are now less likely to receive a high school diploma than their parents were” (Kingsbury). This, coupled with plummeting test scores, has the U.S. severely lagging behind other countries in student performance. In the past, we have fought this fire with great hoses full of cash, only to find that it does nothing but act as an accelerant. President Obama’s policy on education, called Race to the Top, was lauded by him as the solution to our schoolhouse blues; will it be the vehicle of victory for our students or the second installment of the much maligned No Child Left Behind Act?

Though a few presidents have sought to improve our school system, especially since the creation of the Federal Department of Education (ED), perhaps none have done so more notably than George W. Bush. His program, called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was loudly applauded throughout Congress and enjoyed bi-partisan support at its initial inception. It has since become synonymous with unfunded mandate and a perfect example of too many cooks in the kitchen. President Obama’s initiative is very similar to this program, particularly the most important, and coincidentally, most controversial parts.

One of the major components, and also the most reviled, of NCLB is its overdependence on standardized test scores as the truest measure of the success of a student, school, and teacher. The act requires all public school students to be tested yearly from grades 3-8 and once again in high school with the short-term goal being annual score increases. The long-term goal is to have all students meet the minimum standard of proficiency by 2014. Testing figures so prominently in NCLB that some have taken to calling it No Test Left Behind (Chute). Over-emphasizing exams has led to teachers simply teaching the material that the students will be tested on in an effort to boost scores. Frequent testing that is given such critical importance has also led to high student burn-out and a porous education. Some critics of the act claim that schools may even encourage poor testers to drop out early to avoid having their school’s test averages brought down (Kingsbury). While that criticism may be a bit extreme, it is not entirely without merit.

As illustrated by the Texas public school accountability system, a direct model of NCLB, researchers for Rice University and the University of Texas-Austin reported in Science Daily that they have found that it contributes directly to the abysmal drop-out rates there. As a side note of particular importance, a disproportionate number of those drop-outs were African American, Latino, or ESL learners. These plummeting graduation rates are another cog in the wheel of assessment for NCLB. The high graduation rate requirement of NCLB was meant to help avoid the behavior alleged to be occurring in many high-scoring schools, namely pushing out low testers, and sometimes offering various GED prep or alternative placement that is not subject to the same standards of assessment (Swanson). However, like many pieces of legislation, the language in NCLB is broad and open to myriad interpretations. This has allowed some schools to appear to make the all important Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) called for in the act by playing what amounts to a complicated game of semantics.

A program with the best of intentions, NCLB ended up so disliked that it made an excellent stumping platform for the 2008 presidential elections. In fact, then Senator Barack Obama was highly critical of his predecessor’s educational magnum opus and vowed to make education a first order priority. In his own words, Mr. Obama called No Child Left Behind “one of the emptiest slogans in the history of American politics” (Chute). He did, however, agree with the general purpose of it and confirmed his intention to fully fund a revamped version. He disliked the “teaching to the test” that was becoming rite for many educators, and
felt that teachers and schools should be rewarded for success rather than punished for failure. In a campaign interview with the Minnesota school board, Obama professed to be against school vouchers, in favor of local school control, in favor of the expansion of early childhood education programs, and determined to provide what, in his opinion, is the most important factor in a quality education: an excellent teacher. His basic premise was to make teachers eligible for merit based pay raises and school districts in need eligible for running money if certain standards were met (MSBA journal). His eventual election as president put him in the position to make good on his plans.

The center policy of the educational agenda put in place by President Obama was christened Race to the Top (RTTT) and provides competitive grants to schools making good progress toward the goals set forth by NCLB. It seeks to unify the standards of the various localities under one national set of standards and encourages the opening of charter schools. The funding for this program was placed inside the larger legislation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Initially $4.35 billion was allocated for these grants, but it will most certainly require more in the future, and in fact, an additional $1.35 billion was requested in the 2011 budget.

According to the U.S. Department of Education website, RTTT covered four main areas of concern: adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy; building data systems that measure student growth and success, and informing teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction; recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and turning around our lowest-achieving schools.

To be eligible for one of these grants, a state first had to apply for it and then be scored on selection criteria totaling 500 points. The criteria consisted of, in order of importance, seven areas: great teachers and leaders (138 points), state success factors (125 points), standards and assessments (70 points), general selection criteria (55 points), turning around the lowest-achieving schools (50 points), data systems to support infrastructure (47 points), and the prioritization of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education (15 points). States were eligible for different amounts of money based on the number of children ages 5-17 that reside in their state, and the awards ranged from 20 million to 700 million.

RTTT was to be implemented in two phases. A state that felt ready to apply for the first phase could do so, or they could wait until the second phase of grants. If a state received funds in the first phase, they were ineligible for funds in phase two. So far, in the first two phases, eleven states and The District of Columbia have received grant money under this program. Delaware and Tennessee were selected for grants in the first phase based on their aggressive plans for reform and state-wide commitment to change according to the recommendations. In the second phase, forty states applied for the grants; the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island were all awarded funds of various amounts. According to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, “These states show what is possible when adults come together to do the right thing for children” (ED web).

RTTT at its most fundamental was supposed to energize school districts facing tough economic times to do whatever is necessary to secure the funds needed to run their schools. It was a carrot set before hungry rabbits, carefully kept out of complete reach, allowing just a nibble with the promise of more if the right changes were made and goals met. Arguments in favor of this program included the belief that a standardized set of curricula would be a benefit to the entire country. States, especially poor ones, would no longer need to spend money developing their own curriculum or test standards, allowing that cash to be funneled back to the students. Basically, this would allow all students access to the same educational opportunities, and that certainly is not a bad thing in and of itself. The flip side to these national standards is that they do not take into consideration the cultural differences seen around the country, nor the local interests and concerns. Putting the E.D. in charge of what the students learn further erodes the traditional, and some would argue constitutional, duties of the local and state governments to provide for the education of its citizens. Texas has vocally argued against such standards and decided not to apply for a RTTT grant for that reason. Governor Rick Perry explained his decision, “Texas is on the right path toward improved education, and we would be foolish and irresponsible to place our children’s future in the hands of unelected bureaucrats and special interest groups thousands of miles away in Washington, virtually eliminating parents’ participation in their children’s education” (Office of the Governor).

Parental participation has been notably absent from the federal agenda for some time. Another program pushed by RTTT is a pay-for-
performance system that unfairly places the onus of student success on the teacher, rather than taking into account the many other factors that play into academic achievement; most notably absent, as usual, are the parents. It is, however, one of the key arguments in favor of RTTT. Greater teacher accountability through a merit pay system would allow teachers who have never before been eligible for a pay raise based on job performance to now be able to get one. Who could argue with the appropriateness of that? This will, theoretically, make teachers work harder, seek self-improvement, and stay in the profession longer. The drawbacks to this, however, are sharp. While the initial proposal promised to reform and expand the ways that teachers are evaluated, that promise has been hard to keep. Educators are finding instead that the President is more committed than ever to the status quo. Rather than basing “merit” on a comprehensive appraisal, the teachers’ performances are judged according to the test scores of the students they teach. Along with making teachers into scapegoats for the failing system, pay for performance plans also have a tendency to create hostile work environments where they can be the most harmful, and undermine ethical teaching practices, as has already come to pass in Atlanta where teachers were involved in a cheating scandal (Torres). In Atlanta, this was not because of pay for performance, but simply to avoid sanctions from having children failing the tests. The bottom line remains the same, however, and once a teacher’s paycheck is at stake as well, things could get downright ugly.

Another side effect of Obama’s punitive policy is an increase in the heat from some Republican governors, namely Scott Walker and John Kasich, to end the collective bargaining rights afforded to teachers. Others seek to end tenure and due-process rights. The implied message from the White House has permitted the blame for the failures of our school system to be placed squarely on the shoulders of the teachers, and they are suffering for it. Some states seek to fix budget shortfalls by killing the union vote; in such dire economic times, nothing should be considered sacrosanct. However, silencing the unions could be akin to giving the wolf the key to the hen house. Without the intervention of the unions, we will surely see larger class sizes and a dramatic increase in the “do more with less” mentality. To say that teachers are feeling put upon is an understatement. In fact, according to Diane Ravitch reporting for Newsweek in March, 2011, “Many of our nation’s top teachers—some with National Board Certification—are so disgusted by the attacks on public education that they are planning a march on Washington in July. They plan to demand equitable funding for all public schools, an end to using test scores to punish schools and teachers, and involvement of parents and teachers in the decisions that affect their schools.” Teachers, however, are not the only ones who dislike this program.

In its relatively short life, RTTT has proven to have as many detractors as NCLB. Surprisingly, one of the most vocal has been the National Education Association (NEA), a typically flagrant supporter of all things proposed by the Democratic Party. In the beginning, they did support President Obama’s initiatives as they felt they were a direct refutation of President Bush’s misguided folly. Time has proven otherwise as they say on their website:

The details of the RTTT proposal do not seem to square with the Administration’s earlier philosophy. The Administration’s theory of success now seems to be tight on the goals and tight on the means, with prescriptions that are not well-grounded in knowledge from practice and are unlikely to meet the goals. We find this top-down approach disturbing; we have been down that road before with the failures of No Child Left Behind, and we cannot support yet another layer of federal mandates that have little or no research base of success and that usurp state and local government’s responsibilities for public education.

If the administration doesn’t even have the backing of the major education union, then perhaps the policies should be rethought. Another area that has intensely displeased educators high and low, including the NEA, is the continued and increased reliance upon standardized test scores. This approach has been found, in convincing qualitative research, to be very unsuccessful; focusing so narrowly on a snapshot of student understanding simply highlights the mechanisms of memorization and regurgitation of material. This is a talent, not a teachable ability. More importantly, it does nothing to show whether or not a student is prepared to move on and succeed in college or be productive in the economy. They do nothing to measure creativity, ingenuity, or complex thinking. Historically and based on research, standardized tests also contribute to the failure of our minority students and those who are not native English speakers.

It is then not surprising that other vocal critics of RTTT are the major civil rights organizations: the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. They
If education is a civil right, children in “winning” states should not be the only ones who have the opportunity to learn in high quality environments. Such an approach reinstates the antiquated and highly politicized frame for distributing federal support to states that civil rights organizations fought to remove in 1965. (qtd. in Freedberg)

Making the education of our future generations into some kind of contest means that inevitably some children will win and some will lose. It makes education less about healthy intrinsic motivation and more about the greatest of extrinsic motivators: U.S. greenbacks. Some states will be awarded those dollars and some will not. Over 20 states have already found that out, and it remains to be seen how they will pay for the systems they have prematurely implemented in order to be eligible to win the grant money.

Ultimately, RTTT, like most other federal grants, amounts to a temporary hand up to states struggling just to keep schools open due to the economic crisis they are in. States are, for the most part, in no kind of condition to make improvements when they do not even have the operating cash to keep students in school for the full 180 day calendar. For those states taking the temporary money, what happens when the well dries up? Will they be willing to give away more and more of their sovereignty to the federal government in an entreaty for preservation? Will they make ever larger compromises once they become hooked on those federal funds? Like NCLB, RTTT focuses on standardized test scores of students, but to the nth degree. While President Obama declared himself to be very much against testing as a measure of student success, his program has loudly spoken the opposite. After careful analysis, Race To The Top appears to be critically short on research and tediously long on rhetoric, the stereotypical bureaucratic solution. Will it be an ineffectual band-aid placed on an already gushing artery, or will RTTT prove to be the fatal blow?

Works Cited


Land available for agriculture will eventually be depleted due to the increasing population around the world. In the future, there will be a major crisis due to environmental deforestation, world hunger, increased prices, and limited resources. Modern farming practices will lead to environmental devastation if people do not come up with a solution. People in third world countries are suffering this fate right now; their land is increasingly unsuitable for irrigation and producing crops. This fate will come to the U.S. and many other countries like it if action is not taken immediately.

What can the U.S. and the rest of the world do? There is an alternative way of dealing with this problem: vertical farming. What is vertical farming? Vertical farming is an indoor agricultural practice using tall buildings (Despommier 143). To put things in simpler terms, it is stacking the farm up, instead of going wide. Vertical farming is a more effective agricultural system compared to conventional farming.

Applying vertical farming will help sustain the environment. The latest newspaper articles and scientific journals state that the environment is gradually declining. The increasing human population is causing “global warming, deforestation and the steady extinction of species” (Gillis et al. para 7). For instance, due to the vast number of human beings during the Middle Ages, the majority of the trees that covered the lands were chopped down for the use of traditional farming for crops and livestock (Ratcliffe 78). But with the commonsense practices of farming vertically, the forest does not have to suffer destruction for agricultural practices. Another factor that is damaging the environment is runoff caused by the massive amount of water used in conventional farming. Dr. Dickson Despommier, professor of Microbiology and Environmental Health Sciences at Columbia University, claims, “Runoff in most advanced farming operation is laden with silt, fertilizer, pesticides, and herbicides, and usually ends up in some river on its way to the estuary” (151). These chemicals used for agricultural purposes are washed away to the streams, lakes, and sea, and are hazardous to any living organisms in the water. Fertilizers used to make corn grow faster can be devastating to marine animals, and the cost is about 200,000 tons of seafood losses a year in the Gulf of Mexico (Walsh and Kaplan para 9). Runoffs can be prevented if the practice of farming is done indoors due to the containment of water, saving the damage to water around the globe. Dr. Despommier explained that there will be no more runoffs, and the use of water is conserved by up to 95 percent if hydroponic and aeroponic is implemented with vertical farming (162). This means no more use of soil like most modern farms do today. Vertical farming will prevent the damages that conventional farming has on the environment. These include saving the forest from being destroyed and preventing runoff from destroying aquatic life forms. Even though vertical farming can lead to a positive outcome for the environment, it can have a good impact on humanity, as well.

Vertical farming can be a good addition to the increasing population and limited resources. There is an increase in population in the African continent compared to other countries:

- Congo and other poverty-stricken African countries, where fertility rates remain high, will produce much of the world’s future population growth: Germany and Ethiopia now have comparable populations (82 and 83 million people respectively), a UN report notes, but by 2050, Germany’s population is expected to decline to 75 million people, while Ethiopia’s will hit 145 million. (Gillis et al. para 5)

As the population grows, will there be enough spaces to create more farms? Will people share lands? If not, will wars and crises take over the land and crops (Gillis et al. para 4)? The answer might be yes. People in the past fought for territory when there was not enough space. With farming practices today, much of the land is being used by agricultural practices, making space limited. The conventional way of doing things is inefficient because some day space will run out for farming. If it is possible to build skyscrapers and apartments, why not build farms that rise up? Why are economists thinking positively about the future? Gillis, Lunau, and Kontic write in *Maclean’s*: “The debate is increasingly framed by thinkers who view population growth as an expansion of human capital, rather than simply a drain on resources” (para 7). The fact is that there are more people using resources than replacing them. For example, *Time* magazine reports that fish are nearly going into extinction because people are fishing excessively; of the total haul of fish, “90 percent are tuna and marlins” (Walsh 30). These species cannot handle this load. There is hope, though, with vertical farming because people do not have to worry about running out of space as fish farms expand. They can be an addition to the vertical farming facility. The tanks could both house the fish and provide water for crops. Although vertical farming is beneficial for both humanity and resource
The indoor setting of vertical farming will provide security for crops, protecting them from damage-causing pests and adverse weather. Pests can be difficult to manage in an open field, whether they are deer, rabbits, rodents, or insects. People who garden might know this because they have experienced it in their own backyards. A survey given by the Organic Farming Research Foundation showed that farmers have difficulty maintaining organic crops due to weeds, bugs, animals and infections (Chen et al. 124). In organic farms, pesticides and herbicides are not being used to get rid of pests, which creates difficulties. Wild animals found in most conventional farming have to be dealt with, such as deer, rabbits, and rodents, because they feed on any crops that are edible to them. However, vertical farming can solve these pest problems without the use of chemicals and make organic farming more efficient. The infrastructure of vertical farms will prevent uninvited pests from entering the building, unlike conventional farming which is done mostly outdoors (Despommier 161). The use of a positive pressure system inside of the vertical farm can keep the bugs out; positive pressures are similar to what a hospital or microbial lab uses to reduce infectious bugs like bacteria (Despommier 199).

Climate changes are another aspect to be considered. John A. Cross writes in *Geographical Review* that “Official agricultural statistics indicate that these weather vagaries had adverse effects on crop yields, especially 1988, 1992, and 1993” (277). Other statistics show that “farmers typically expect to lose 10 percent of their crops to various types of adverse weather” (Cross 277). However, vertical farms can protect against the adverse effect of climate change, which means they can be built in the middle of desert if needed. Pest control and climate can be a problem to crops in traditional farming, but can be managed due to the indoor setting of vertical farms. Even though indoor farming protects crops from pests and climate changes, it can also help prevent the spread of illnesses.

Vertical farming will keep food protected from pollution and spoilage caused by contamination. Cars, trucks, tractors, airplanes, and ships all put out emissions which might not be easily detectable, but can be harmful to humans. Over time, emission gases like carbon dioxide can create chronic diseases that jeopardize respiratory and cardiovascular systems (Neacsu and Negurita 136). Another factor to consider is that chemicals used in modern farming to increase productivity have a negative impact on human health and environment (Chen et al.124). This can lead to hospitalizations and shorten human lifespan. The use of vertical farms will reduce health-threatening pollution to a minimum. Tractors will become obsolete because crops can be managed indoors using alternative systems, and trucks will only be traveling short distances because the vertical farm is located in the heart of the city, creating fewer emission gases (Despommier 143).

Spoilage on produce is another issue that needs to be addressed. Spoiling on perishable produce can be dangerous for human consumption and “most spoilage losses...are due to non-plant-pathogens. These organisms can contaminate the commodity in the field, during harvest, transport, processing, and/or storage” (Tournas 34). This is true; when people pick vegetables with their bare hands, they transfer germs onto the produce. According to Dr. Despommier’s idea of vertical farming, safety precautions will be taken, such as in wearing protective suits to prevent contamination (198-200). This means more fresh fruits and vegetables will be saved from spoilage, making it easier for consumers to purchase, and providing them with a healthier lifestyle. Vertical farming will benefit human health by reducing harmful pollutants and providing easy access to healthy foods without contamination.

The benefit of vertical farming far exceeds modern day farm practices. The environment is affected by humanity’s traditional farming practices. Populations are growing rapidly and might change the ratio of humans to foods. Pest management is becoming chaotic due to the open access of conventional farms. Pathogens and emission gases produced by modern farming are causing human health problems. Vertical farming is the solution to this entire problem. If farming practices are not changed, there might be a disaster in future generations, and possible extinction of humanity.
Formal Essays

Work Cited


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**Dr. Brian J. Corrigan** is a professor of Renaissance literature in the University system of Georgia. He won his first national award at seventeen with a full-length play entitled *The Sound of the River*. In 2006, Brian was named Author of the Year in the debut fiction category by the Georgia Writers Association for his first novel, *The Poet of Loch Ness*.

**Mary Hood** is the author of two story collections: “How Far She Went” and “And Venus Is Blue,” as well as the novel “Familiar Heat.” In 2011 she completed another collection of stories, “A Clear View of the Southern Sky,” and is working on a novel about the Flint River, “The Other Side of the River.” She lives and works in Jackson County, Georgia.

**Dr. Linda Stallworth Williams** is a Professor of English at North Georgia College & State University. After teaching English at the University of Oklahoma and at Rose State College, Williams served as Coordinator of Faculty Development for the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents before joining the NGCSU faculty in 1997. In 2001, she received the Dorothy Golden Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Composition, an award presented annually at the regional Student Success in First-Year Composition Conference. In 2007, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) selected Williams as the Georgia Professor of the Year.

**Dr. Ralph Tejeda Wilson** teaches graduate-level courses in poetry writing at Kennesaw State University. He has published poetry, fiction, and reviews in numerous journals, including *The Georgia Review, The New England Review, Puerto del Sol, prairie Schooner*, and others. His first book of poems, *A Black Bridge*, was published by the University of Nevada Press in April 2001. In 2002, he was awarded the Georgia Author of the Year Award in Poetry by the Georgia Writers Association. He is currently at work completing a second book of poetry.
Brittany Barron is a sophomore at Gainesville State College and an English major who loves to write. Her favorite poets are Laurie Sheck, Margaret Atwood, and Sylvia Plath. When she is not busy with school or curled up with a book, she likes to travel with her sister.

Tiffany Bennett is currently an English Education major at GSC. Tiffany loves to read and write leisurely. She aspires to become a writer like Lewis Carroll, and hopes to publish children stories one day. Her muses are her dog, Viktor, and her cat, Einstein.

Nate Benjamin was born and raised in north central Indiana. He has enjoyed writing ever since he can remember, but was inspired to write poetry and short fiction through his interactions with Dr. Samuel Prestridge, a professor at Gainesville State College. He currently lives with his wife and daughter in Athens, GA.

Jordan Burnett is an aspiring computer scientist who just recently started enjoying writing and literature. He plans to graduate from Southern Poly Tech after leaving Gainesville State College. Plagued with the disease of a massive amount of forethought, he’s found himself wondering exactly how he will be remembered in this world.

Emmy Dixon is determined to change the world; the written word is but a tool. She has made it her mission to speak for the silenced and awaken people to live right now in the world around them. In her free time she does an inordinate amount of laundry.

Cindy Dyer is a Science major at Gainesville State College. She lives in Habersham County along with her husband, who is very supportive of her goals. They have two daughters who keep them on their toes. Although known for her crazy storytelling, she recently rediscovered how great a story can be on paper.

Margaret Kellum is an Early Childhood/Special Education major in her second year at Gainesville State College. Time not spent studying is spent with the people she loves, snapping photographs and filling journals with her experiences, thoughts and prayers.

Young Kim is a second year Gainesville State College student pursuing a B.S. degree in Environmental and Spatial Analysis. A native of Korea, Kim is also a veteran in the U.S. Navy. The motivation behind his writing is to let others know that there are better alternatives to modern farming.

Zellie Manzella is in her third semester at Gainesville State College. She is an English Education major with a passion for writing. When she isn't focused on school, her attention is on her journal, where she writes daily entries. She feels so blessed that God gave her the gift to express herself through story.

Spencer Mills, after a conversation with his sister, began to take notice of small details and family traditions that had been overlooked for many years. He has a deep desire to go beyond the raw data to create moments of history that perhaps were previously unnoticed in the shadow of greater events.

Jasun Pina, a veteran of the United States Air Force, lives and writes in Flowery Branch, Georgia with his wife, Erin, and two-year-old Dachshund, Rolly. He is an avid artist, who enjoys drawing, painting, reading, and writing. This is Jasun’s first publication.

Kristen Stamey has enjoyed writing stories since she was seven years old. She is currently taking creative writing courses at GSC. When she isn't writing, she enjoys singing, playing guitar, and indulging in her obsession with Tim Burton films. She resides in Buford with her husband Josh and daughter Kiernan.
Short Fiction

1st Place  Jasun Pina  “Keep”
2nd Place  Nathan Benjamin  “The Controller”
3rd Place  Spencer Mills  “A Civil War Letter”

Poetry

1st Place  Nathan Benjamin  “Summer in Winterville”
2nd Place  Brittany Barron  “Close your Eyes”
3rd Place  Nathan Benjamin  “The Scarecrow”

One Act Plays

1st Place  Kristen Stamey  “Teen Temptations”
2nd Place  Zellie Manzella  “Army Blues”
3rd Place  Tiffany Bennett  “The Happy Hostel”

Informal Essay

1st Place  Kristen Stamey  “The Writer Resides”
2nd Place  Cindy Dyer  “Jesus Loves Me”
3rd Place  Margaret Kellum  “Taking the Stairs”

Formal Essay

1st Place  Jordan Burnett  “Equal Inhibition: The Invisible Ceiling and the Fallacious Floor”
2nd Place  Emmy Dixon  “Race to the Bank”
3rd Place  Santiago Rodriguez  “On Any Given Sunday”

The 2011 issue won third place in the Journal Category at the Regional Southern Literary Festival.