

**AN EXPLORATION AND MODERNIZATION OF CLASSICAL
EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT THROUGH FICTION**

by
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EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT THROUGH FICTION**

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Abstract:

Author Chip Fankhauser explores classical existential philosophy through a series of fictional short stories. Each story deals with a different subject matter and theme of classical existentialism. In this collection Fankhauser also experiments with form and technique in an effort to develop more as a writer.

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Overview and Author's Statement

It was January, February, and March of 2020. I was generating ideas for a thesis project, thinking about every piece of literature I'd ever liked, and what I'd like to try to write. Like many naïve young writers, I was drawn to the world of fiction. At the time, I was also in a fiction writing course with my thesis advisor, Dr. Thompson, and we had read some Kafka and some literature that encapsulated existential elements. Maybe it was the flow of history or the universe that drew me towards existentialism, or lively discussions with the research librarian, Aimee Harrison. Maybe, like a writer friend of mine once told me, "you're first professional writing project is just processing your childhood." Whatever it was, a divine sense of irony certainly had its kiss for me.

That March began the 2021 coronavirus pandemic. Existential dread wasn't something you had to read about in literature or watch in movies. It wasn't something you had to go out and find – it found you. Not only were people dying in record numbers from an unseeable and unknown disease, but cracks in American society were apparent as ever. Police brutality and racial prejudice took the forefront of news cycles. A divisive presidency made enemies out of neighbors. We physically stopped being able to see each other's bodies – we couldn't exist with our loved ones. There became a culture of judgment on in-person fraternization, further making us look at our neighbors as strangers. I'm sure there are going to be thousands of literary articles of all forms exploring the pandemic and the year of 2020 from every angle, but that's not the purpose of this introduction or this thesis. Basically, existential thought wasn't hard to come by.

One might think that the pairing of so much unprecedented change and the desire to write literature existential feelings of anxiety and dread might be kismet. However, in the genre of fiction, I found myself in an impossible position, between two opposite but equally impossible

writing assignments. On one hand, I could try to write stories that mimicked, mirrored, or even directly represented what I was seeing in the news and around me every day. With that course, however, I found myself lacking true understanding what was happening around me well enough to try and represent it well in fiction, or to write anything that wouldn't be appropriating the narratives of people suffering around me. On the other hand, I could explore existential topics and scenarios completely dissimilar from what I was seeing on a daily basis, and instead try to replicate the narrative and creative success found in my literary research. However, when approaching this option, motivation became a major obstacle, as I had trouble trying to find escapism from my current existential crisis in other philosophically challenging scenarios. My brain, heart, and soul could only take so much.

Retroactively, the choice to switch the focus of this thesis to non-fiction instead of fiction seems like a potentially beneficial one. If writing outside of my own experience felt inauthentic or exhausting, then logic would imply I should write what I could see and hold. Maybe I should have done that – I don't have all the answers, even now, writing this. I don't know if I consider each of the pieces I've included in this collection a success on either their existential exploration or their composition technique. These two goals – satisfying generation of philosophical thought and high literary quality – I felt were always at odds with each other, as I felt like I had to sacrifice parts of one to get closer to another.

But I assert that this exploration isn't invalid or flawed in conception. What I feel are my shortcomings in either the role of a philosopher or as a writer are mine to carry, but I believe this collection still has a meaning and purpose. This is existential fiction written by a person living existential reality. I stand at what feels like the epicenter of a perfect philosophical storm, where change is constant, the future is as unknown as ever, and everything I thought I knew has been

compromised. I think what I've been able to produce has value, perhaps to some scholar forty years in the future trying to write their own research thesis on how the pandemic affected college student writing, or maybe to some weird publisher who loves a piece after a thousand rounds of edits, but mainly to me. I haven't been able to journal about everything that's happened this past year. Every time I tried, I came up at a loss for words or emotions to describe everything I was thinking and feeling. For a year in the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to generate two creative works: one, a collection of silly dinosaur paintings, and the other is this. So, I'm genuinely proud to present this collection of existential short stories.

Conception and Research

My choice to explore fiction came from variety of factors. First, the dream of fictional success is sexy - of becoming either a literary legend, like Hemmingway or Austen, or an absolute blockbuster, like Collins or Patterson. Either way is creative success as a writer – creating something people enjoy. And mainstream media certainly focusses more heavily on fiction properties than anything else. As a writer, I also find fiction challenging with in a postmodern society. I've always been drawn to fictional stories that can present societal truths and express them in unconventional and creative ways unavailable to nonfiction pieces. This, as I'll later discuss, became a large factor in the research phase of my writing process. Existential fiction, in that regard, explores the horror of existence through symbolic and situational means.

My choice to explore existentialism began as mimicry of some of my favorite literature. Of the existential literature I had read when beginning this project, I admired their often experimental form. The most recent piece I had read, The Hunger Artist by Franz Kafka, was so weird and surreal that I wanted to understand why something that seemed to deviate from the typical short story format was still so effective. Existential literature also seemed like a real

challenge for me to try to make work, as it takes masterful skill to create literature with so many layers, textures, and ideas.

The research phase consisted of my reviewing of several different types of media: nonfiction philosophical texts, written fiction, and film. Listed below is a list of the literature I reviewed, which most heavily focused on fiction and actual examples of existential literature. Pieces of my research were generated by pieces I had read before and revisited, as well as pieces recommended to me by my advisor and by the TCU research librarian.

Nonfiction

Introduction to existentialism: from Kierkegaard to The Seventh Seal – Robert L. Wicks

Fiction

The Hunger Artist – Franz Kafka

The Metamorphosis – Franz Kafka

In the Penal Colony – Franz Kafka

Invisible Man – Ralph Ellison

Notes from a Dead House – Fyodor Dostoevsky

The Nose – Nikolai Gogol

The Overcoat – Nikolai Gogol

The Plague – Albert Camus

The Stranger – Albert Camus

Wise Blood – Flannery O'Connor

Catch-22 – Joseph Heller

Waiting for Godot – Samuel Beckett

The Things They Carried – Tim O'Brien

Film

The Shawshank Redemption – based on a Stephen King novel, Dir. Frank Darabont

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly – Based on a Jean-Dominique Bauby novel, dir. Julian Schnabel

Conclusions from Research

Throughout my reading and watching, I found a better understanding of classical existentialist ideas, story themes, and tonal elements. While some of the philosophical readings were a bit difficult to understand for my novice philosopher mind, I got enough of an elementary understanding of the concepts to recognize them in my readings.

With my study of the existential fiction, I made a note of how subtle yet potent the themes of existentialism are in these short stories, novels, and plays. I decided that I wanted to try to incorporate the themes similarly in my own pieces. The literature incorporated these themes both in their situational concept, characterization, and in language. For example, in The Metamorphosis, Gregor's surroundings, background, and attitude are all elements of his transformation, the absurd element.

In my readings, I identified six central themes of existential thought. There are many more themes and ideas, and I only claim to have a basic understanding of these concepts, which I have summarized briefly below:

1. Existence precedes essence – Humanity's physical existence and needs have a higher priority in our subconscious than the demands of societal structures or modern desires
2. Anxiety, anguish, and dread – A general sense of uneasiness that exists as part of the human fear of a pointless existence

3. Absurdity – A reaction to contradictions and impossible truths that are present in human existence and in our environment
4. Nothingness or the Void – The concept of existence without constricting essences; being free of absurd realities
5. Death – The ultimate step of Nothingness, and something that is unavoidable, the end of both essence and existence
6. Alienation or Estrangement – Feeling out of place in immediate surroundings or in current situation

I tried to incorporate each one of these themes as a central idea into one story, while using creative writing and fiction to carry my thoughts on these themes. Many of these themes overlap and exist within any existential literature, but I tried to focus on producing a unique situation that primarily features each theme.

However, when doing my research, I found some of the themes, topics, and settings to be a little dated and irrelevant to modern times. I don't mean in subject content, but in attitudes towards large concepts as well. For example, I really hated the character Mersault in The Stranger by Camus. For context, Mersault is a man who is psychologically detached from his surroundings, as the reader sees his inner monologue and lack of emotion, even when his mother passes away or he becomes romantically involved with a nice woman. I don't mean to say that Mersault is a bad character – his perspective is almost sociopathic and falls into almost the exact definition of “existence precedes essence,” as he seems free of the societal expectations for emotional response. However, that doesn't mean he isn't a douchebag. He totally is. Today, I think Mersault doesn't quite fit in as a compelling protagonist that audiences would find relatable. Personally, I found his callous attitude and apathy all too

familiar, as recent times have seen the emergence of people who proudly proclaim their ignorance. People who refuse to do something as simple as wear mask to stop the spread of a deadly virus, or deny racist elements in our social systems, or ignore scientists of basically all kinds (climate change scientists, sociologists, political theorists, etc.) all soured my reading of Mersault. I also found his lack of emotional response to the death of his mother off-putting because of the massive amount of death in society right now, and because I love my mom. Mersault is not portrayed as a hero in this story by any means, but honestly he doesn't even appeal to me as a protagonist right now – I see enough narratives of apathetic people like him already. So, in my stories, I tried to create more empathetic protagonists who still struggle with existential concepts.

In my stories, my other main goal was to modernize these tenets of existentialism by factoring in how I, and other members of Gen Z, might react or perceive a situation with existential connotations. I also tried to include some modern consequences of large existential themes, as I will discuss below, hoping to analyze these modern realities through existential fiction.

Short Stories

The first story in the collection is titled The Vegetable and explores the ideas of the theme existence precedes essence. Inspired by my obsession with Grey's Anatomy and the film, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, this story follows a dancer trapped in a pseudocoma, or "locked-in syndrome," where he is completely unable to move or speak but fully conscious. The dancer, who refers to himself as "the poor man," has a mental conversation with the doctor who's assigned to help his rehabilitation. I tried to modernize this story by making it about a modern performative culture. The dancer, who is unable to move in bed,

rejects the doctor's attempts at mental or physical stimulation because he is tired of being perceived as a subject. He believes his essences as made him a performer throughout his life, and after feeling like he hadn't satisfied anyone with his performances, on or off the stage, he stubbornly resists any desire to move again.

This piece was the first I wrote specifically for this collection. I tried to model this one a bit like The Hunger Artist by Kafka, as the subject isn't referred to by name. While I do show a bit more of the dancer's inner monologue, I try to leave his choices and thoughts open to interpretation. Another way I tried to emulate classic existential literature was in the title. In my research, much of the literature I read was titled "The _____," which informed the reader on what to pay attention to or keep in mind when reading the piece. Overall, this one deviates considerably from the classic short story structure, as there is no traditional dialogue, and the conflict does not evolve in the same way. This made it particularly challenging to write, but I found the experience of experimenting with subject and form stimulating.

The second piece, Doritos Lasagna, was a piece I originally wrote for a fiction writing workshop course with Dr. Thompson. However, as I did my research and talked with the research librarian, one subset of existential media is prison literature, and I found that this piece fit into my collection.

Doritos Lasagna is an exploration of the existential theme of anxiety. This piece follows a young chef-in-training, Marco, who visits a childhood friend, Jack, who's in jail for selling drugs. In this conversation, Marco and Jack reconcile the different paths they chose, as Jack argues which path has more integrity. The modern element I incorporated into this piece was comments on capitalism and how the system perpetuates guilt, no matter what path someone is able to take. For Marco, who is pursuing a traditional career and wants to become a chef,

he sees his advancement as perhaps a betrayal of his community, as he wrestles with having to leave parts of himself behind to move forward. Jack, while he feels like he is loyal to his roots, he is imprisoned and cannot participate in the community he feels loyal to. They both are separated from their childhood selves by capitalistic structures, and both see their own work as honest.

Incorporating themes of capitalism into this piece was extremely delicate, as I wanted that aspect to be subtle. This isn't a scene where the characters point out the flaws of capitalism or rewrite the Communist Manifesto, but rather an intimate scene between two old friends who grew apart. The general sense of anxiety centered around the future has always been something that's weighed on me heavily, as I see people with more connections than me quickly acquire high-paying jobs and easy lives, whereas I also recognize my own privilege and how that's accelerated my future plans. This is something a lot of Gen Z deals with, as many of us are coming of age in an almost dystopian capitalist hellscape, without anyone willing to make systemic change. This was something I needed to include in this collection, as it seems to be such a universal experience and feeling to me.

My third piece, The Apprentice, explores the theme of Nothingness and also makes some allusions to existential themes of God. This piece follows a young piano player, Adina, as she goes on a house visit to assess a broken piano with her mentor, Mr. Haversham. Adina is put in the middle of an argument between Mr. Haversham and the manager of the community center, Shawna, after they disagree about the piano. In this piece, I tried to have the characters of Shawna and Mr. Haversham reach the conclusion that the most important thing was the piano. For Mr. Haversham, he reverently worships the piano, and holds it in a nostalgic, infallible light. Shawna values the piano as a gathering place of her community and

doesn't want a judgmental old man to take something that holds sentimental value to her. The "modern" aspect of this story is how Gen Z reacts to the conflict between Millennials and Baby Boomers, who both seem to be extremely stubborn in having the world operate the way that they believe it should. Adina serves as the Gen Z perspective, as she is very much a realist, and thinks of the piano as something she can use to create music. She sees beyond its physical existence and values its purpose.

I wrote this piece after reading Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor, which dealt heavily with the concept of religion. God, in that novel, is a subject that everyone has an extreme opinion about or reaction towards. I refer to this piece with my friends as my "Piano God" piece, as the central piano represents a deity that both Mr. Haversham and Shawna wish to own but have different methods. Adina here rejects both of the belief systems of Shawna and Mr. Haversham and has no strong opinion on the piano. She admires not its essence, but its existence, valuing it as an instrument which she could use. In my life, I've often felt like I'm being argued around and over, as older generations carry in beliefs and standards that they refuse to change. Yet, despite those arguing above and around me, I've felt like I had to keep moving forward, despite their claims, and wanted to represent this disconnect in this story.

As I wrote this during the COVID-19 pandemic, I wrote January 3rd, 2021 as a fictitious journal entry. This story explores the theme of death, which has been extremely present in the news, as hundreds of thousands are dying to the virus. The journal entry is written by Valerie, a young woman who lives alone after the death of her mother. She recounts a visit from a social worker and a friend of her mother's, Doris, and misunderstands why a social worker would be visiting her. In her grief, Valerie has turned to trying to learn how to be her own mother and develop the skills that her mother had before her death. Here, I reject a bit of

the classical existentialist understanding of death. Death, for Valerie's mother, wasn't an escape from structures oppressive to the human existence but was a random occurrence.

I wanted to explore the effects the pandemic has taken on society's collective psyche in this piece. Many characters in existential literature are depicted as alone, with no one they're truly intimate with. This piece was also partially inspired by The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, as the fight to stay sane in my drastically changing mid-pandemic world has felt like it's robbing me of humanity. Though this journal entry is fake, I hope to capture real thoughts and feelings that people are feeling day to day. Overall, I think the classical existential understanding of Death may be a little dated. In our modern world, where we are constantly engaged in societal structures through technology and media, escape from those constructs is a luxury that most people can't afford. I wanted to make this piece reflect someone who didn't consider Death an escape from her reality, but who viewed the loss of her mother as a stimulus for her to try to change.

The final piece in this collection is titled Marlo Dwarfstar: Origins, and explores the theme of alienation. This story follows a man named Michael who has an elective procedure to have a memory erased from his brain. After the procedure, he meets his friend Nathalie, who slowly realizes that he might not be the same person as before. In this story, I tried to include the idea of the *Urbemensch* in my modernization. With all the media properties that exist today, many people spend time and creative effort creating an Original Character (OC) that exists in a fictional world. Michael, who's a fan of the Star Wars spoof "Space Elves," comes out of his procedure feeling more empowered to be the OC, "Marlo Dwarfstar."

Without the essences that were restricting him before, he is able to achieve what he feels is

his true existence, being more like Marlo. Nathalie finds her friend's new identity jarring and, ultimately, worries that her friend has changed to be unrecognizable to her.

This piece was inspired by a piece that I originally wrote in my first creative writing class. The original story had a similar concept but was much less focused and had more characters. I wanted to rewrite that story for this collection, as it fit well. This piece was also inspired by how prevalent escapism has become in our society. It has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, as people explore new and different worlds through videogames, science fiction properties, and other media. Many main characters in these media are able to achieve their goals because of their uncanny abilities, powers, or equipment, and their only obstacles tend to be physical and external. For regular humans, we face obstacles that were based in our past. We are faced with our own self-doubt, regret, and insecurity. I wanted to explore how it would look if someone had the "power" to become independent from those obstacles, especially someone who experienced an indescribable trauma in this story.

Please enjoy my collection :)

The Vegetable

The poor man decided that he liked the blank screen of the TV in his hospital room and hoped that no one would turn it on. He had thought about asking someone to turn it on so he could watch something. Maybe news tragedies to make him feel lucky, or a shopping channel to make him feel frugal, or a sports channel to make him feel sleepy. In the end, though, he decided that even if he could speak and ask someone to turn on the TV and turn on something that would keep him entertained, he would get sick of it eventually, and there was no guarantee he'd be able to speak again to tell someone to turn it off. Silence, he decided, was better because he always knew what to expect. More silence.

Unfortunately for the poor man, he could not enjoy silence forever, but he could expect a new doctor or nurse or therapist or whoever to steal his blood and check his piss bag and look at his numbers and poke him. They disturbed his rest. The longest that he'd been left alone, he thought, was twelve hours. It happened at night, and everyone must have been sleeping in their own beds instead of bothering him in his.

Someone was outside of his door. "I need you to rush these to the lab and get them back to me as quickly as possible. Don't walk, run," he heard the voice say through the door, followed by quickened and heavy footsteps down the hall. His door opened.

Dr. Helsing was a tall, stocky blonde woman from Sweden. Every time she visited, she was wearing a short black heel, which he could tell even though he had never seen them. The sound of her shoes on the tile were sharp and powerful, and she always walked with a heavy foot, probably because she was too exhausted to waltz around more quietly. He assumed they were black because he couldn't imagine her wearing any other shoe color.

“Hi, Martin,” Dr. Helsing said as she stood in the doorway. “It’s time for our exam. Is now a good time?”

“No, it is not a good time, nor will it ever be a good time,” the poor man thought. “It will never be a good time for you to come in here and bug me.”

“I ask that, even though you can’t respond to me, because one day you will be able to. You’ll be able to tell me to go away because your family is visiting, or you’ll tell me that it’s a perfect time to do our questions because your friends just left. You’ll be able to answer those questions.”

“You should be able to see that I’m not in the mood,” the poor man thought. “I’m lying here in a bed and the only thing I have is my quiet, and you take that from me.”

“Your mother called and asked about you again, by the way. She seems very concerned that you haven’t moved yet, but I wouldn’t say I share that concern. She’s afraid you won’t ever move again, but I’m just sure you haven’t moved *yet*.”

“You’re too talented to sit in a bed all day, sweetie,” he remembered his mother saying when he was relaxing on the weekend, reading a book, and after he broke up with his boyfriend and mourned with old nature documentaries, and the first time she visited him in the hospital, sitting by his bedside while checking her lipstick in a hand mirror.

“Tell her I’m not planning on it,” he thought.

“I’m sure you’re trying your best. Your mother was certain when she signed you up for this trial that you’d be my star patient, that you’d out-perform everyone else. I think you can still do it.” She pulled a chair from his bedside a little closer and sat next to his head.

Dr. Helsing was a neurologist conducting a clinical trial for patients in pseudocomas, or “Locked-In Syndrome,” when a person is awake and conscious but their muscles are paralyzed.

They'd been flown in from all over the world. Martin was transported from Chicago to Berlin, which wasn't even a city he cared about. He'd been to Berlin before with his company but wasn't impressed. Even now, if he could get up and go walk around, he didn't think he'd want to see too much, and would end up just returning to bed anyway.

“Martin, let's start with the word of the day. The word of the day is *ribbon*. *Ribbon*. The word of the day is *ribbon*.”

“How about the word of the day is ‘leave me alone?’” Dr. Helsing had discussed that, if he woke up and was able to talk again, she would go through a long list of words that contained some of the words of the day, and some not, and she would count how many the poor man could identify as being a word of the day. The poor man had given thought to trying to speak and move just so he could misidentify all the words of the day and ruin her study. Revenge for all the times that she disturbed him.

“Today is Tuesday, April seventeenth. Two months ago, you had a stroke at your dance studio that resulted in your condition. I am implementing a three-pronged approach to your care, drug therapy, physical stimulation, and mental stimulation. Your mother consented for you to participate in this study.”

The poor man wasn't a rat. Dr. Helsing's study was based on a drug study in rats. It was all very screwed up, the poor man thought, that there was a lab out there that put rats in a pseudocoma just to do tests on them. They induced the rats into rat strokes and rat pseudocomas. Dr. Helsing, in one of their meetings, said she went to the rat lab, and saw all the successful rats that weren't in pseudocomas. She thought that the same drug treatment would work on humans. “I'm not a rat,” the poor man thought. “I'm not in a cage.”

“Let's do a math exercise. Count backwards from two-hundred by eights.”

“Two-hundred. One-hundred-ninety-two. One-hundred-eighty-four.” The poor man did every single dumb exercise that Dr. Helsing asked him to do, not because he liked math or because he wanted to get better, but because he thought it would drive Dr. Helsing crazy if she knew that he was actually counting, or saying his ABC’s, or going through the steps of a ballet in his head. It would drive her crazy that he was doing everything she said but still wasn’t getting better, because he didn’t want to, and she didn’t understand that.

Dr. Helsing observed the poor man, watching his eyes. Even though he couldn’t turn his head and he couldn’t glance to the side, he could tell she was staring at him. He imagined that someone would feel her stare from the balcony while they were on stage, that she would make an actor remember that they’re not really Romeo, but really just some guy playing Romeo. She had that kind of stare.

“I had another patient wake up and tell me that they hated the counting exercises,” she said, chuckling under her breath. “She said she hated them so much that she just had to wake up and move so I would stop asking her to count backwards. I had a similar attitude towards math when I was in university, I think.”

“Go into the teacher if you don’t understand.” The poor man’s father was an engineer and wouldn’t tolerate any unsatisfactory grades. “To be excellent you must do things excellently.” When the poor man chose the path of a dancer and not of an academic, his father, a former college track star homecoming king valedictorian, wasn’t disappointed. He enrolled the poor man in the best programs and the best schools and bought him the best dance shoes and sat in the front row for every show in a custom-tailored tan suit.

Dr. Helsing tapped her pen on her notebook. He had counted down to zero by then, but she seemed to still be giving him time. If she was disappointed by his lack of progress, she didn’t

show it. She came into every session with the same tone and focus. The poor man, one day when his silence was too deranged to enjoy, found himself wondering if Dr. Helsing was happy because of her science or because of her life. He wondered if her work was her baby for whom she wanted to be excellent. He wondered if she was married and had happy children who danced for her.

“Okay, I hope I gave you enough time to count. If you didn’t finish, don’t worry. Let’s move on to some psychophysical therapy.” Dr. Helsing moved to the corner of the room and brought over a certificate in a leather folder. The certificate read “This certificate is presented to Martin Li in recognition of his accomplishments as a master of ballet. Presented by Illinois Educational Commission for Excellence Fine Arts.”

Dr. Helsing lifted his leg and bent his right knee. She raised the leg slowly to his chest and lowered it back down. “As I move your muscles, think about how your body moved when you danced for this award. Think about how you felt when you were presented with this award.”

When she started his treatment, Dr. Helsing asked his family to send her objects that had great value to the poor man. They had sent his dance shoes. His diploma from college. Programs with his name on the front page in big, cursive letters. A picture of the three of them after his first show in New York, his parents grinning even though they had notes on his performance.

Dr. Helsing exercised his legs and his arms for a while, remaining quiet and giving him the space to think. “If I wanted to dance, I’d dance.”

“I had another patient who said the first sensation he had was when he touched a basketball his wife sent him,” Dr. Helsing said. “He was seventy-three and hadn’t played basketball in over fifty years. But his wife found an old Wilson basketball in their attic that his

friends had signed, and she sent it here, and he said that it was the first thing he could feel. His cells remembered what touching a basketball was like, that's how that connection was made."

The poor man's eyes roamed beyond the certificate at the black TV screen mounted on the wall. Dr. Helsing positioned the poor man's arms onto his abdomen and placed the certificate in his hands, which he wouldn't have wanted to hold or feel even if he could.

When the poor man first woke up after surgery in Chicago, many friends came to see him and watch him. "Will he dance again?" an instructor asked, placing a pale pink "healing crystal" by the window. "If you can hear me, blink once," an old friend demanded, blowing air on his face after yelling at the nurses about the temperature in the room. "Get out of that gown, it's not your color," his lover, Sebastian, teased, wiping tears from his eyes before closing his eyes and falling asleep in a hospital chair by his bedside. For several days, he didn't have a moment of silence. Slowly, though, they stopped coming, because he hadn't gotten better, and the doctors were giving disappointing news.

"Okay, let's wrap up our exercises for today," Dr. Helsing said, putting the certificate on the other side of the room, out of sight. He wondered if she put it out of sight so that if he really cared about whatever trophy his parents had sent over, he'd have to turn his head to look at it. She sat down by his head again. "Let me tell you something new."

It was Dr. Helsing's theory that she was covering all possibilities. First, she'd make the poor man think, trying to make his brain exercise and make new connections. Then, if that didn't work, she'd rely on memory and emotional connection with her psychophysical therapy. Finally, she'd have to rely on her last strategy, personal connection. "My research has had a significant number of positive outcomes, and the head physician told me earlier that my work might be up for an award," she said happily.

“It’s an award for medical advancement, and they think that my research makes me a strong candidate. My success rate is high above what even I hypothesized. The treatment *works*.”

The poor man would have taken pride in being an exception to her medical breakthrough, because he wasn’t getting better and didn’t want to, but he was more perplexed by the other patients he had heard about. The woman who hated math and the old man who played basketball both seemed illogical to him. “Didn’t they like the rest that we had? Why were they so ready to stand up and walk around and go explore Berlin?”

“Growing up, I was the little girl who asked my father to buy me science magazines instead of gossip columns.” Dr. Helsing always had the slight insecurity that her patients weren’t listening and that she was embarrassing herself by sharing dreams no one wanted to hear, but she persisted. “I would look at the doctors on the cover and read their articles, and even though I didn’t know half of the words because they were too complicated, I wanted to be like them. Ooh, maybe I’ll get a cover on a magazine.”

The poor man liked dancing for himself. On nights when he felt sad or happy or angry, he’d lock himself in his room and turn off the lights, take off his clothes, and dance. On those nights, he’d listen to classical piano, or sounds of a waterfall, or heavy metal screaming, or pop, or nothing as he let his body show him what to do. In the dark, no one was watching him. There were no studio ceiling-to-floor mirrors for him to watch himself in and critique his form. His mother wasn’t there to tell him to use this inspiration and feeling in front of the judges, how he could expose his artistic spirit. His father wasn’t there to ask if he’d tried his hardest or pushed himself hard enough, because anything worth doing is worth doing right. There were no overbearing choreographers or envious dancers or silent audiences to wait for him to slip up. He

was alone. His dances weren't choreographed or pretty or certificate winning or sensational, but they were the poor man's alone, and that was enough.

"A colleague of mine at another hospital is doing a drug treatment trial on stroke victims, but I hear their research has reached a standstill," Dr. Helsing admitted. "I'm not glad that his work isn't going well. It just feels good that mine is. Do you know what I mean, Martin?"

The poor man didn't like it when Dr. Helsing called him by that name, especially because she had never met Martin. Martin was a dancer by trade, and had friends he danced for, and had a studio he danced in. The poor man wished no one would watch him to see if he'd move or speak or twitch. He didn't want to return to his life and have friends congratulate him for his recovery and be Dr. Helsing's star patient.

Dr. Helsing waited a moment. For a moment, the poor man thought he could see a pitiful look in her icy eyes, but if it was there, she shook it off quickly, as she was a professional and couldn't let her compassion taint her science. She took a couple notes in her pad, but then set it down and sat in silence with the poor man, which he would have liked if she hadn't been expecting him to break it. He wouldn't dance for Dr. Helsing, or anyone else.

"Okay, that wraps up our time for today, Martin," Dr. Helsing said, standing up on her short black heels. "I know you're scared, and that this is the hardest thing you've ever had to do. You will get through it. You will be able to move and do what you want to do again. Remember that." She stood up and left the room quietly, and the poor man waited until the sharp click of her heels faded down the hall.

As she left, the poor man wondered what she would report to his mother and father, and if they'd feel obligated to tell the rest of the family or his friends. A nurse came in to change his fluids bag so he could stay hydrated. He felt a cold glare from the side of the room he couldn't

see, and feared that someone was sitting there, waiting. Two more nurses came to change his bedding. In a room down the hall, he could hear someone screaming happily and clapping, as he thought another one of Dr. Helsing's rats miraculously recovered. Another nurse took his blood. He heard his father's hum in the buzz of the air conditioning system. One nurse came to take his piss bag and noted how much output the poor man had made. In the coos of the birds outside his window, the poor man heard the shrill cheers of his mother and the deep bellow of his father echoing in the auditorium at graduation. A nurse came to draw the curtains at night and open them again in the morning. Then Dr. Helsing and the nurses stopped bothering him and he was silent and alone. No one was watching him, and he was happy.

Doritos Lasagna

Marco Perez sat down on a stool at window six and rested his hands on the metal counter. He stared at his reflection in the plexiglass in front of him. His hair was a mess, and the bags under his eyes hadn't faded since he woke up for school eight hours ago. He had another shift that night, third that week and it was only Thursday, so he was already in his work clothes. The yellow walls in the Lincoln County Jail visitation room made him want to barf.

Marco stopped staring at himself as he saw Jack approaching. Marco immediately felt guilty thinking that he looked tired, because Jack looked exhausted. Despite his face, that clearly hadn't seen sleep in several days, Jack forced a smile. He put his fist to the window as he sat down on the other side. Marco pressed his own fist to the glass, opposite Jack, and picked up the phone.

"You look like shit," Marco said as soon as Jack had his receiver up to his ear.

"Damn, I feel like it too," Jack responded, smiling a little. He paused and shifted on his stool. "It sucks in here."

"How long 'til you get out?"

"They say I'm facin' 5 years, but I'm hopin' they take it easy," Jack said, rubbing his oily, pale neck. "It's my first time wit anything serious, and I'on even know if they got nothin' to pin me wit."

"That's hopin'," Marco said, looking away. "They feedin' you in there?"

"Not that gourmet shit you proolly eat, but yeah, it's aight. Ain't Nana's food, though."

"Damn, you know Nana cain't cook, man," Marco said.

"You can't say that about my Nana, Marc, it ain't fair. I can't hit you from in here."

“You know damn well she as much my Nana as she is yours, and you know none of it good.” Marco pushed his sleeves up.

“What about the Doritos lasagna?” Jack challenged.

Marco paused at the smile he saw on Jack’s face. It had been too long since he saw Jack really smile. “You know, you got me there. That shit’s pretty good.”

Nana had always been “creative.” One day, before his fifth grade graduation ceremony, Marco ripped his pants while playing with Jack. “I’ll sew it up real quick,” Nana said, and pulled out the duct tape. Within minutes, she had taped the inside leg so well that, from the outside, no one could tell they were ripped at all. As much as Marco hated the feeling of duct tape against his leg that night, he was glad he didn’t have to wear ripped pants.

Marco remembered when Nana had first made that lasagna. She was a spry woman in her early sixties back then, with a foul mouth and a big heart. Jack didn’t care about cooking, so he sat at the plastic lawn table with two chopsticks he’d been rubbing together for over a week now, trying to start a fire. He hadn’t had any luck. Marco, whose regular home meals came from the microwave or drive-thru, was ready to help Nana with anything in the kitchen. Nana always appreciated his help, partly because he was eager and polite, and partly because he helped her get back to cursing at the news on TV faster.

“Grab the noodles out of the pantry, Marco?” Nana asked while cooking the meat.

Marco looked in the pantry, but couldn’t find them. “I don’t see ‘em,” Marco said.

“Let me look,” she said. “Stir the meat.”

Marco stood on his toes as he tried to stir the meat, but he accidentally spilled some meat out of the pan. He quickly picked it back up and threw it in the pan.

“Well, all we have is some hot dog buns or Doritos,” Nana said, coming back. She gently took the spatula back from Marco. “What do we use?”

“Doritos! Doritos, please!” Jack said.

“I can go to the store, Nana,” Marco said, because the idea of a Doritos lasagna sounded gross to him.

“No, no, it’ll be fine,” Nana said. “Sometimes, you just have to work with what you have.”

“So, what they doin’ wit her?” Jack asked after a long pause.

“Your dad’s drivin’ back t’ move her out,” Marco said, shuffling in his seat.

“Move her where? You know Nana ain’t meant for a home, she belong in the real world.”

“She needs the help, though, you know she old. And your dad’s still on the road, he can’t be there if she need somethin’.”

“How’s Hank even gonna ‘ford a home for her? He barely make enough to keep us where we at, and it ain’t like he can take an extra shift. They ain’t let them drive more than they supposed to.” Jack’s smile was gone, and Marco saw his orange-clad leg nervously bouncing beneath the counter.

“I’m not sure, I ain’t heard about that,” Marco said, “but I think he might sell your place. Mi mama talk to him on the phone a bit, and I heard her offer him to sleep on our couch.”

“Bullshit,” Jack said, and banged his fist on the table.

Noticing Jack’s sore wrists, Marco pushed his sleeves back down, leaning his arms over the cold metal table. He wondered how often they cleaned this place, if ever. “Why ain’t you look after her? You jus’ said she your Nana too.”

“I’m still in school, an’ I got work,” Marco said.

“You work at that barbecue place down Liberty, right?” Jack asked, and Marco nodded.

“What happen to Burger King?”

“Well, I told my manager I want to be a chef,” Marco said. “He knew some guy at Garden Pig, and he got me a job cleanin’ dishes. He told me it helps to get connected wit the real food shit or whatever.”

“Damn, Burger King not that bad, though.”

“Yeah, it’s aight,” Marco said, feeling for his phone in his pocket. He was expecting a text from his boss about picking up a shift that weekend, but forgot he had left his phone outside.

“I jus’ need somethin’ more, ya know?”

“Yeah, I get it,” Jack said. “I respect the hustle.”

“Oh, yeah, Jack?” Marco said, bringing the phone closer to his mouth and talking softly.

“It’s just J now, remember? I tol’ you that.”

“Is there anythin’ you, uh...,” Marco whispered, looking around. “Anythin’ you need me to get rid of at home?”

“Ah, nah, man,” Jack chuckled, sitting back. “I ain’t keep my shit at home, I ain’t want Nana findin’ nothin’.”

“Thank God,” Marco sighed. Jack pulled at his baggy orange jumpsuit that swallowed his thin frame, and Marco rubbed his hands anxiously on his dark jeans.

As kids, they were inseparable. Nana, Jack’s grandma, watched Marco while his mom was at work. Jack’s dad was a long-haul trucker, and was out most of the time, so Nana was in charge.

Nana was everything a good grandmother should be - strict, loving, and a little crazy. One time, when Marco was in high school, he heard his mom and Nana talking. His mom said, "I'm really lucky, Marco's never given me much trouble."

Nana laughed, and said, "He never caused no trouble, 'cause he knew I'd beat his ass if he did!"

Marco couldn't remember when he learned that about Jack. That he liked to cause trouble. Maybe it was the time they tracked mud in the house after playing soccer in the rain, or when he carved their names under a desk at school, or when he got sent to the principal's office for taking the test answers, or when he would run with his white ass naked across the house, or when Marco heard that Jack was selling drugs. He always said, "It ain't a big deal, no one gives a shit," when Marco told him to be careful. Now, staring through the glass, Jack's furrowed brow and frown made Matt's stomach churn. He wished he could give his friend a hug.

"What ever happen t' you, man?" Jack asked bluntly.

"Huh?"

"What happen t' you? We use to hang all the time, then at some point I ain't see you much anymore," Jack said.

"We still hang," Marco said, "I was at yo' house las' week, I made dinner."

"That ain't what I mean, you there for Nana, not me. We ain't talk for real since freshman year." Marco's fingers tapped on the counter, bouncing to the beat of Jack's talking.

"I don' know, I got busy. I got my job then, I don' know."

"Bruh, you work at Burger King, don' ack like that meant you can't see me no mo' cause of that."

"I jus' was focused on my mom and school, I had to grow up. She need the money."

“Well why’ dya go to damn Burger King, then? There plenty of work you coulda done in the neighborhood.”

“You mean dealin’ drugs?” Marco yelled, before realizing how angry he was. He looked at Jack, who seemed pretty pissed. Taking a deep breath, Marco said, “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’ mean t’ shout like that.”

“Nah, I get it, you just don’ understan’ why I did shit. I had to grow up and take care of Nana, an’ I needed big money fast.” Marco looked Jack in the eyes, taken aback by Jack’s definition of “growing up,” but his eyes getting wet, so he let it go.

“Yeah, I guess I jus’ don’ get it.”

Marco had seen Jack get angry before. When Jack got caught taking test answers from school, he was so mad Marco had to hold him back from slashing the principal’s tires. The worst day was sophomore year, when Marco told him he wasn’t going to play soccer that year because he had to get a job. After Marco told him, Jack yelled at him for a while, punched the brick wall, and stormed off. Jack wouldn’t talk to Marco for a month after that, even when Marco came to help Nana sort her medicine and clean the kitchen. Nana, now bound mainly to her armchair in front of the TV, nodded gently when Marco came in, but Jack never left his room. After his first shift, Marco brought Nana and Jack Burger King. As Marco sat with Nana as they ate, Jack came out of his room, grabbed his food, and went back to his room without a “thank you.” He never really understood why he got mad, but he never fought back, because he knew Jack would just get over it eventually.

“I’m sorry I got mad, I ain’t sleep much since I got here,” Jack sighed.

“That sucks, man.”

“You got work today?” Jack asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Marco said, looking down at his Garden Pig uniform shirt. He glanced at the analog clock bolted to the wall. 3:32. He had to leave in six minutes, if he wanted to get there early. Marco always thought that the Liberty area was safe, but his boss always wanted them there before the sun started going down.

“Wait, aren’t you done at school in May?” Jack asked. “I might have the cash to get me out on bail, and I can put up for Nana ‘til you get done, then you take over?”

Marco took another quick look at the clock, then back to Jack. “I don’ think I can. I might be goin’ to school, college.”

“Bullshit, you cain’t afford no college,” Jack said. “I seen your ass, and I know it’s jus’ as poor as mine.”

“They have this scholarship for kids whose parents ain’t go to school, and my boss is recommendin’ me. It’s a cooking school, ‘bout an hour north.”

“Damn, ok, your rich barbecue boss is gonna pay for yo’ school? What kinda fairy tale shit is that?”

“Nah, he’s just payin’ for my application, I’m still gonna have to work to pay for it, if I get in.”

“So, what, you gon’ work down there the rest of your life? Liberty ain’t even good, the people there are all shit. You know that’s where the cops got me, right?”

“What?” Marco asked, his heart sinking.

“Yeah, we was runnin’ out of my dealer’s place down there, and someone called the fuckin’ cops. We wasn’t even doin’ nothin’ bad or loud, but we got chased all the way down t’ 13th.”

Marco wondered if he'd eaten today. He woke up after a late shift, had school, and came straight here, but did he get lunch? He kept thinking about what food he had eaten, or what food he hadn't, or what food he wanted, 'cause he didn't want to do the math on how long Jack had been in there, and how long it had been since he told his boss that he heard something when he was taking out the trash, or how he excitedly watched the red and blue lights ride past the window above the dishwasher. That was too much for how sick he felt. Maybe he could eat some of last night's rolls when he got to work.

"I jus' want a job," Marco stammered. He looked at the clock. He had to go.

"Nah, you jus' want to leave who you is behind."

"Jack, I'll keep an eye on Nana, your dad should visit sometime," Marco said, standing up. "I gotta go, I'll be late for work."

"Wait, wait," Jack said quickly, before Marco could hang up the phone. "Hang on, you really gotta go now? We still got ten minutes 'for visit's over, you cain't stay?"

Jack's eyes desperately searched to meet Marco's, but Marco just looked away. "I gotta go." Marco hung up the phone. Jack stood and pressed his forehead against the plexiglass as he watched his friend walk out the visitors exit with his head down, not looking back.

* * *

Almost-boiling water scalded Marco's hands as he washed dishes at Garden Pig that night. They had given him a pair of yellow rubber gloves, but he struggled too much trying to hold the rag with them on. Instead, he let his hands burn and the soap sting as he washed.

It was busy for a Thursday. They had gotten more customers after they painted the murals. Lincoln County had hired street artists to paint murals of Civil Rights leaders, quotes, and butterflies on the weathered brick walls downtown. When they first went up, Marco spent an

afternoon admiring them before work. His favorite was the one on the side of Garden Pig: a clever piece that made it seem like flowers and a litter of piglets coming out of the wall. He liked to think the piglets were escaping from the smoker inside.

A waitress set another stack of dishes down next to him, and he pushed up his sleeves again to start on the next batch. Mr. Hulberry, the restaurant owner, had offered Marco the job of a waiter first, but Marco wanted to wash dishes. He wanted to be in the kitchen, watching the cooks work, chop, improvise, talk. Marco would sometimes repeat what they said, learning the lingo. We need more brisket. Can you start a fresh batch of the okra. Where'd I put the tongs? Marco also didn't want to be a waiter in a restaurant his friends never came to.

Nana and Jack had come on one of Marco's first nights there, along with Marco's mama. Mr. Hulberry, who insisted Marco call him Dan, but who Marco still called Mr. Hulberry out of respect, let Marco run to greet them quickly. "What's good here," Jack asked, "and why does a side of mac and cheese cost six dollars?"

Marco wondered if they had mac and cheese in jail. "Marco, you doin' alright?" Mr. Hulberry asked, walking in with another stack of plates. Mr. Hulberry wasn't the type of boss who wouldn't do the work of a waiter or a busboy. "Also, you hear about the bust they did the other night?"

Marco dropped a plate into the sink. Luckily, it didn't break, but he had to reach his hand into the scorching hot basin to pick it back up. "Huh?"

"You remember, from th' other night," Mr. Hulberry said. "They finally got the punks who kept makin' trouble across the street, ain't that great?"

"Yes sir."

“They won’t be a problem anymore, I’ll tell you that,” Mr. Hulberry said with a chuckle. “You’ve got quite a stack there, you need a hand?”

“No sir, I’m alright,” Marco said, face wet from the steam.

“Well, you’re doin’ a fine job,” he said, patting Marco on the back firmly. Marco picked up a small bowl, and washed out the remaining mac and cheese residue from another satisfied customer. He didn’t think about Jack. He thought about how raw and dry his hands would be tomorrow, but not Jack.

Finally, the night slowed down, and the bachelorette party that was keeping them over finally made their way out. Marco finished washing their dishes. They had all ordered extra sauce, but none of them had used all that much of it.

He drove home in silence. He was lucky that his mama let him use her car when she wasn’t working. Pulling up to his house, he waited in the car for a moment. In his mirrors, he noticed a light was on at Nana’s. He thought about going to say hello, or to ask her if she’d taken her pills, or if she was okay without Jack. After a couple minutes, though, he saw the light turn off for the night. Not sure what to do, he sat there, watching to see if the light would turn back on.

He waited for what felt like forever. After a while, he turned the car back on, pulled out of the driveway, and drove to Walmart to get everything he needed to make a lasagna.

* * *

He hadn’t slept in two days, and he starting to feel ill, but he got everything he needed. The noodles, the sauce, the meat, the cheese. He almost got Doritos, but he didn’t. They only had Cool Ranch, and he couldn’t forgive himself if he made a Cool Ranch Doritos Lasagna.

He made the lasagna in an aluminum pan that Nana could just throw away when she was done. The house smelled delicious, as the cheese melted and the sauce boiled and the spices burned.

Marco took the hot pan across the street as soon as it had cooled enough for him to carry it. He tripped on a curb, the same curb he'd stepped over a million times, but luckily didn't drop the lasagna.

He got to the door. Nana had the front door open, but the glass cover door shut. Inside, he could see the hallway to the living room he used to talk in, and the hallway to the bedrooms he learned to cry in, and the door to the kitchen he learned to love in.

Quietly slipping in the front door, he set the lasagna down on the entryway banister. For a moment, he worried that Nana wouldn't be able to carry it. She was sick now, and didn't have the strength of the woman who carried two muddy third graders all the way to the tub.

In the other room, he heard Nana watching her news. Quietly, Marco stepped towards the living room, and peeked around the corner. He saw the back of Nana's old green-leather armchair. He couldn't see her from behind, her shrinking frame completely hidden by the chair. Marco felt a tear hit his hand, and he realized he was crying. As quietly as he came in, he stepped back outside.

Marco raised his fist to the glass door. Nana always hated it when he knocked, because she said, "Only strangers knock, and you ain't a stranger. You're family." But he couldn't bring himself to tell her about the lonely look in Jack's eyes or how his jumpsuit looked too big for him.

Marco knocked on the door loudly, maybe too loud from his nervousness, before running as fast as he could back home.

the apprentice

“How will your approach be different without us knowing what kind it is?” Adina Hooks asked her teacher. She posed her pen on her notebook, diligently awaiting to add his response to her notes. She sat in the back of a classic Chevy station wagon parked on the road in front of a local community center. Mr. Haversham, her mentor, liked to keep his car meticulously clean, and so suggested that Adina sit in the back because her shoes were muddy from the summer Florida rain.

“I have to ascertain what model and year it is first,” he responded. He was an older man with rigid features and thin multifocal glasses. Gel held his peppering hair in a uniform line across his forehead, and Adina could not remember ever seeing it ever budge, even in the wind. His thin lips were aligned with military straightness, and hardly parted as he took a sip of his morning tea. He smelled like old paper and modest cologne.

Adina finished her note and tucked it into the orange woven bag she held on her lap. Along with her notepad, she had brought two books of Baroque church music and a copy of *Piano Maintenance and Care*, which she had bought with her graduation money. She was hoping that between working with Mr. Haversham and what the church could pay her for playing on Sundays she could get her own apartment.

“You have a camera, correct?” Mr. Haversham asked, adjusting his tie in the rear-view mirror while glancing at her. The car smelled of aged wood lacquer and paper and

“I brought my phone, yes,” Adina said, turning her head. “I can print pictures out from it after.”

“Good,” he said, and seemingly satisfied with his appearance, opened the car door. Adina got out too and straightened her sweater and long pleated skirt. “This piano is most likely beyond

recognition. I may not even be able to identify it.” He dusted himself off, making sure his tailored sweater vest and trousers hadn’t wrinkled in the car.

Adina had chosen her outfit to look like Mr. Haversham’s that day. This was the first time he had allowed her to join him on a house visit, and she wanted to prove she could be as professional as he was. Though he was a man of few compliments, he did give her an approving nod when she walked into the office that morning.

The community center was an old school building with sun-bleached stucco walls constructed in the 1960’s. Air conditioning units hung from the windows of some of the rooms, most of them turned off for the springtime. The façade was coated with dirt and was rough like sandpaper. Weeds and ivy conquered the front lawn, with only a few patches of green grass remaining from summertime stomps. Adina spotted a toy sprinkler attached to a hose against the building, caked in mud from summer activities. As they walked along a pebble-paved sidewalk to the front door, the sun began to slice through the morning fog.

By the front door stood a heavy-set woman, who smiled a toothy smile at them as they approached. “Welcome,” she waved, raising her lion-tattooed arm a little to wave.

“Good morning,” Mr. Haversham said.

“My name is Shawna, I’m the community manager,” she said, extending her hand. She was tall and bubbly. Her voice squeaked when she talked, and her words whistled through the gap in her front teeth. She wore a large red t-shirt covered in paint stains, a sweatpants material skirt, and a pair of worn tennis shoes that complimented her bouncy disposition. A matching red bandana kept her long, dark braids out of her face. Adina thought she seemed familiar, like an auntie she’d never met, or an old babysitter she’d forgotten.

“I am William Haversham,” he said, shaking her outstretched hand. “This is my apprentice, Adina. She will be observing me today.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Shawna said, and shook her hand with a strong squeeze. “How old are you?”

“I turn twenty in two months,” Adina responded.

“Wow, and already an apprentice!” she said, mispronouncing the last word. Adina glanced at Mr. Haversham and noticed a flash of annoyance pass across his bulging eyes, but he was too much a gentleman to correct her. Adina smiled to herself a little, especially because she wasn’t fond of the title, anyway.

“Yes, I’m very grateful to Mr. Haversham,” Adina said. “He’s an excellent teacher.”

“Well, I’m sure you people are busy, so let me show you our piano,” Shawna said. She opened the heavy metal door and held it for them. Adina thought she looked natural in a doorway, standing with open arms and big, bright eyes.

The entrance hall to the building had cracked tile but was otherwise relatively clean. Letters for the sign *Creekwood Elementary* had been covered by a hand-painted banner that read, “Welcome, Campers!” The walls were adorned with finger-paintings and old disposable-camera photos from some of the center’s programs, as well as some educational boards, with titles like *Eating Healthy can be Yummy!* and *Hitting is NEVER OK!*

Shawna escorted them into the gymnasium, which had a carpeted floor with tape outlining a basketball court lined on the floor, though there were no hoops in the room. The piano was tucked in a corner, along with a stack of multicolor foam pads. “A couple of our keys have stopped working,” she said. “Before, it was just one, but lately a couple more are broke.”

Mr. Haversham's demeanor changed as he reverently approached the piano. "Do you play?"

"Me? No, I don't have time to learn that," she responded, checking her phone. Adina wondered if Shawna ran this place alone. "I wish I could."

"Do you have a professional who plays?" Mr. Haversham probed, pulling out a pair of white cotton piano gloves from his pocket. Though a man of nearly seventy years old, his hands were dexterous, executing every motion with machine-like precision.

"Oh, no, we can't afford that," Shawna scoffed, apparently picking up on Mr. Haversham's condescending attitude. "We have a couple students who play good."

"I see." Mr. Haversham paused, and looked to his apprentice. "Miss Adina, before I do my assessment, what are your first thoughts on the model?"

Adina perked up, as she had been planning possible answers to his questions since that morning. "Well, the label plate is missing, but the frame is sturdy and ornate, so I think it could come from a higher-quality maker."

"You think or you know?"

Adina cursed herself for using uncertain language. Mr. Haversham was quick to reprimand any ambiguity in her, or any, language. "I know, sir."

"You are correct," he said. "Do you notice anything about the frame?"

She circled the piano, inspecting the body for anything distinct that would give her something astute to tell her teacher. However, other than the words "DIRT BONES" and "KJ SUCKS" carved into the sides, she couldn't really tell much about the piano.

"It seems like a relatively simple construction, sir," Adina said nervously.

“Simple? I’m don’t believe so,” he said. Adina wished she had come up with something more intelligent to say. “Though it is clearly worn from poor upkeep, there is a proper finish on the frame, and details and ornamentation along the edges inform me of what maker it most likely comes from. Do you have any guesses, Ms. Adina?”

Taking another look at the piano, Adina scoured her brain for the information she had learned about different manufacturers. She could count the number of pianos she had seen in person on her fingers. Until she started working for Mr. Haversham, she hadn’t thought two pianos could differ all that much from one another. She was lucky he had never asked what kind she had at home, as he would mock her for practicing on an electric keyboard. “Could it be a Carpenter’s?” Carpenter’s pianos had uniquely beveled sides and detailed wood carvings on each side of the body. The carvings on this piano featured more floral features than she’d expect from a Carpenter’s, but it was her best guess.

“Not a bad guess, but no.” Mr. Haversham approached the piano, and adjusted his wire framed glasses. Adina admired how he still displayed an almost childlike excitement looking at a piano. “From my first assessment, it looks like a Welheir. Do you see the lilies carved into the sides? Welheir’s have signature lilies hand-carved into them. I also recognize the smooth ridges along the top and down the legs. Manufacturers have stopped producing this level of detail, which is shameful. Welheir is a relatively small manufacturer, though, so I’m not surprised you haven’t read about it yet.” He ran his fingertips over the keys, walking the full length of the piano.

Adina stepped back, as Mr. Haversham removed a tuning wrench, a long-tipped duster, and a small flashlight from his bag and set to work. She had seen him inspect the piano at the office, when he would adjust it, but had never seen him in a setting like this. He treated the piano

with rigorous grace, his hand and tools waltzing through the piano as he performed his routine checks. Adina watched as his calculated movements carried him around the piano, to the back for a brief pause, and then back again to the front.

“You look like me at a crawfish boil, hungry,” Shawna joked. Adina smiled politely as Mr. Haversham remained silent, not looking away from his inspection. Shawna paused at the silence, and, dissatisfied, asked, “So, is this thing is fancy-fancy?”

Mr. Haversham’s steely eyes were spears as he glanced up at Shawna. “This *instrument* is a Welheir 1968 model church piano, as seen on the authenticity guarantee tag inside the lid.” Adina reminded herself to write that tip down in her notes later.

Confused, Shawna glanced at Adina. Adina shrugged her shoulders and responded with her own unsure expression, which comforted Shawna.

Mr. Haversham opened the lid of the piano and shone the intense LED beam of the flashlight into the body. “Miss Adina, what could happen to a piano in this kind of environment that would prevent a note from being played?”

“There could be some sort of obstruction, sir,” Adina said, “probably debris beneath the keys, like crumbs or lint.”

“Good, Miss Adina,” he said. For a moment, Adina thought she saw a slight approving smile cross Mr. Haversham’s thin lips. Mr. Haversham did not often emote. He had no wife, and from what Adina could tell, he made few stops between his studio office and home. Once, on his desk, she found a receipt from Lee’s 24/7 Chinese from 7:53 AM on a Saturday. He had ordered lo mein.

“Classic pianos like this need to be maintained,” Mr. Haversham scolded Shawna. “Do you allow your students to eat by the piano?”

“Of course not,” Shawna said defensively. She crossed her arms over her chest, now getting a bit annoyed by Mr. Haversham’s judgmental tone.

Mr. Haversham looked at Shawna for a moment. He paused, and for a brief second, his normally statuesque face frowned. “Of course not,” he said. He pulled a can of compressed air from his bag, and gently lifted the lid. “Miss Adina, could you please wipe down the keyboard?”

“Yes sir.” Adina pulled a microfiber cloth out of the side pocket of her bag and began to carefully wipe down the keys.

For a while, they worked in silence. Adina looked over to Shawna, who had taken a seat and began working on her phone. Looking up every few minutes, Shawna kept careful watch over Mr. Haversham’s every move. Her dark brown eyes were expert trackers, trained to catch the smallest details from years of working with children. Though she seemed kind, Adina could tell that she had a keen sense for identifying trustworthy people, and it appeared that Mr. Haversham had not yet earned her trust.

“Shawna,” Adina started, starting to suffocate in the cold silence. “Or, uh, Miss Shawna, how long have you worked here?”

“Oh, this is my seventh year here, I think?” Shawna responded, finishing a text or email before putting her phone down. “Though, I don’t think of it so much as work. I’ve always liked playing with kids.”

“It sounds like a lot of fun,” Adina said, as she cleaned finished wiping down the keys for the second time. “I liked all the crafts in the hallway.”

“Oh, those are my favorite, too,” Shawna responded, sitting up. “I still draw whenever the kids draw, too. I find it relaxing.” Her phone buzzed, and she looked at it briefly before putting it back in her pocket. “Do you play piano? How did you learn?”

“My mom volunteered a lot at the church, and would bring me with her. She was dating the church pianist, so she taught me.”

“How long have you played? Are there professional piano-ists that play?”

“Oh, I’m not that good. I normally only play on Sundays for church,” Adina said, looking down as she crossed one arm to hold the other.

“That’s really amazing, that you know how to play and stuff,” Shawna said. “And I’m sure you’re better than you think. What are you playing right now?”

Adina smiled awkwardly and started to blush. “I’m working through a book of Haydn, who wrote really pretty church music. It’s pretty hard, though.” Shawna gave her an approving smile.

Mr. Haversham put his bag down on the piano bench behind her.

“Are you done?” Shawna asked.

“I am finished,” Mr. Haversham said. Adina looked at him closely, and saw a bead of sweat on his brow, which she had never seen before. She’d never seen him sweat, even on the most humid Florida evening.

“It was thirty, right?” Shawna asked, pulling out a check she had written before.

“Well, Miss Shawna,” Mr. Haversham said, and took a deep breath, “I actually have a different proposition.”

“Is something wrong?” Shawna asked. Adina looked at Mr. Haversham, and his eyes were intense and ablaze, though his mouth stayed perfectly straight.

“No,” he started, “in fact, this model of piano is one I have great interest in. I was going to offer to buy it from you.”

“Why? Is it that special?” Shawna asked.

“It is a model I have a great sentimental connection with. This model was a focal point in my home, as my mother would play for us every evening.”

Shawna uncrossed her arms and put her hands on her hips. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know if I want to sell to you.”

“Please listen to what I have to say before dismissing me,” he pushed. Miss Shawna’s eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched. Mr. Haversham, noticing her shifting demeanor, raised his hands apologetically. “Miss Shawna, I don’t mean to be curt. But I am willing to offer a very generous sum for this piano, and I will handle its transportation.”

“Look, I know you think that we don’t take care of it, but we do, and the kids like this piano. I’m not looking to sell.

“Miss Shawna, I am willing to pay more than enough to purchase a new piano. You could use excess funds to finance other community projects. Please, *please* hear my offer.”

Drawn in by his desperation, Shawna crossed her arms again and lowered her head.

“How much?”

“I’m willing to offer twelve thousand dollars for this piano, today,” Mr. Haversham said.

Shawna took a moment to pull out her phone and do some research. Adina looked at Mr. Haversham, hoping for an explanation, but he kept his eyes focused on Shawna. “Some of the ones online are more expensive than twelve-thousand.”

“Twelve thousand is more than enough to buy a new unit that would fit your needs, even from a high-quality brand. I have a catalogue of available, new models in my bag.” He opened his bag and opened to a page for Shawna to look at. “Though, you could always buy a cheaper used model, and use the money elsewhere. There are many possibilities.”

Shawna paused for a moment, then took the catalogue. She examined it for a moment, flipping pages back and forth, before looking at Adina and asking, “What do you think?”

Adina had never bought a piano, though twelve thousand seemed like plenty to buy ten. At home, all she had was an electric keyboard to practice on. Mr. Haversham had always been a man of tradition and respect, but Adina never thought of it as sentimental. How was he going to fit the piano in the back of the station wagon?

“Miss Adina doesn’t know much about the pricing of pianos,” Mr. Haversham cut in. “But I assure you, this is a very generous deal, especially for the worn condition this model is in.”

“I want to know what she thinks,” Shawna insisted, looking at Adina.

Adina looked to Mr. Haversham, then to Shawna, then back to Mr. Haversham. “I don’t know.”

“You think this piano’s worth more than that?” Shawna asked. “If it’s really this rare, it must be worth something good.”

“This model is rare, yes, but only so valuable in a collector’s market. This is high above the price point others would offer, I assure you. I have many colleagues I could refer you to for an assessment, or you can look for similar models online. A Stross upright piano would be comparable, and there is likely one for sale on eBay or FaceBook. On my honor, I assure you that my offer is more than fair.” Mr. Haversham’s face remained stoic, but Adina caught him wringing his wrists.

“No, I know your type,” Shawna said, “You ain’t gonna steal this away from us, besides, the kids like this piano.”

“Ma’am, I’m trying to help you find a piano that would suit your community’s needs better,” Mr. Haversham said. “This is more a church model than a leisure one and should not be battered by children.”

“Our students are very respectful, thank you. You can go now.”

“Miss Shawna, please,” Mr. Haversham pleaded. “I’m not going to leave this piano here. It is *clearly* being vandalized and mistreated, and I cannot stand the thought of it continuing this disrespect.”

“It’s a damn piano! Leave me alone, get out.”

“Ma’am, this model is of great significant emotional value to me. I’ve been searching for one for some time.”

Adina whipped her head back and forth between the two. “Sir, I don’t really give a damn, it’s ours.”

“Miss Shawna, you’re being unreasonable,” Mr. Haversham said. “This piano deserves to be somewhere better than this. It belongs with me.”

“Better than this? It’s our piano!”

“If it doesn’t matter where it is, why not just sell it and get a newer, nicer piano?” Mr. Haversham argued. “Miss Adina, I have more sales catalogues in my car, please go fetch them so Miss Shawna can consider more options.”

Miss Shawna held out her arm before she could move. “We don’t need a new piano, like we didn’t need no old man to come in here and tell us what to do. We hired you to come fix our piano, can’t you just go?”

“I refuse to leave this piano here,” Mr. Haversham insisted, stamping his foot down and crossing his arms.

Mr. Haversham and Miss Shawna stood in silence for several moments, Adina sitting on the piano bench in between them. They soon began fighting again, and Adina turned her neck as they argued over her.

“Fifteen thousand,” Shawna presented.

“That’s perfectly reasonable. Fifteen thousand, and I would be willing to include free routine tunings and maintenance for whichever new model you decide upon.” He stretched out his hand, hoping to close the deal.

“Hold on, pal, I never said deal. No, I’m still not selling to you.”

“Miss Shawna, if you knew the emotional significance of this piano, you would understand why I cannot allow it to continue to be sullied by your dirty children.”

“That’s it, you’ve been lookin’ down on us all day. You’re rude and judgmental and a guest, and we don’t tolerate rude people here.”

Mr. Haversham readjusted, his eyes bulging from his head as he bowed. “I deeply apologize, Miss Shawna, you are correct. I have been uncouth, and I certainly admire your fine community. Please, forgive my outbursts, I am simply overflowing with passion.

Shawna asked them to leave, but Mr. Haversham stood his ground. She took a wide stance and bent her knees, as if Mr. Haversham would take off with the piano if she wasn’t watching carefully. “Won’t you get him out of here? What’s wrong with him?”

She glanced nervously at Mr. Haversham, who locked his eyes on her, indicating for her to back him up. “I, uh,” she stumbled, “I think he just really likes pianos. That’s all.”

“Miss Adina is correct. This is my trade and I take it very seriously. Please consider my expertise in this field, Miss Shawna, and know that I am trying to help the center. Really, this

piano is old and dated, and most likely has few good years left. It would be a service to take it off your hands.”

“You think you’re trying to help?!” Miss Shawna shouted. “What do you know about helping us?”

“Mr. Haversham, I think it’s time to go.” Adina tried to leave. She packed her bag and stood by the door, signaling to Mr. Haversham to leave. “Mr. Haversham,” she called again, but he wouldn’t budge. The sun had risen high in the sky. She took Mr. Haversham’s keys and went out to the car. She started it, came back inside, and said, “I started the car, let’s go.”

“You don’t know how important this is,” he scolded her, and he returned to the fight.

Adina groaned, and looked at Shawna. “Do you mind if I practice the pieces I’m working on?” she asked.

“You can play however long you want, honey, because this piano’s staying *here*.”

As Adina pulled her practice book out of her bag, Mr. Haversham offered to fund a musical at the community center. Shawna told him they didn’t want his charity or pity. He offered to play there, whenever, for free. She said, “We don’t want a grumpy old man like him there, anyway.”

Adina sat down at the piano and pressed the spine of the book against the wooden prop. She set the book on the stand and opened to the piece she was practicing, the alleluia to the *Summer Mass IX*. For the first time that day, her bare fingers laid on the keys of the piano, and she could feel the warmth of the students at the center on her fingertips. “You’re making a tremendous error if you refuse my offers. This is no way to treat a supporter of your center.”

“You haven’t earned my trust. I don’t know who you are or what the hell you want from us, but I know you want what’s ours. But you can’t have it.”

Adina played a single note, E flat, and the sound came out crisp and clear, much nicer than her electric keyboard at home. The timbre of the instrument echoed in the beams of the gymnasium. Her foot bounced on the pedals as she focused on her warmups, letting her fingers run loosely and precisely over the keys.

“I’m not going to get rid of our piano without talking to my students.”

“Miss Shawna, think of how grateful that would be if you surprised them with a new model. That, surely, would bring them joy.”

“Can you two be quiet?” Adina asked to no avail. As she began to play, the insistent voices began to fade. The stubbornness of Mr. Haversham and the stoicism of Miss Shawna melted into the major chords and the melismatic melody in her right hand. Though their argument tried to rival her practice, Adina could not hear them as she focused on the sound she and the piano created together. As the sun began to fall, she practiced her piece in selected silence.

January 3rd, 2021

I was lying on the floor, flicking the spring door stopper on the wall, when I heard a soft knock at the door. “Valerie?” a muffled voice called through the door. I gave the spring one last big pull and stood up as it bounced back and forth.

Through the peephole I saw Doris, one of my mom’s friends from work. She was a petite older woman, probably around her seventies, who always dressed in a big, baggy zip-up hoodie. Today hers was tie-dyed with all the colors of the rainbow. She wore black rubber clogs, which squeaked painfully when wet. Anyways, I opened the door because I knew her, and I hadn’t had company in a while.

“Valerie, it’s good to see you,” she said as she politely stood in the doorway. I invited her inside, and she set her umbrella down on the mat right inside my door. She removed her shoes, too, and placed them to the side. It was soaked in raindrops, and I looked out the window for the first time that day. I didn’t know it was raining.

“Valerie, how have you been?” Doris asked. “Do you mind if I take off my mask?”

“Fine, and sure,” I said, making a note to maintain six feet distance from each other. That was something I was still getting used to.

I thought about brewing her a pot of tea, or getting out some crackers and cheese, but I realized I had nothing in the fridge to spare. I only had enough food for myself for the next four days. I don’t really like talking to people but I figured she needed something from my mom or something like that, so I invited her in.

“Do you mind if I have a seat?” she asked. I said of course and cleared some old photo albums off of the table and chairs to make room for her to sit down. She was a very petite woman.

“Have you been looking at old photos?” she asked.

She perused the collections strewn about with great interest, but admitted to her that I hadn't really been looking at them, I just pulled them out of the cabinets while I was looking for the pancake pan, that has the low edges that made it perfect for flipping.

“Did your mother make these?” She was captivated by the books. I kicked myself for leaving them out. Looking at them, all on the table, it appeared messy. The albums are separated into different years, each album essentially starting on my birthday. There weren't too many pictures in each, but Mom and I used to flip through them, cackling at my old homemade Halloween costumes and bad haircuts. I told her she did, and Doris flipped through one for a moment.

Once again my eyes wandered to the window and the rain. On the streets below me, rainwater formed a river down the asphalt. When I was young, I used to go out in the rain barefoot and stand in the street river. It was always really cold and my feet would get really dirty, but I never missed an opportunity to do it, even in high school. I'm twenty-five now – did I grow out of standing in the street river?

“Hey, Miss Doris? Why are you here?” I asked.

Doris tore her sagging eyes away from the pictures. “I came by to see how you are doing, dear. With everything.”

“Well, everything has been pretty okay this year, actually,” I said, “My job adapted really quickly to online, and tax season is coming up soon. I'll be more busy then.”

“Oh, that's nice,” she said. “I haven't quite understood all of the online chatting and videos.”

I explained that we already worked with computers every day, so it was easy for me to adjust and learn the new formats. I think I'm an excellent learner. I'm also good at identifying things that I'm good at.

"It sounds like you have been handling that well," she said, but she didn't seem all that impressed. "Do you ever have to leave your house?"

"No, I never have to go into the office at all. I went in the first week to get a couple of things, but I haven't gone back in since."

"Does everyone work from home?"

I explained to her that some of my coworkers went back in to the office, but that if you didn't want to come, you didn't have to, as long as you did the same work at home, which is funny because I get more work done at home.

You see, one thing I am bad at (I am also good at identifying what I'm bad at!) is that I'm a total gossip at work. I always want to know what's going on in people's lives and hear their stories. Most people at work were boring, but normally at least someone had a story. There were the usual suspects: the young, new hires who lead messy love lives and still talked and drank like freshmen. They always had something going on, but it was never juicy, not something I could sink my teeth into. What I really loved to hear about were the boss's scandals. I wished I could talk to them about how their husbands and wives say they work too much, or how the hotel they booked for their trip to Cancun messed up their reservation, or how they never call their mothers anymore. I didn't get to hear those anymore online, though, so I just do regular work.

"How have you been handling your mother's death?" Doris asked. She rested with perfect posture in her chair as she prompted me to think.

“I’m fine. I go to therapy every week, so that helps, I think.” That’s actually why I’m writing all of this down here – Dr. Lemlin said that journaling might help me process my day. He said it would almost be like organizing things in a spreadsheet, which I was really good at, so I thought I’d try this.

Doris and my mother worked as social workers for our district. Doris was actually my mother’s mentor and tried to get me to go into social work too, but I was scared off by the stories my mother told me about work. She normally worked with women in bad situations, and it would get scary. Also, I liked my intro Accounting class in college, so I just followed that. “I know you’re a social worker and you’re taught to ask me stuff, but I’m good, don’t worry. I’m learning how to do things on my own a bit more.”

“What have you been learning?”

Looking back, that was a good question to keep me talking. Doris was really rather plain looking. She dressed in knee-length denim skirts most days I’d seen her, and always wore some brown clog shoes. She’d had the same long, straight gray hair since I’d known her, too. Her plain look helped her at work, I guess, because everyone overlooks her and she doesn’t present as all that special, so when she asks you questions, you sort of feel like you’re talking to nobody.

“I’ve been learning how to cook,” I told her, which I now realize sounds kind of rude because I never offered her something to eat. “Learning to cook for one, that is.”

“That sounds nice,” Doris said. “What have you made? Why don’t you fix us something up?”

“It’s an online cooking class,” I told her, now feeling compelled to make something for my guest. I walked over to the kitchen and opening the fridge. It was embarrassingly empty – I didn’t even have enough to put something on the bottom shelf.

That's another thing that I've been good at, though, cooking. "I take this class with a British chef, Chef Charles, who lives in England, so the class is always really late at night. My sleep schedule is always crazy now, because of this class, but I really like him," I explained. I saw him on television once and I found out he was doing an online class, so I signed up." That's why I was looking for the pancake pan and the kitchen table was such a mess, because he was teaching us how to make American-style banana pancakes, which was a breakfast my mom made for me on holidays.

"What are you makin'?' I'm hungry," Doris asked.

"Pancakes," I responded.

"Sounds good," Doris said. "You know that's the only thing your mother could cook, right? Breakfast. I swear, at all the potlucks and dinners I went to over the years, all she ever brought were egg casseroles or hashbrowns or stuff like that."

"Yeah, I know. Mom really liked breakfast." At home, sometimes she'd buy an actual pint of buttermilk and use flour and make real, fancy pancakes. I used to wake up to the smell of butter and maple syrup drifting through our one-bedroom apartment. When she hosted pancake breakfasts at the community center, though, she was a wizard with a "just add water" mix, crafting hundreds of light, fluffy cakes out of the shitty box mix. I pulled out a bowl and started the griddle on the stove. I'd practiced the recipe a couple times since class, so I gathered the ingredients and measured them out from memory.

"Have you changed the apartment at all, since you live alone now? I bet you moved into the bedroom."

"I already slept in the bedroom, and mom slept on the couch. She worked long hours and said she didn't want to wake me if she got home too late." I cracked the egg on the side of the

bowl, and split it with one hand like Chef Charles did. “Some nights, rough nights for her, she’d come home, shower, and crawl into bed with me and hold me through the night. I think when she had a tough day, she liked to hold me to remind her of what matters or something. She was a total blanket hog, though.”

“Oh, wow,” Doris said, chuckling. “I’d never let my kids take the bedroom over me.” Doris was observing me, which I didn’t like, especially because she must have so many other people that actually needed help she should be visiting. I mean, she was a friend of my mom’s, but that didn’t mean she was really my friend. Looking back, I kind of wish I hadn’t invited her in, because I felt like I was wasting pancake resources on her. I pulled the hand mixer whisk attachments out of the dishwasher and pushed them back into the appliance. I mixed the batter, which also gave me a bit of a break from Doris’s probing questions.

That was something I guess I’ve been working on (which Dr. Lemlin says is a nicer way of putting “things I’m bad at,” but basically something I’m bad at), was a social life. I guess welcoming in a woman who I didn’t invite over who wasn’t even one of my friends and I got sick of being in our apartment in like five minutes of her being there isn’t really a social life. But that’s I guess why I let her in. I wish I could say disease in the air or government restrictions or a snowstorm or the falling sky was the reason I didn’t have much of a social life, but I didn’t have much of one before, either.

Now, with the batter ready, I sliced a banana into thin coins that would rest evenly in the center of a pancake.

“Have you seen any friends lately?” Doris asked. She pulled out her water bottle and a seven-day pill organizer and took two orange pills and one white one. “I’m old friends with the building manager, he said he hadn’t seen anyone come by.”

Old friends. I might be paraphrasing some of the other things she said, but I know she said “*old friends*” because I thought that was a funny thing for her to say. I figured all the friends she had were old friends who still read the paper or watched the news, and thought writing a letter was just as easy as sending an email, and thought movies should have more cowboys than superheroes. She’s not really that old, I guess, but she’s probably the oldest person I know.

“Benito said that? It’s a pandemic, we’re not supposed to have people over. Besides, all my friends are really busy these days.”

Our landlord, Benito, was a slimeball. Not in, like, a slime ball that’s a bad landlord or creepy, but he wears, like, a pound of grease in his hair every day, and always smells like he has a whole bottle of body spray on. One time, my mom dressed me up as him for Halloween, and she almost hacked up a lung laughing when I knocked on his door for candy. She slicked my hair back and drew an ugly mustache on my face and gave me big rimmed glasses from the dollar store. There’s a picture of me and Benito, both with our hair slicked back, in one of the photo albums. All I remember from that night is wanting to get the hair slime off me as soon as possible.

“He said he caught you throwing pancakes out the window. What’s that all about?” Doris asked. “And, speaking of, are they almost done?”

My pan was hot, bananas were sliced, and the batter was running like silk off the whisk. It was a fast process of pouring batter, spacing out and placing slices, and flipping before one side got too burnt, but I’d got the process down to muscle memory.

“Oh, that was pancake night,” I explained. “It was a good night. It was the night I took that online cooking class, which was pretty fun. Anyways, I’d made a lot of pancakes. I actually know that I made 23 pancakes, because the recipe makes 6 pancakes each batch, and I made 4

batches, but I burnt one really bad and had to throw it away, so instead of 24 there were 23.

Anyways, I couldn't eat 23 pancakes. I was full after 2."

I flipped the first pancake. "Why'd you make so many?" Doris asked. While I waited for that pancake to finish browning, I handed Doris some silverware and syrup.

"Practice, and the buttermilk was going to expire two days later if I didn't use it all." I flipped the done pancake onto a plate, and started the second. "Anyways, it was, like, 4 AM by the time I was done making pancakes. My last batch was really, really good, but I would have made another if I hadn't run out of bananas. By the way, you're okay with banana pancakes, right?"

"Sounds good to me," she said, as I flipped her second pancake. "Then why were you hucking pancakes out the window?"

"Well, it was late, and I'd been cooking forever, and when I cook, I cook with the window open because our oven vent is broken. Out the window there was a stray dog howling hungry. So I threw him a pancake, which he seemed to enjoy very much, because he started eating it very vast. So then I threw another pancake, so he could have more, but accidentally hit the dog, and he got scared off and ran away. But the second pancake landed just barely off of what was left of the first pancake, and I knew I wasn't gonna finish all the pancakes, so I made it a game. I was tried to stack as many pancakes on top of each other in the parking lot as I could. So I threw the rest of my pancakes out the window, and got 4 in one stack. That's when I saw Benito, who must have been responding to a late-night pipe burst or something. Or maybe the crazy lady throwing pancakes out the window. He yelled, 'What are you doing?'" she said, trying to mimick Benito's voice. "And I yelled 'throwing pancakes!' and then he left. Good ole Benito."

I pulled the second pancake and started a third on the griddle, then served the two hot ones to Doris. “Do you have butter?”

I brought the softened butter dish over to the table for her. “Looks good, thank you,” Doris said before cutting in and taking a big first bite.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I reiterated to her.

I finished the of the batter as Doris raved about the pancakes. “These are great. Did you steal this recipe from IHOP?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well then they should steal if from you. Yum.”

I finished making my pancakes, and she gestured for me to join her at the table. I sat at the other end to social distance, but I realized this was the first time I’d eaten with someone else in a while.

“Thanks for taking care of me with these,” Doris said after swallowing her last bite. She’d cleaned the plate. “I hadn’t eaten in too long.”

I hadn’t realized I’d taken care of Doris. I thought she’d come over to take care of me because of Mom, but now I think she just heard I was making pancakes and was hungry. “You’re welcome,” I said.

Doris stood up and put her clogs back on. “I do have to get going, my dear. Thank you so much for the meal. You’re in therapy? Keep doing that, you seem like you’re doing fine.” She put her mask back on. “Do you need a hug?”

I hadn’t been hugged since before mom died. The memorial was virtual, and none of my friends had been able to visit since. “Yes, please.”

Doris gave me a hug. Though she was short, her warm arms wrapped around me. “Take care, now. I’ll be back to see what you cook up next!”

I guess I wanted to start my journaling with this, I guess. I have a lot of people in my life right now who are, like, trying to fix me or help me or whatever, but most of them are pretty bad at it. I only get to talk to Dr. Lemlin for an hour a week, but it’s not really a conversation, he just lets me talk and sometimes asks me questions. And, like, it helps me think about everything better, but at some point I think I’m just describing my problems and not fixing them, you know?

I thought only person who’s really helped me is Chef Charles. You know, with my mom making pancakes for me as a kid, and made them for the people at the center, but I didn’t know how to make pancakes. Chef Charles taught me how to make pancakes, and to feed the stray dogs (taking care of others), and to exercise (my arm is sore from pancake throwing). Also, banana pancakes have fruit and oats in them, so they’re kind of healthy for me, and someone in the class said they put peanut butter on theirs and that it tasted good, which would add protein. See, I’m learning a lot in that class that I haven’t learning with anyone else lately.

But it was really good to see Doris, too. She helped me see I was working on my problems in real ways, too. Months ago, I wouldn’t have offered to cook anyone pancakes. I may not even have opened the door. Doris was a small step, I guess. Go me!

Anyways, I guess this is my first journal entry. I was supposed to start these a while ago, but I finally started, so good! I’ll try to do more. I promise to make an effort.

Marlo Dwarfstar: Origins

Nathalie sat in a wide corridor in the clinic that had been fashioned into a French street café. She wore a magenta woven sweater over a black spaghetti-strap top, jeans, and a little bit of blush. Thumbing the corner of the packet in her hands, she re-read the cover page to make sure she wouldn't mess anything up. *Remember: the person you're about to meet is the same person you've always known.*

Overhead speakers played faint restaurant white noise and French accordion, which helped distract from the fact that she was completely alone in the room, as if Paris had become a ghost town. In front of her on the table were two beading glasses of ice water and a brown paper bag from the bakery. She took a large sip from her glass, hoping it would help calm her nervous stomach. Michael, her best friend from college, asked her to pick up chocolate chip muffins from their favorite bakery for after the procedure. He had a sweet tooth.

Directly behind Nathalie was a door to the parking lot. In front of her, a set of double wooden doors were on the other side of the operating rooms, with an unlit lightbulb installed above the door. She could hear the tapping of her foot against the tile over the ambient sound.

The doors opened and Michael walked into the room. He was wearing the sweatpants he had put on that morning and black shirt with three possums howling at the moon. His unkept dark hair connected to his patchy beard which framed his signature smile, hiding his teeth with closed lips.

“Hey Natty,” he said, approaching the table.

“Hey nerd,” she said, and stood up and gave him a big hug. He hugged her tightly, pulling her head into his chest, which only happened when Michael was really happy.

“Let's sit down,” she said, motioning them towards the table.

Michael noticed the pastry bag. “You went to Mertyl’s?”

“Yeah, though they only had blueberry and banana nut.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” he said, shrugging. “You got banana nut?”

“Duh.” She handed him his muffin.

“You know, I don’t really mind the banana nut. It’s pretty good.”

She stopped and looked at the way he peeled the wrapper off the muffin. Michael had large hands yet was always delicate with anything he was holding. Once he finished the meticulous removal, he flipped the muffin over and tore off the bottom to eat it first. “Yeah, it is,” Nathalie agreed as she flipped to the beginning of the packet.

The counselors at the Forget-Me-Now center explained to her that the procedure has higher success when the patient can debrief with someone close to them. Nathalie was, of course, willing to help. Though they gave her the option to speak freely, she chose to stick to the pre-written script they provided because she wanted to make sure she did everything right.

“Are you gonna eat?” Michael asked through a mouthful of muffin.

“No, I ate earlier,” Nathalie lied. Her cold, pale hands flipped through the pages of her notebook, to the beginning of her script.

“I feel fine, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he said, starting in on the top part of his breakfast. “I can tell you’re worried.”

Nathalie cleared her throat, and tucked her long, dark brown hair behind her ear. She read from the first page. “Hi, Michael. You just finished a procedure that removed a memory from your brain. This was a procedure you elected to go through. Do you remember this?”

“Yes, I do.” As he finished his muffin, he looked her in the eyes. “I remember that I elected to forget something, though I don’t know what I forgot.”

“You will not be able to remember what you forgot. Before the procedure, you wrote a letter to yourself that explained what you forgot and why it was important that you had that memory removed but does not contain any of the details of that memory. Would you like to read it now?” She felt her voice moving mechanically through the statements she had pre-written. Even though she had read them in her head at least a dozen times, there was no way to pretend like this was normal.

“I don’t think so,” he said. His eyes searched hers tenderly. “Is it bad?”

“I can’t comment on that,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I can’t give you any hints on to what it was right now.”

“Oh,” he said, looking down. Nathalie recognized her timid friend sitting across from her now. *Remember: the person you’re about to meet is the same person you’ve always known.*

“Does it hurt?” she asked, the question slipping without thinking. She was already deviating from script.

“Not at all, actually,” Michael said. “I thought I’d feel lighter, but I honestly feel the same. It kind of feels like I just woke up from a nap.”

“Oh. Good?” When Michael first shared that he wanted to have the memory of his father erased, Nathalie tried her best to be supportive. She researched the procedure online, investigated the risks, and went into the office to ask the doctors. Over the past several weeks, she attended both online classes on how to support someone who’d gone through the procedure and in-person sessions concerning Michael’s case specifically. The results were good, and everyone was saying that, based on his situation, he would benefit. She knew he would, too.

“You know that post-nap haze? That.” Michael bit his thin lips. Over the speakers, they heard clinking glasses and indistinct chatter as Nathalie looked for her place in the script.

“What’s next?” he asked, brushing his muffin crumbs back into the wrapper and crinkling it up into a ball.

She chuckled at his classic tidiness. “Right... Okay, so, I know this will sound frustrating, but I’m not going to tell you about what you’ve forgotten if you ask. If you do come to a point where you want to explore those memories, we can return here and sit down with a counselor and review some of the pre-procedure interviews and statements you wrote. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah! We talked about this, remember?” She sat forward. “It’s not a big deal. We didn’t talk about it ever anyways, really,” she said, even though they used to stay awake to 4 AM in college talking around the trauma he carried from his father and she could never help him understand that he wasn’t the bad guy his father was. That he was a good man.

“Okay, good,” he said. “How many questions are there? It’s weird seeing you like this, so...”

“Official?”

“Yeah, sort of,” he said. “I don’t know, you just...” he trailed off, and looked around the hallway for a waiter to take away his trash.

“I what?”

“You look sad, I don’t know,” he said. “You just look a little sad. Are you worried about me or something?”

Though designed like a French café, the rigid hospital air in the room made Nathalie shiver. She crossed her arms as Michael stared at her. “I’m fine,” she said. “Let’s move on to

some of the exercises, okay?” She turned her binder a couple of pages, and pulled it into her lap, its edge resting on the table, so he couldn’t see.

“Sure, whatever we need to,” he said, letting his concern go for a moment. His eyes wandered around the room and settled on the large exit door.

“First question: what are our plans tonight?”

“We’re going to see the premier of the new Space Elves movie, which starts at ten,” he said with a sigh.

“Actually, it starts at midnight,” Nathalie corrected. “We were going to order in have a picnic in at my place.” She had set up a red gingham blanket on her living room floor and had been daydreaming of them eating under the fairy lights she hung on the ceiling.

“The fan meetup starts at ten, though, at the bar near the theater, right?”

“I thought you didn’t want to go to that? You hate parties.”

“Well, we’ve never been to one of the fan parties. I talk to those guys all the time online, I just thought it would be fun to meet them in person.”

“You told me, like, three days ago that you absolutely weren’t going. What changed your mind?”

“I don’t know. I’m just feeling good today. Don’t you think it’d be fun?”

“Yeah, I do,” Nathalie said, her shoulders tensing a little. She looked up at the cameras, suddenly aware of how the doctors were watching her, too. “*Am I screwing this up?*” she thought.

She moved on to the next question. “You planned a costume for this evening. Who are you going to be dressed as?”

He leaned forward. "I'm going dressed as Marlo Dwarfstar. To prove that I remember everything, Marlo is my OC in universe. He's a dark matter mage who wields a staff powered by an abyss emerald, which are formed at the explosion of a black hole. He's from the planet Wintirset, and fights with the coalition after his village was destroyed in a trading conflict with the Troll Mercenaries."

Nathalie smiled, remembering how he held the knife when he whittled a hole in a large branch to insert a piece of broken, sanded-down dark green glass. When they first became friends, she couldn't have cared less about Space Elves, but she always found it charming when he'd get excited about it and fidget like a child. "Almost, but I'm going to have to fail you on that one. You didn't say his catchphrase."

"Oh, that's because I was saving it," he said. "Whenever he puts anything in his pocket dimensions in his staff, he says, 'I'll take that to-go!'" Michael started laughing at himself, and Nathalie let out a small chuckle, too. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"What?" Nathalie asked.

"That that sounded so stupid," Michael said. "I mean, on paper it looks all right, but saying it out loud right then sounded so dumb." He kept laughing. Nathalie didn't recognize his grin when he smiled. His jaw was too relaxed.

"You don't like it?" Nathalie asked, blushing a bit. "I thought it sounded cool when we came up with it."

"No, I like it, actually," he said with the unfamiliar expression on his face. "It's kind of fun. And funny, right? Can't you imagine someone saying that?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, I do. I feel really, really great. I'm just excited for tonight, aren't you?"

She hesitated for a second. “Yeah, I am.”

“Okay... let’s keep moving.”

“Sure,” she said. “Next question, what snacks are you planning on getting at the movie theater?”

“That is a trick question. We never get snacks at the theater; we always buy them at the gas station before and sneak them in in our waistbands. You always get Peanut M&M’s, and I always get either Sour Patch Kids or Skittles.”

“I have literally never once seen you get Sour Patch Kids, and we’ve gone to, like, a million movies. You hate sour things.”

“I used to have them a lot as a kid, though, with my dad. My favorites were always the yellows, because they’re lemon and extra sour.” He stood up and started pacing around. Nathalie used to laugh at him when he’d start pacing because he always claimed his brain worked better when he was moving. Once he started moving, he could tell her about anything for over an hour. When she mentioned she’d never seen Space Elves over dinner, he explained the entire franchise until they closed the cafeteria. She’d never heard him talk about his father while pacing.

“That was only half right, because you lost points for saying Sour Patch Kids.”

“I like sour stuff! I really do! I’ll get Sour Patch Kids tonight, just to prove it to you.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, Michael.”

“I know, Natty,” he said, shaking his head with a smirk. “I really do appreciate you doing this.” He smiled at her, and Nathalie was surprised to catch herself blushing. His lanky arms swung at his sides as he went back to pacing the length of the room.

“You’re walking so bouncy,” Nathalie said, giggling a little.

“Can we go back to the Marlo conversation, though? For a second.”

“Sure, what do you want to talk about, Marlo Dwarfstar?”

“Okay. I know that he’s been my own character for, like, ever, right? I’ve written fanfics with Marlo in them going on adventures or in the movies, doing lots of crazy stuff.”

“I know, I’ve read them,” Nathalie teased.

“Well, I’m just feeling really good right now. I can’t remember what I forgot, you know, but I know that before today I hadn’t felt like this. I feel like Marlo Dwarfstar.”

Nathalie looked up at the camera again. She almost expected nurses to come rushing through the door to take Michael back, saying that they did something wrong to him that made him act so different, so sure. “What?”

“Just for years I would write these stories about me being this guy, right? And, like, I know that I can’t do space magic, but I feel like I *could* if I wanted to.”

“Are you feeling okay? You seem really different. Did they mess something up?”

“If they did, I’m glad. Nat, we both went into this hoping that this would help me move on from whatever happened to me. That’s what the doctors and the counselors said, and you agreed with them. I don’t know if this is too fast, but I just feel like this is my starting line.”

“So, what, you’re going to just be your cosplay?”

Michael chuckled, and sat down. “No way. I don’t want you to call me Marlo Dwarfstar, but maybe I just want to be like him. Or, I always wanted to be like him, and now I can be?”

Michael’s eyes were clear and bright as he looked to Nathalie for approval. She’d seen him avoid eye contact before, whenever she’d ask about what he wanted in life or about his dad.

“Hey, you look stressed. Are you okay? Is this too much?” he said, grabbing her hands. His hands were warm on hers.

Nathalie shook her head and pulled her hands away. “I’m okay. It’s weird to see you like this, I guess.”

“Weird in a good way?”

She opened her hands upward, shrugging. “Yeah, it just seems like it was so easy for you, you know?”

“What?”

“I mean, I’ve just known this one version of you with, the, uh, memory. You almost look different.” She looked at him, and the quirky features she used to love now looked more rugged, handsome, and new.

He shrugged. “Nathalie, I’m the same guy. I don’t think all my problems are gone. Like, this party tonight, I’m still nervous to go.”

“But you just feel great now? Like everything’s better?”

Michael rubbed the back of his head. “I’m just feeling a lot, is all. Probably just, like, everything adapting to the new normal.” He paused. “You’re okay? I’m okay, but I can tell this is a lot.” He caught Nathalie’s eyes. She pulled her sagging sweater up and released her shoulders.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” She shook her hands out like they were wet and returned to the script. “I have one last serious question, and then we can go. What was our last fight about?”

He stopped, crossed his arms, and frowned at her. “I don’t like this question.”

“Dude, it was so long ago,” Nathalie said. “This is to see that you still remember serious things, not just Space Elves.”

“Nat, we don’t do this. We’re not serious people.” Michael stuck out his tongue and made a stupid face.

She smirked a little. "What was the last thing we fought about?"

"Fine," he said. "You were mad at me because I wasn't going for a promotion at work, and I didn't want to, but now I just don't like it 'cause I know you were right." He started pacing as he explained, his eyes focused and intense. "You know that people are going up into space? Like, on vacations?"

"What?"

"You can pay people to take you up in a spaceship and feel what zero-gravity feels like and orbit the Earth. Commercially."

"You want to go to space? You hate vacations."

"But I wouldn't hate a vacation to space. And I can't do that if I don't earn more money, which is why you were right. I should have gone for that promotion, I wanted it."

"Yeah, but I pushed too hard..."

"But you didn't, though. I needed to be pushed. I'm like a rocket ship, I've always been full of rocket fuel, but I just needed someone to spark it." Michael was pacing and he spoke like air leaving a balloon. "You did that for me, Nat."

"Hey, you're getting a little worked up..." Nathalie said, covering her face. Michael sat back down and brushed his shaggy hair off his face with his hand. He looked older with his forehead exposed, Nathalie thought, her heart pounding in her chest.

"I know, I'm just excited. This is exciting!" His fingers tapped the table rhythmically. "You know, next promotion that comes up at work, I'm going to take it. Maybe I'll even go ask for one."

"You're pushing yourself too hard," Nathalie said, trying to hold his hands.

He pulled them back. “No, Nat, I’m not pushing myself, I’m pulling myself forward. You don’t have to hold me back.”

Nathalie fiddled with her jacket zipper, running it up and down. “Are we done with the questions?” he asked, standing up again. “I want to go get into costume.”

Remember: the person you’re about to meet is the same person you’ve always known.

“I have one more. Are we still okay? As, you know...”

“Friends? Yeah, Nathalie. You’ve helped me so much. I know that for you, this all seems so sudden, but for me, this feels like a long time coming. I’ll wait for you to catch up, get to know the new me.”

Nathalie held her breath, her face burning and her mind racing. The Parisian accordion from the speakers rung in her head. “The new me?”

“Great,” Michael said. “Let’s take this thing to go. I still have to prove to you I like sour stuff, right?”

“Yeah, right.” She looked up again at the camera, and down the hall to the door he came out of. No doctors came out, rushing to stop them because they thought something, even a small something, could be wrong with Michael. He was okay, and happy, and different, and Michael.

He stood up and walked towards the exit. When he got to the door, he pushed it open and walked out without looking back. Nathalie watched the door close behind him and put her hand on her chest for a moment to feel her pounding heart. She took a deep breath, straightened her sweater, and rushed to follow him out.