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An Alternate Route

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ABSTRACT

An Alternate Route is a collection of short fiction and creative nonfiction from my undergraduate creative writing minor at Cedarville University. It explores stories I have heard, experienced, and imagined—stories worth remembering. “My Boyfriend’s Estranged Grandfather” was published in *Cleaver Magazine*, and “Rick’s Café: Negril, Jamaica” appeared in *The MacGuffin*.

AN ALTERNATE ROUTE

by

Rachael Diane Tague

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor.

Cedarville, Ohio

2016

Approved by

INTRODUCTION

In high school, I never thought my undergraduate Creative Writing portfolio would contain anything but adventure fiction for young adults, and while my distaste for poetry persists (poets beware, you will not find one poem in this collection), you may notice that the pieces are split almost right down the middle: half fiction, half nonfiction. I'm proud to say that the fictional story "Ayla" consists of majorly revised and updated excerpts from one of my first "novels" (culminating in 28 hand-written pages) I tried to write in Junior High. The other short story, "Picnic Pickpockets," is derived from a new project of mine to create *A Collection of Clippings*, a group of short stories based on incomplete-feeling newspaper articles from the early 1900's.

The characters in both of these pieces make me happy for different reasons. Ayla is near and dear to my ink-stained heart. She is the modern day tomboy princess I wanted to be when I was twelve. She has a lot of me in her. I've handwritten over 600 pages about Ayla and her adventures throughout the last ten years, and, while I can't declare that the pieces I've collected here are the best of them, I hope they communicate the dedication I feel to her story.

"Picnic Pickpockets" represents my maturing writer's foray outside of YA novels. My fiction classes taught me the importance of short stories, and I learned how difficult they are to craft. In this story, and in several others not recorded in the portfolio, I gave myself the opportunity to take flat characters from a one-hundred-year-old newspaper story and round them out. Literally. I've enjoyed filling in fictional gaps to these real-life happenings, and "Picnic Pickpockets" has one of my favorite characters I've written, especially for a short story, the large, snack-loving Chief Klause.

These fictional stories are the ones I always expected to write and love and share. The rest of the stories—the nonfiction—were a surprise to me.

Growing up, I never felt equipped to write nonfiction because my life seemed pretty plain. My wonderful parents raised me in a middle class Christian home in the suburbs of Indianapolis. I went to high school, traveled to college, I work and study...same old, same old. That's why I've always adored reading and writing fiction: I enjoy diving into other lives and different worlds and times.

It's funny, though, how mundane events like ladybug infestations and high school take on different tones, start to seem important when I transfer them from my head to the page. And when I consider the unexpected and unplanned events like cliff-jumping in Jamaica, witnessing a chicken murder in Manila, stepping in a bee's nest, and dropping out of college, I realize that every life has delightful, tragic, comedic, and inconvenient stories worth telling. It's a bit of a rush to take a seemingly ordinary event and craft it into something beautiful. It's a relief to write down the stories I've spoken a million times. This is what I learned to do with nonfiction.

You probably won't react to my writing with any physical activity, but I hope this collection evokes at least some kind of emotional response. I hope you see my dedication to my fictional characters, and I hope you feel appropriate revulsion, sympathy, laughter, and exhilaration in response to my real-life experiences. Aside from separating the fiction from the nonfiction, these pieces are not in any particular order. Life is messy, unexpected, bumpy, and I want my nonfiction to reflect that. Forcing these stories into a lumped theme would suggest an organization I couldn't foresee and one that I didn't intend to generate.

As I re-read "I get lost a lot..." which I wrote when I was frustrated to the core about a wrong turn that made me late to class, I had a flashback. A few years ago, my sister and I worked

at a take-n-bake pizza place, and we both clocked-out around eight every night. One summer night the normally muggy Indiana air was deliciously cool, the sun just beginning to set to eye level. We had a choice: go home? Or get lost. We decided to cruise through the cornfields, drive interstate 70 east until we found a left turn we didn't recognize, and take it.

For the next two hours I told Sara to pick a number, mostly between one and five, and whichever number she chose determined the number of off-roads we'd pass before we turned, alternating left and right. We rolled all the windows down until we had goose bumps, blasted Carrie Underwood until our ears vibrated, turned left and right until we did not have any clue where we were, until the corn obscured the sun, until we could find the big dipper. Then we navigated back to 70 without cell service or a GPS.

I still don't like getting lost—in a car or in life—but sometimes the quest to return to the “highlighted route” is the most memorable part of a drive, the ones worth writing about. Sometimes we have to discover an alternate route. Other times, we have to jump out of the car and hack our way through a corn field to figure out where the heck we are. But those are where the good stories are. Nobody tells stories about smooth car rides. Read through my transition from fiction to nonfiction. Hop aboard and prepare—as my real-life car passengers do—to get lost. Get lost in my other worlds and times and memories and experiences, ones that hurt me, helped me, made me obsess, panic, gasp, or giggle. Enjoy these stories, savor the ride.

FOREWORD

My parents, grandparents, professors, pastors, friends, and everyone else have always told me that I can use my writing to glorify God. I believe that. But glory is abstract. What exactly does it mean for my writing to bring glory to God? How can my writing be worship? As a Christian, this is important because, ultimately, I want Him to be pleased with me and my efforts here on earth.

When C.S. Lewis first considered the idea of glory, he considered it in terms of the glory promised to Christians in Scripture: “Glory suggests two ideas to me, of which one seems wicked and the other ridiculous. Either glory means to me fame, or it means luminosity” (Lewis 365). He says fame is a “competitive passion and therefore of hell rather than heaven. As for [luminosity], who wishes to become a kind of living electric light bulb?” (366). But the deeper he studied, the more he began to recognize glory as a “divine *accolade*,” as when God says at the judgement seat, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (366). The “specific pleasure of the inferior” is that of being praised by one who is greater. He determines that “to please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is” (367).

I long to please God, to hear that my writing furthered the Kingdom in even a small way. If, by writing well, I can grab the attention of someone who does not know Christ but appreciates a great piece of creative writing, perhaps that outlet could lead to conversation that leads to the One who gave me the ability to write.

Already in my internship with a secular literary magazine, I have the opportunity to work hard, provide good feedback, and review books to the best of my ability, and the editors know

I'm from a Christian college. Can they see Christ through my work? The founding editor has given me wonderful feedback, complimenting my "dedication and sense of responsibility" and calling me "an all-around wonderful addition to the *Cleaver* team," but how might my work lead them to an understanding of Christ and His gift of salvation?

Since this is a totally remote internship, I have never met the staff face-to-face or interacted with them on a daily basis, but I still have an opportunity to prove that I can put out high-quality work, and I pray that God will provide the increase from something as seemingly mundane as a well-crafted book review. Maybe my work will give them the confidence to hire more Cedarville students for future internships. Maybe they'll begin to wonder why we stick to deadlines, provide honest feedback, and make their jobs easier and more enjoyable. Maybe they will understand that we are all different people with different styles, but we have something in common besides the quality of our work. Maybe someday they'll ask what that is. Who knows? Maybe someone will simply see our author biographies and research Cedarville. We need Christian voices in the literary world.

When I die, I want God to recognize that I have studied and practiced and used the talents He's given me, but in the here and now, I want unbelievers to see me use those gifts. I want the opportunity to prove that I am a Christian who writes well. I want my work to reflect the Creator in whose image I am made. But I wonder if I will receive a crown in Heaven? A writing crown to lay at Jesus feet. And I wonder what that might look like. What must I do today to receive a reward in heaven? I think—I hope—that my writing crowns will not be determined by the number of people who come to salvation because of my stories because I have no guarantee that my works will do that. I can guarantee that I will write with my audience in mind: not my earthly audience only but also, and perhaps more importantly, my heavenly audience. May God be

pleased by my writing stories that praise good and abhor evil, that coerce my readers to cheer for justice, righteousness, redemption, selflessness, goodness.

C.S. Lewis scholars says he is only known as a Christian writer in Christian circles. His books and essays are popular around the world to Christians and atheists alike because they are good. His fiction is not overtly Christian, but every reader will “come away enriched as a human being by traveling through these stories.” His books “appeal to our senses of right and wrong...we’re all on board, and we’re all cheering for the right thing” (*The Magic Never Ends*) In the same way, I want my own writing, no matter the depravity it may depict, to leave my readers cheering for the right thing. It may not, probably won’t, depict a salvation story, but it will be redemptive, and it will point to my Creator.

Redemption is another one of those words like “glory.” Abstract. God redeemed His people from sin and hell through His death. What will my work redeem? Certainly not humanity, though, with the Holy Spirit’s movement, perhaps my stories could open that door. But I’m more interested in redeeming the world on a miniscule scale, one story at a time. How can I depict God’s creation in a beautiful way despite its fallen state? This world is marred by sin, but by God’s grace, it is not totally depraved, and we can see our Creator’s love in a rainbow, a thunder storm, even advancing technology, inventions, heroism, everyday acts of kindness, and the artful words that strive to depict these things. My stories can shed light on the good in this world despite the evil, perhaps even depict the heightened contrast of light next to darkness. How much more beautiful is a good deed standing next to something despicable? A diabolical villain (evil scientist, drug lord, abusive husband, alcoholic mother) next to a champion (superhero, policeman, kindly pedestrian, friendly neighbor). God created this good world, and sin invaded. Despite the darkness, light shines through. I can write that.

I still remember five years ago in freshmen composition when we were assigned an essay by Richard Terrell in which he reminds his readers that "if God is a story-teller, then it simply makes sense that His creatures, made in the divine image, would act in similar fashion" (Terrell 240). I have the capacity for creativity and writing because God is creative. God is a writer. God has given me some of His interests.

And one day, I will recognize this gift to its full capacity. In speaking of the New Earth, Randy Alcorn says, "So look out a window. Take a walk. Talk with your friend. Use your God-given skills to paint or draw or build a shed or write a book. But imagine it—all of it—in its original condition." Someday my creative powers will be unlocked, and I truly believe that the way I use my gifts now will influence the way I use them for eternity. Someday my worship will be perfect. Today, my writing can worship God, but it will be tainted by my own selfish desires to please readers, editors, publishers, to advance my career, to make myself look great. But I must keep my eternal motivation in mind, which in Bret Lott's words is "not to succeed in the world's terms but in God's terms" (Lott 32).

Alcorn says, and I say it with him: "I'm worshiping [God] now as I write. Yet too often I'm distracted and fail to acknowledge God along the way. In Heaven, God will always be first in my thinking" (Alcorn 189). I look forward to the day when Christ will literally light the world, but for now I will, with Brian Doyle, "[thrash] toward light with a sharp pen" and pray that God will enable me to use my gift in a way that pleases Him (Doyle).

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AYLA

Homework

“Bryn? Bryn Bryn Bryn!”

Despite my nagging, my brother managed to keep his attention on the genealogy on the table in front of him. I swung around to his other side and climbed onto the arm of the chair, tickled his ear with a whisper.

“Are you done yet?”

He shrugged me away, leaned closer to his work. I watched him fill in the blank for our great grandfather, Maxwell II, who took his wife’s name when he married into the royal Welling clan.

I let my head droop onto Bryn’s shoulder. “Thomas went on break and left the Wimpy Intern in charge of the back entrance.” My little voice was muffled in his shirt. “He’ll let us through without telling mommy and daddy.”

Bryn’s pen paused on the paper. “Have you finished your lessons?”

I threw my head back. “Who cares?”

Bryn dropped his pen and looked at me, his big eyes serious. “The kingdom doesn’t want a princess who can’t pass first grade math.”

I scrunched my nose as he resumed his work, licked my finger, and poked it in his ear.

“Hey!” Bryn shoved me off the arm of the chair and dug his shoulder into his ear, glaring.

I flicked my ratty hair out of my face, giggling. “Come on! Edina told me you’re two weeks ahead on your lessons.”

He nodded. “And you’re a week behind.”

I shrugged. “I’ll catch up. Maybe tomorrow when it’s supposed to rain. But today,” I stood and turned Bryn’s head toward the window, “the sun’s out for the first time all week.”

Bryn’s shoulders dropped, his eyes glazed with sunlight. “Wimpy Intern’s on guard?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you promise to catch up on your lessons tomorrow?”

I groaned. “Fine.”

He bit his lip, then, in a blink, moved my hands from his head to his shoulders and pulled me onto his back, whooping. We flashed past Wimpy Intern, and Bryn dropped me to race down the stairs.

“Pirate and Princess?” he asked between breaths.

“Only if you’re the princess.” I cheered as I beat him to the lawn then screamed when he tackled me into the grass.

We laughed and rolled onto our backs, freshly mowed clippings tangling into my curls.

“Fine,” he panted, “if you get to be a pirate, I’m an astronaut.”

I grinned. “Deal.”

*

Stargazing

“That one looks like a tree. Ooo, and there’s a snake.”

“Ayla, we’re supposed to be identifying constellations, not inventing new ones.”

I shifted off of the clump of dirt digging into my back. A breeze lifted my discarded star chart and flipped it across the field. When I made no move to retrieve it, Bryn glared at me.

“Edina’s going to kill you if you lose another one.”

When I didn’t respond, Bryn growled and stomped over me to fetch the paper. He snatched it up, placed it on my tummy, and weighted it with a rock, then plopped down next to me, cross-legged.

He let his gaze drift back up to the stars and so did I. They were hazy that night, more swirled than speckled. Several paces behind my head, a twig snapped.

“Miss Ayla? Bryn?”

I sighed. “We haven’t moved, Thomas.”

The head of security grunted and shuffled away.

“Be nice, Aye. He’s just doing his job.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Aha.” Bryn clicked on his flashlight, scribbled on his star chart, clicked it off, then fell onto his back beside me. “Done.”

I shrugged against the ground. “I’ll finish mine tomorrow night.”

“Edina wants it tomorrow morning.”

“I’m the princess. I turn in my homework whenever I want.”

“She’s trying to give you work you’ll enjoy. Everybody has to do school, even princesses.”

“But you know what? Colin doesn’t have to do stupid star charts. South Burnham gets to do shell collections on the beach. The whole class! Colin says Miss Bridget’s real nice and pretty and lets them play games, and you know what else?” I propped myself up on my elbow and looked at Bryn, my star chart again falling to the ground. “They have this thing called *recess* three times every day!” I fell back. “The whole class goes outside and plays on a playground. And their cafeteria—”

“Ayla, the kids in Colin’s class aren’t royalty.”

I gritted my teeth. “Lucky.”

Bryn sighed, and I could tell he wanted to say more. But even by that tender age, we had already exhausted our arguments regarding our positions in the kingdom. There wasn’t much else to say.

I stuck my tongue in the gap where my two front teeth used to be.

“You know what else the first graders do at South Burnham?” Bryn asked.

“What?” I could tell he was grinning.

“They have to take naps. Every. Day.”

I gasped.

“On the floor, all in the same room.” He spoke like he hit the climax in a ghost story.

The wind swayed the tall grass around us. A grasshopper landed on my arm, and I shook it off. I shivered. “Colin never told me that.”

Bryn pointed to a clump of stars to our right. “That looks like a crown.”

I sighed through the gap in my teeth. “Everything looks like a crown to you.”

*

Treehouse

“Keep digging the moat, Ayla, we’re almost done!”

I sighed and scrubbed my hands against my jeans, glaring at the little spade we had swiped from the groundskeepers’ shed. “It’ll take forever to dig all the way around this stupid tree,” I grumbled. My curls were sticking to my face and neck, and there was dirt down my shirt and in my teeth. “Why can’t I build up in the tree?”

“Because,” Bryn knotted a rope to a branch and tugged on it, testing his weight, “you’re too little.”

I stomped. “Am not! I’m nine-and-a-half!”

Satisfied with the rope, Bryn pulled a plank from a canvas bag hanging from a higher branch and fitted it between two branches to make a path back to the trunk. He plucked a hammer and nails from his junior tool belt and squatted on the branch.

“You can’t even make it up the tree, Aye.”

His hammering drowned out my protests. I crossed my arms and eyed the trunk. My big brother had nailed planks into the trunk to assist his climb. They weren’t that far apart. I could make it.

Distracted by his work, Bryn didn’t notice my ascent until I was halfway up the tree and reaching for a particularly high hand-hold.

His eyes rounded and he dropped his hammer. “Ayla, no, that one’s not sturdy enough!”

But it was too late. Pulling it loose, I lost my balance and fell backwards, tried to catch myself on my wrist. I heard the snap before I felt it and screamed.

Bryn, yelling for help, slid down the rope and landed in my half-dug moat. He lifted me up, steadying my arm, and guided me back to the palace, both red in the face, hearts thumping. It

wasn't until a guard heard Bryn's shouting and my crying that Bryn relinquished me and let the guard scoop me up and run the rest of the way home.

As the guard cradled me, I glanced over his shoulder and saw Bryn grimacing at his hands, raw and bloody from his flight down the rough rope.

But he still managed a smile when he looked up to me. "You'll be okay, Aye." He choked then stuffed his hands under his arms and trudged back to the palace alone.

*

After the Blast

I redistributed my weight from my right leg to my left, trying to bring feeling back into my pinched toes. At the same time, a bit of hair slipped out from beneath my giant hat, tickling my nose. I blew it out of my face, but it floated right back in front of my eye, the frizzy, red curl cutting my gaze in half. I sighed, glanced at my mom whose face, to the good people of Burnham, looked solemn and respectful as she listened to her husband's kingdom address. But I could see her lips purse, silently begging her daughter to stand still.

But my blazer was confining, the gloves made my hands sweat, and never in a million years would I have chosen to wear heels when I knew I would be standing in front of a live crowd and cameras.

"Good people of Burnham, we gather here at this hollowed site to remember the loss of so many lives. Today, on the fifth anniversary of that treacherous act of terror, we mourn those who perished and pray for those who survived. Weep with those who mourn, Burnham, as I do,

as do my wife and my daughter.” He motioned to us, and my mom raised a handkerchief to her eye.

It was a good speech. Too bad I could barely hear it over the flies buzzing around my head. Stupid perfume. I had told my mom, “No one will smell it. I’ll be on a platform above the audience.”

“Ayla, the ambassador brought you this perfume from India, and he’ll be in attendance. Wear it.”

I waved my hand in the most lady-like way I knew how, and the flies dispersed then returned a second later to continue their orbit.

“My son, my dear Bryn, as you all know, was here at the airport that d—” the King stuttered.

I stopped shooing the flies to listen, heard mom’s breath shudder. Judging by the look on her face, she didn’t know about this addendum to the speech any more than I did.

Dad grasped both sides of the podium. “He was a fine boy. At fifteen, he could have run this kingdom. But the boy, always looking to the skies, wanted to visit the tower, watch the planes take off.” He choked.

Mom quickly wiped a real tear from her cheek. My stomach clenched.

“Now my son’s in a wheelchair, paralyzed, brain damaged. And five years later he’s still not well enough to even attend events like this.” He paused, his voice steady. “Rebels Against Royals will answer for the crimes.”

A few people in the crowd nodded and grunted in agreement.

I gritted my teeth.

“My dear friend Thomas here,” he motioned to the decorated man on his left, “our wonderful head of security, has assured me that his team is making progress in the search for R.A.R. Hear me now, Burnham: we will find them.”

The crowd erupted. Dad nodded resolutely. Mom clapped politely. I rolled my fingers into a fist. How dare they use my brother as a sob story to garner support in their fight against R.A.R.

All the way home, Dad talked to Thomas in the back of the limo, continuing their ongoing discussion about how they would flush out the leaders of Rebels Against Royalty. Mom shuffled through paperwork, her glasses tipping her nose. I bit my tongue.

When the driver dropped us at the circle in front of the main doors, I was the first out of the limo. I kicked off my heels in the driveway and bolted up the stairs. I wound my way through the marbled halls, past the servants, tearing off my gaudy hat, the blazer, the gloves, untucked my shirt, and was ready to slip into shorts before I even reached my bedroom. I pulled my hair into a ponytail and took a deep breath, checked my watch. I would be able to see Bryn as soon as he finished lunch. In less than a half-hour. In the meantime, I plodded back downstairs, marveling at how quickly my discarded clothes had been picked up.

I stopped in the kitchen, grabbed a pint of Ben and Jerry’s, and headed to the smallest sitting room. My room, as the servants called it, was too far off the beaten path for my parents to frequent. Perfect for me. I flopped over the back of the couch, slammed my ice cream onto the coffee table, and rubbed my face.

“Ugh!” My annoyed growl came out as more of a shriek as I kicked my feet and punched the cushions. I stuffed a pillow over my head and sighed.

“Ayla! Sit. Up. Straight.”

I dropped the pillow onto the floor. Of all the days, of all the hours, of all the minutes, the Queen had to pick right now to venture into this sitting room. “Mother, not now.”

“People are watching.”

“No one is watching.”

“Somebody is always watching.”

I heard her heels click across the hardwood then the zip of the blinds and the *tick, tick, tick* as they bumped against the window. I leaned up on my elbows.

“Feel better? Those invisible paparazzi can be a pain, let me tell you.”

“I am not in the mood for your surly attitude, young lady. Please, sit up.”

I melted off the couch and slouched against the front of it, my arms and legs crossed. I could almost see my mom’s hair frizzing out of her tightly wound bun. I lifted myself up onto the couch, fingers clenched in my lap.

“Do you have any idea what your father’s going through right now? Of course you don’t, you skip the kingdom briefings. Suffice to say we’re under threat.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re always under threat. But the last three were false alarms, and we went into lockdown for nothing.”

“You don’t think that today of all days, we might have cause for concern?” She slid onto a chair, somehow managing to suspend the illusion of a steel rod in her spine. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, sighed, then let her shoulders drop a fraction of an inch. “I sat in on Bryn’s speech therapy this morning.”

I straightened. “Who rescheduled his speech lesson? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Odette wanted to try some of his exercises without you there.”

“And?” I slid to the front of the cushions.

“Nothing. He wouldn’t talk to me, wouldn’t talk to Odette. Still only to you.” Her voice cracked on the last word.

I suppressed a smile. I shouldn’t have been happy that my brother couldn’t communicate with anyone but me. But at the same time, I put more effort into his therapy than anyone else, including his therapists. I re-taught him how to walk, patiently wheeling him through the gardens every day, letting him use me as a crutch until he could finally stutter step on his own. He’s still slow, and he tires quickly, but he has that much independence now. More than he had for a long time after the explosion.

Now I help him in his schooling instead of the other way around. Now I take care of him. My parents make their appearances, but they don’t have the time to dedicate that I do. Rather, they’re not willing to ignore other responsibilities for their brain-damaged son.

“Ayla, are you even listening to me?”

I looked at my mom, slowly reached for my ice cream without breaking eye contact.

“I just got off the phone with Edina. She said you never showed up for your etiquette lesson this morning.” Her eyes looked calm, but her lips were trapped in a line, and her fists were clinched much like mine.

“I was up late last night.” I had taken Bryn out to go stargazing in the back yard, but I didn’t dare tell my parents. They didn’t understand, thought it was best for Bryn to be shut in, but I knew better.

He always loved the sky. It’s what drew him to the airport that day. He grunted and smiled and pointed excitedly every time something flashed above us, whether it was a shooting star, a plane, or a lightning bug. Bryn was never more himself than when he was outside, looking up.

My mother snapped her fingers. “Ayla, pay attention. Edina quit, do you hear me?” She stood up and circled the chair, her hands flapping around her head. “I just don’t know what to do with you. Edina was your last chance, do you hear me? You’ve run off every instructor and tutor in Burnham, and when the most highly praised tutor deigns to return to you after years of retirement, she’s forced to leave after less than a year. Gone, poof! She’s broken every girl she’s trained.”

“Mom, I’m not a dog—”

“But no one stands up to the great Ayla Welling, oh no. Ayla Welling is king!” She threw one hand over her eyes and steadied herself on the back of the chair with the other. “I just—it’s just—I can’t—oh!” And she fluttered to the door. She tossed it open and turned back to me. “You will become a lady. You will learn your place in this kingdom. You will, or—or so help me, Ayla, I will fling myself off the north tower!” and she slammed the door, leaving me slouched on the couch.

I set the ice cream back on the coffee table, stood up slowly, and wandered through the room, dreamlike. I let my fingers drift over the chairs, desk, mantle, mirror...mirror. My cheeks blotched red. The rash traveled down my neck, past the collar of that t-shirt my mom despised. The one with the name of the hospital in which Bryn stayed during his recovery. She blanched every time she saw it. I looked down at my holey tennis shoes, the farthest footwear from glass slippers I could manage.

Bryn always encouraged me to wear what was comfortable so we could slip straight from studying to exploring the forest behind our house. We’d be plane-wrecked archeologists stranded in a jungle, spies on a mission, army men. I hadn’t grown out of that stage yet. At sixteen, I probably should have, but nothing made me happier than make-believe.

Making-believe that Bryn was whole, undamaged, that my parents could accept me for who I was: someone who preferred a hike to a banquet, a canoe trip over a ground-breaking ceremony, and always sweatpants over dresses. Never dresses. No heels.

I bolted out of the office, headed straight for Bryn's room on the other side of the palace and walked in without knocking. His nurse, accustomed to my storming in, gave me a nod and returned to her book, glancing up at Bryn every few minutes.

Bryn sat in a chair by the window, staring over the grounds. I wondered if more thoughts traveled through his head than what he could communicate. Did he miss being able to stand up and run? Did he even remember the times when he could? I laid a hand on his shoulder, and when he turned up to me, a smile split his face. He almost knocked off his thick glasses in his haste to give me a hug. One eye drifted lazily while the other tried to focus on me.

“Do you want to go for a walk?”

He jerked his chin downward, and I helped him to his feet. He leaned on me for a moment then caught his balance as I opened his door that led directly to the gardens.

“We're going out,” I said over my shoulder.

The nurse waved us away. We wound through the gardens at a snail's pace, Bryn limping along and grinning the whole time. He pointed at the birds and grunted in delight. Normally, I'd encourage him to use words, and often times he would, but right now I wasn't in the mood to talk. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and drifted beside Bryn. Finally, he turned to me, sensing something was off. He forced his eyes downward and stuck out his lower lip.

“Yeah, I've had better days.”

You know what today is, big brother? It's not a happy day. Five years ago today, we lost half of you, the half who was a prince, who did everything to please his parents and his subjects in the hopes of one day becoming king.

Was he sad? Would he miss it?

I remembered all the times my mom yelled at me to look nice, be punctual, act like a lady, and for goodness' sake, wear a skirt for once. The times my dad glared at me if I dared to speak out of turn at a dinner party, skip a kingdom briefing, or ask for a night off. Now, since Bryn mostly stayed in his room, I had to be royal enough for the both of us.

I plopped down on a bench, and, after a moment, Bryn joined me, leaning his head on my shoulder. We watched the sun sink toward the trees, his hair tickling my face. He had been an adorable kid, bleached hair from his outdoor adventures, freckles like mine splashed across his cheeks, always a mischievous gleam in his eye.

Now he had glasses, a result of damage to his sensory cortex, or so they told me. His dull hair was always uneven because of scarring on his scalp. Due to lack of exercise, he was heavier now, nothing like the skinny little boy I remember. He was plagued by ataxia, a condition that made his muscles twitchy and uncoordinated, and contractures deformed his right arm, creating a permanent bend in the wrist.

I thought he looked great, still my perfect brother.

PICNIC PICKPOCKET

A rare September sun shone on New Ulm, sparkling off the Ferris wheel, vendor carts, party favors, and table upon table laden with pitch-in food for the picnic festival. The leaves were beginning to turn, one or two taking the occasional fall, subjecting themselves to the stomping, crunching, crinkling of hundreds of children, parents in tow. A jazz band played with the breeze, crooning, swinging to the swoosh of rickety rides, beating with the merchants' call for *Popcorn! Snow cones! Get 'em hot, Get 'em cold!*

It was a beautiful day. *Certainly too beautiful to be on duty*, thought Chief Klause. From his perch on the picnic table, his shiny shoes resting on the bench, his bulk bowing the tabletop, he could see nearly every resident of New Ulm milling through the park.

The Miller boys weaved through the trees, chasing the Bayer girls. Frau Hermann, a second generation immigrant committed to her roots, sat straight-backed, casting her eyes about the town's mischief-makers. Mrs. Bonn, battered from years as first lady of New Ulm yet retaining her regal air, chatted with Mrs. Kral, whose nervous eyes followed every movement of her eight children swarming around the park. Mrs. Ring hobbled over between two crutches and rested by her friends, brushed her hair out of her eyes, adjusted her dress.

Chief Klause counted down the hours until he could return home to his mama's cooking.

He patted his belly, careful not to add any strain to the nearly bursting buttons, and sighed. Some of the women had offered him a plate of cold ham and potato salad, but he was forced to decline, unwilling to appear distracted from his duties. Though, he reasoned, the

occasional cupcake, hardboiled egg, or finger sandwich snatched from the table could hardly distract a man for more than a second or two. If a fellow still had the use of his hands when trouble arose, a snack here or there couldn't hurt. He had eaten three cupcakes before Mrs. Kral had slapped his hand away from the tray.

Chief Klause laced his sausage-like fingers, mourning his uneaten cake, and surveyed the park. The festival was prime time for hooligans and crooks to take full advantage of the crowds. Chief Klause had already broken up one fight at the Ferris wheel, turning sideways and waving his nightstick between two young men, one of whom had apparently cut in front of the other. Besides that, though, it had been a quiet day.

He remembered his predecessor's golden moment: it was nearly fifteen years ago at the Festival of 1901 when old Chief Ackermann had discovered and undermined a devious con wherein a few rascals planned to stand at the gate and charge an entrance fee to unwitting guests. Ackermann saved the town bundles of money when he overheard the boys' plot and caught them before the act. The Festival had been dedicated to him that year—the plaque still hung in the department lobby.

Klause's eye caught on Mr. William C. Bonn, long-time mayor of New Ulm, a short, pudgy, frayed-looking man, bobbing amongst his loyal followers. Well, mostly loyal. Mayor Bonn had recently made a bad deal with the northern town of Klossner, lost New Ulm its favorite children's park. The entire town was behind Bonn when he made the friendly wager with the neighboring mayor before a baseball game, but when New Ulm lost the game and the park, the town revolted, blaming the Mayor for the loss.

The mayor twiddled his fingers behind his back, his normally easy-going eyes darting nervously. He nodded to Charley Kral who nodded in return while sidestepping one of his many

children. A few of the kids bounded up to Mayor Bonn, hands extended. The mayor fiddled around in a few of his inner pockets, finally extracting a peppermint. Klause watched the Mayor apologize to the boys for coming up short on the candies, pat the boys' heads, and send them on their way.

Not a second later, the Mayor noticed something across the field, and Klause followed Bonn's gaze to three boys. Klause recognized the Davenports, a young man and his younger twin brothers, sniffing around the food. The brothers had recently wandered into New Ulm, no one knew from where, but after one of the twins had thrown a rock through the town hall window during a meeting, Mayor Bonn had banned them from the town and charged Chief Klause to keep an eye out for those troublemakers.

Klause had found them once the week before, huddled under an old quilt in an alley late at night. He made eye contact with the oldest one, placed his hand on his nightstick. The oldest one pulled his sleeping brothers closer, eyes calm. Chief Klause deflated, continued his route without a word. Early the next morning, he picked up a box of pastries and carried it to the alley, but the boys had moved on, and he hadn't seen them since.

Now he watched as Mayor Bonn stormed through the crowd. The twins hid behind their brother who stood straight and quiet while the mayor scolded, drawing a bit of attention from the crowd. Klause prepared himself to stand, but the scene was over as quickly as it had started, the oldest brother pulling away from Bonn and shouldering through the crowd, pushing his little brothers ahead of him. Bonn growled, straightened, and continued his rounds.

“Chief Klause?”

Klause cleared his throat, ruffling his mustache, and glanced around to see a child standing at his feet, a Kral kid judging by his static-y blonde hair. Klause smiled, fingering his badge.

“Yes, my boy?”

The boy looked to his left and to his right, hooked his finger, and beckoned the chief closer. Klause sucked in and leaned over his belly, the table creaking. The boy whispered, his hand cupping his mouth.

“Do you like cupcakes?”

“Why yes, son, I suppose I do,” Klause laughed, eyeing the boy’s other hand hidden behind his back.

“What color’s your favorite?”

“I was always partial to the blue ones. It’s what mama made.” Klause winked.

The boy pulled his hand slowly from behind his back to reveal a pink cupcake. “Well,” he said, “I don’t have blue, but—”

Klause reached for the dessert—

—and the boy smashed the cake in Klause’s face, smearing icing down his nose and into his mustache. The boy bolted. “I did it, you owe me a quarter!” he yelled.

“Why, you little—” but Chief Klause tripped when he tried to dismount the picnic table and landed face-first in the grass, popping at least two buttons in the process. Klause growled and rolled over, rocking back and forth until a kind man grabbed his flailing hand and hauled him to his feet.

“Terribly sorry, Chief Klause, let me help you there.” The man handed Klause a handkerchief, and when his eyes were icing-free, Klause’s glance darted every which way in search of the boy.

“He took off, Chief,” said the rescuer whom Klause now recognized as Charley Kral, a giant of a man and the father of the cupcake boy. Mr. Kral let Klause stand and situate himself against the table, sneezing pink icing out his nose.

“Got a little smudge there, sir.” Kral swiped the handkerchief across the badge, smearing it further, the pink filling the engraving. Klause jerked away and unclipped the badge, rubbing it between his fingers while Mr. Kral poked through the grass for the missing buttons. “Found one, sir.”

The chief growled and stuffed it into his breast pocket. He sighed, feeling the table take his slouching weight.

“Can I do anything—”

“You’ve done enough, Charlie. Go lasso those kids of yours before they get into any more trouble.”

“Right.”

The Klause Festival dedication plaque faded from his imagination. He scraped icing from beneath his stubby nails.

“Klause.”

Chief. *Chief* Klause, he thought, and then noticed who was addressing him. The gruff little mayor stormed up to Klause’s table, his small shoes squeaking.

Klause rocked to his feet. “Yessir?”

“Klause, I want to keep this under wraps.” He spoke in a quick, loud whisper.

“Yessir.”

“You hear me?” A demand.

“Yessir.”

Mayor Bonn leaned in. “Pickpockets, Klause.”

“Yess—pickpockets?” Klause stiffened to attention. “Here? At the festival?”

“This town can’t lose any more money, Klause, I can’t bear it, you hear me? After the Klossner fiasco, I’ll be blamed for every pinched penny in New Ulm. It’s gotta be stopped, gotta be stopped quick. Twenty crisp dollars snatched straight from my pocket, *straight* from my pocket, and Albert Ring just told me he’s missing money, and who knows who—”

“I’ve been robbed!” Charley Kral’s towering frame emerged from the crowd. “Robbed, I tell you, seventeen dollars gone!”

The milling townspeople perked up and gathered around Mr. Kral who turned his pockets inside out. Mayor Bonn clawed from the top of his shiny head to his chin and back up again, covering his eyes. Chief Klause pinned his badge onto his uniform, still tinted pink and now upside-down, hiked up his pants, marched over to the crowd, and cleared his throat.

“Scuse me, sir, can I be of assistance?”

“I should think so, Chief.”

“No. No. No no no.” If Mayor Bonn’s mustache were any longer, he would have ripped it out as he performed his one-man stampede into the throng. “No disorder here, everything is fine, everything is—grand, it’s grand, just—fantastic.” He reached his hands up to Charley’s chest and shoved him back a step. “In the name of all that is holy, Charles, you will stop this at once.”

“Because you can’t keep track of this town’s belongings—”

“That’s out of line!”

“Gentleman, gentleman, please,” the Chief stepped between the squabbling men. “This is now official police business.” He waved his nightstick above his head. “Disperse please, disperse.” The crowd wandered away slowly enough to appear as if they were leaving but lingered close enough to overhear. Klause obliged, raising his voice a tad as he turned to the victims. “Now where’s Mr. Ring? Mayor Bonn, I understand he, uh, he too registered a complaint to you?”

“Here, Chief, I’m here.” A pipsqueak of a man with a voice to match shoved his way through the thinning crowd. “Present and accounted for and missing almost five dollars, sir.”

“Right, Mr. Ring. Gentleman, if you’d follow me to the table over there I’d be glad to take your statements.”

Mayor Bonn, Charley Kral, and Mr. Ring proceeded to Chief Klause’s lookout, the townspeople parting to make way, muttering about the injustice of it all. Klause’s mustache grinned at the gawkers. He nodded and gave a little wave.

“Now then,” he started when the three men were seated on the bench. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?” He extracted a crumpled notepad from his back pocket and a pencil from behind his ear. “Mr. Ring, let’s start with you.”

“Yes, sir,” Mr. Ring squeaked. “Well, it was the most peculiar thing, sir. I reached into my pocket to purchase a popsicle for the missus—poor thing’s still on crutches, not moving around too great, you know, and I wanted to give her a little reason to smile, so I thought to myself, I thought, why not a popsicle, right? Normally a child’s snack, I know, but still enjoyable, though they tend to drip, and now that I think about it, may have been terribly difficult to eat on crutches, but, well, it wasn’t meant to be anyway, I suppose. With Rosy’s medical bills piling up, we don’t have a lot of extra money around the house, what with me working all these

hours and her having to rest that leg of hers all day, not that I'm complaining, I of course am blessed beyond what I deserve, but nevertheless, I had set aside a bit of cash to give Rosy a fun day at the festival, maybe a popsicle or two as I said, perhaps some popcorn, but I didn't have much to spare, not much, not much, you know, and when I reached into my pocket to find it, it was surely gone, sir, all five gone."

"And when was this?" Klause asked.

"Oh, not twenty minutes before the good Mayor Bonn reported it to you, sir. I informed the mayor, I said, 'Mayor Bonn, sir, I think there's a thief, a pickpocket or someone at the festival who's picking pockets, because I checked, and my pockets are sewn tight, no holes to fall through,' and I had checked my pocket just a minute before I passed through a thick crowd, and the bills were there, wrinkled but there, and the good Mayor Bonn assured me he'd take care of it, and he went about his investigation and then, poor man that he is, he received the same treatment as I did, and it looks like he's kept good on his promise to report it to the proper authorities, Mr. Chief Klause, sir." Mr. Ring folded his fingers tightly in his lap and looked to the mayor whose face rested in the palm of his hand, groaning as he spoke.

"You finished, Ring?"

"Why, yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I get to rambling sometimes, I—"

"This all started with those darned out-of-towners, I tell you," Bonn cut in. "Haven't trusted them from the minute they stepped foot in my town, Klause."

Klause nodded, scribbling on his pad, his letters as prim and curly as a girl in grade school. "And, uh, am I to assume you're referring to—"

"The Davenports, of course, those blasted brothers have done nothing but cause mischief in New Ulm."

Kral nodded. “Skulking in alleyways is not becoming to New Ulm, Chief.”

“Mark my words, Klaus,” Mayor Bonn rose from the bench, his shiny head barely reaching Klaus’s badge, “it’s those Davenports. I’d put my last penny on it if they hadn’t already taken it.”

“I saw those hooligans hanging around the mayor, I did, very suspicious like,” Ring piped up.

“And the youngest was hovering near the popsicle cart, I saw him with my own two eyes,” said Kral.

“I want this taken care of, Klaus, and fast, before these light-fingered gentry ply their trade on any other respectable citizens of this fair town, you hear me?”

“Yessir, but uh—”

“No buts, Klaus,” the mayor reached to his tiptoes and pointed a finger to Klaus’s nose. “You’ll take care of this. By the end of the day.” Bonn quit the group. Kral and Ring shrugged and wandered off to find their own families, leaving Klaus to wilt onto the picnic table.

Klaus had wanted to believe those boys were harmless, nothing but poor kids without parents, but this new evidence brought to light the possibility Klaus had been mistaken. It could not be a coincidence that Bonn, Ring, and Kral had all witnessed suspicious activity surrounding the Davenports, and Klaus determined to dig to the bottom of it.

Ring bobbed through the crowd, approaching Klaus, breathless and pointing to the gate. “Chief Klaus, sir, they’re leaving!”

Klaus followed Ring’s finger to the Davenports who seemed to be ducking out of the festival in a hurry. Klaus hoisted himself off the bench and shoved the crowd aside, reaching for his nightstick as he approached the exit. “Halt, Mr. Davenport.” But the eldest quickened his

pace, pulling his arms around his brothers and shoving them forward. The two resisted for a moment, but at the apparent entreaty of their older brother, shoved their way through the last throng of festival-goers and shot down the road, kicking up dust.

In the second before the oldest could gain his footing, he came to a choking stop, Klaus's hand on his collar. Klaus yanked him to the ground and pinned the boy's hands behind his back. "Not today, Davenport."

There was a general rumble of assent from the crowd, and as Klaus hoisted the stringy boy to his feet, one person clapped, then another and another, compounding in a mild applause punctuated by shouts and whoops.

Klaus flushed and, with one hand wrapped firmly around Davenport's upper arm, raised his free hand to silence the admirers. They fell quiet, expectantly, smiles dancing on their faces.

"Good people of New Ulm," Klaus started, "rest assured, I will get to the bottom of this. Justice will be served."

The spectators erupted but were cut short as Mayor Bonn shouldered his way to the front. "Check his pockets, Klaus."

The boy glared at the ground.

"Turn 'em out, son."

"Ain't got nothin' to turn out, *sir*."

"Even so," Klaus cleared his throat, feeling sweat leak around his collar. "You turn 'em out, you prove your innocence."

The boy didn't move.

"Well I'll get to the bottom of this!" Mayor Bonn stomped up to the boy and flipped out one pocket, looked surprised when it came up empty. "Uh." He scrambled around to the boy's

other side and turned out the other pocket. Nothing. The Mayor backed away, shaking his head. “No, no, no, I know it was you, I know it. Wait—his brothers, those little brats, they ran off, ran off, they did!” The mayor blotted from the top of his shiny head to his collar.

“Chief Klause?” Two little boys peeked out from the crowd.

For the first time, the older brother perked up, “Leo, Will, get outta here!”

But the twins, sheepish, approached the Chief who released their older brother and bent down. “How can I help you, boys?”

One of them raised his chin, “Chief Klause, our brother didn’t steal nothin’. But,” he reached into his pocket, “he found this cash in his pocket right as we was about to leave. He didn’t know what to do, and then you chased him, sir, and he got scared, and gave it to us to get rid of.”

“I wasn’t *scared*,” said the older boy. “But I knew you’d never believe me even if I told the truth. I don’t know how I got that money, but I s’pect someone’s framing me.” He looked sharply at the Mayor who had slowly inched away from him.

Klause took the cash from the twins, “Thank you, boys,” and stood, counting it. “Twenty-two dollars here, so that belongs to Mr. Ring and Mr. Kral. But where’s the money Mayor Bonn lost? Mayor Bonn?”

The crowd propelled their mayor toward Klause.

Klause pulled himself up as tall as he could. “How much did you say you lost, sir?”

“You’re mistaken, Klause, I was not robbed.”

The crowd gasped and mumbled.

Mr. Kral stepped forward, Mr. Ring in his shadow. “Now, you’re lying, Bonn, loud and clear. You reported your case to the chief here right in front of me and Ring.”

“That’s right, Mr. Mayor,” Ring piped up.

Bonn’s face reddened, his cheeks puffed out.

Klause tapped a finger on his nightstick. “Mayor Bonn, would you be so kind as to turn out your pockets?”

The mayor jerked. “How dare you, Klause, how dare you, I’ll have your badge!” His fingers played together nervously.

“Simply empty your pockets, and we can clear this right up.”

“I won’t!”

“I will.” And Charley Kral, fists drawn, approached the mayor.

“No, no, no!” And the mayor turned out his pockets, showering the ground with cash and coins. The crowd gasped.

“I thought you said all your money had been taken, Mayor?” said Klause.

The spectators mumbled and buzzed, their gossip building until they began to lurch forward toward their mayor. Bonn covered his face and cowered, but Charley held off the tide long enough for Chief Klause to cuff the villain. New Ulm cheered. Klause looked for the Davenports and spotted a flash of their grimy clothes as they slipped away.

The town paraded Klause and the bumbling mayor around the corner to the station and watched, chanting “Chief Klause” as he slammed Mayor Bonn in a cell. The people clapped. Klause, rested his hands on his bulging belly and looked at the golden Ackerman plaque on the wall. It looked dingier than he remembered. The Davenports peeked through a corner of the window as the crowd celebrated. The oldest one nodded to Klause, his arms wrapped around his brothers. Klause nodded in return.

He imagined the celebration cake he’d be eating for the next several days, and smiled.

MY BOYFRIEND'S ESTRANGED GRANDFATHER

He was an alcoholic, a wealthy engineer, and a butterfly collector. He traveled all over the world, especially in South America, specializing in Southern California and Neotropical specimens, amassing a collection allegedly worth hundreds of thousands of dollars by the time of his death in late 2007.

His house in California must have been nothing but walls and racks of display cases—wings ranging from the size of a buttercup blossom to an oak leaf. Splotched, banded, eyed, lined, swiped, swirled. Splayed and mounted, framed, flocking Emperors, Brushfoots, Daggerwings, longwings, snouts, and Swallowtails, sleek, fuzzy, feathered—frozen.

It happened on a bridge—or rather off a bridge—in the Kosnipata Valley of Atalaya, Peru. He ventured away from the Association for Tropical Lepidoptera early on the morning of November 4. As there were no witnesses, they can only assume that he spotted a rare butterfly—perhaps the one he traveled to Peru to find—misjudged its distance from the bridge railing, and flung his net too hard.

Accounts of the height of the fall range from thirty to five thousand feet, frozen in flight for an instant, barely long enough to snatch a breath of the air rushing around him, before he met the dry river bed. His association initiated a search when he didn't show up for dinner and discovered his body in the ravine, his net in his hand, and the butterfly trapped, flapping in the fibers.

CORRY CHRONICLES

We were orphans whose plane crashed in a frozen tundra, an excuse to traverse the golf course to the ultimate sledding hill. We were survivors designing moss carpets, brick couches, tire toilets, shrub sunrooms, mud casseroles, dried grass stews, weed paths to the creek for water.

We were mermaids or dolphins or Martha Washington if we flipped our hair after our underwater tea parties. They were sharks and pirates. We were princesses sometimes but usually spies who dreamt of a Tupperware submarine and groundhogs who would respond again to the letters we stuffed down their holes. Several years later, we learned, much to our dismay, Aunt Lori had bought a paw print stamp and replied on the groundhog's behalf.

We tanned on the tennis court until the chipped, green pavement burned. Stargazed, our heads on each other's stomachs until the breeze chilled through our hoodies. We plucked small green apples, munched around the worm holes, then tossed them into the weeds, praying the grown-ups didn't happen to look out the window as we did so. We had seen Grandpa pick his way through his raspberry bushes in search of the biggest berries, but the one time we tried, we trampled the bush, and the next year we did not have fresh raspberries. We determined to tame the woods in the backyard; therefore, we had to knock down a tree. We chose the biggest one we thought we could conquer and piled around it, pushing on the count-of-three for the better part of an hour until the 20-foot sapling released its roots and surrendered to the Ottaway clan.

TO THE PERSON WHO RAN US OFF THE ROAD

When you swerved into our lane, I covered my face, thinking, *We are going to die and I don't want to watch it happen*. When Alyssa jerked the wheel to the right, I thought we'd roll to a stop in a field or hit a mailbox or slam into a ditch. But we did not slow down, and we were not next to a field. So as you drifted back into your lane, I thought of JP as we bore down on the tree we narrowly avoided, pictured his family surrounding his blue, swollen body.

You corrected, but we ramped a driveway and fractured a telephone pole. Wrenched the wheel from the well, axle and all, totaled the car. Did you know the corn starch in exploding airbags looks like smoke? You were a couple miles down the road when I woke my mom from her sleep, and you were probably home and in bed while she sobbed in our front room for two hours thinking about what *could* have happened. Yet I left with nothing but a rubber burn on my left elbow and a severed headlight from the man who found it in his yard.

After you drove away, the cop ticketed Alyssa for “failing to control the vehicle” and her parents can no longer find affordable car insurance. Did you buy a newspaper the next morning, check for fatalities while you sipped your hangover coffee and aspirin?

You don't know that Alyssa had to pull over to catch her breath the next time she drove on 72, that she considered calling me to have me pick her up. That my teeth hurt with the memory of them jarring together, my back stiffens, stomach clenches, and I squeeze the chair, close my eyes whenever I'm in the passenger seat on a two-lane road. That now, in my head, every pair of oncoming headlights swerves.

I GET LOST A LOT...

...and not in ways that make a lick of sense.

Some people misread their GPS. My GPS misreads me—it doesn't understand my utter lack of sense-of-direction, my inability to “drive to the highlighted route.”

And I don't take it in stride. At all. My cousin Alyssa laughs her way through wrong turns and misdirection, finds it amusing to get lost. I punch my steering wheel and all of my muscles feel like they're wrapped in rubber bands, trembling, ready to snap. My teeth chatter. I grind them. My lungs shrink. The music I was singing along with before I missed the turn is suddenly way too loud. I feel dumb.

Once, and this wasn't my fault, two friends and I were driving to another friend's house. “It's right off 465. You've driven 465, right? Head toward Carmel.” Interstate 465 is a big circle around Indianapolis. Josh's house is at the top of the circle. Here's what we did: we missed the exit. Drove all the way around to the bottom of the circle, exited, and continued driving southeast for a good forty-five minutes. And I, a Hoosier since I was four, had no clue we were headed in the wrong direction until I saw a sign for New Palestine. Where the heck is New Palestine and how did it end up in Indiana? What should have been a forty-five minute trip, turned into a two-and-a-half-hour debacle.

Last year, when I took a year off from Cedarville University, I visited campus a few times, a two-and-a-half hour straight-shot to Ohio. But three, count 'em, *three* times in a *row* I got lost coming home because the main highway through Indianapolis was closed. The first time,

I ended up sobbing in an alley in the middle of Indianapolis. “Dad, the GPS can’t find me, my gas light clicked on twenty minutes ago, and I have no cash and nothing in my bank account.” I tacked an hour onto that commute.

Over the summer, my mom, sister, cousin and I road-tripped from my grandma’s house in Corry, Pennsylvania to our family friends in Harrisburg. First we hit construction on a country road which delayed us about a half hour. Then, the lovely city of Harrisburg decided to rope off the main drag for a marathon, and we detoured, stop-go-stop-go through neighborhoods whose houses puzzled together, bumped up against the road—a forty-five minute delay. Then we arrived! At the wrong address. Did you know, in Pennsylvania, there are *two* 21 Meadow Drives in the same town and zip code? Yeah. Neither did we. The two addresses should have been five minutes apart, but the two GPS’s we had running simultaneously were bent on directing us to the wrong one. We zigzagged all over town and didn’t arrive for another half hour. That four-and-a-half hour trip stretched to about six.

My house is 1.2 miles away from campus. With stoplights, it’s a five minute commute, easy. But last week, the city repaved Wilmington, transforming almost two miles of road into a one-way street. My five minute, 1.2 mile trip became a twenty minute, 9.7 mile mess. I called my sister, yelling over the whoosh of the wind through my open windows. “Who closes down an entire road!? I. Am not. Happy.”

“Rachael, it’s going to be okay.”

“This is idiotic! I’m late for class!”

“So skip it.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re going to get there eventually.”

“But late!”

“Relax.”

“Not. Happy.”

“Okaaay, well I have to go now. Deep breaths.”

RICK'S CAFÉ: NEGRIL, JAMAICA

The cemented rocks, walnut-sized but smooth, fit the arches of my feet. They are no longer slippery because I have been standing on the platform long enough that the Jamaican breeze has dried my salt-stained skin to goosebumps. Behind me, the Senior Class Trip chaperones sunbathe by the pool. Below, my classmates bob in the bay, most of them having taken three flights of stony stairs to reach the ocean. I stare down a more direct route.

I stutter forward and step back, make the mistake of peeking over the edge of the cliff through thirty-five feet of air and twenty-feet of ocean to the sandy-bottomed floor. No boulders. Good, so I won't smash my face. The waves lick the cliff, smack their chops, preparing for my plunge into their mild maw.

"Jump, Rachael!"

"Don't look down."

"Don't think, just jump!"

"She's not gonna do it."

My toes clutch the ledge. I try to lean out and let the space catch me, but my knees lock, and I step back onto the pool patio, away from the cliff, let someone else go in front of me.

I march back onto the platform, glance over the edge, squeeze my eyes and shiver, turn away. I scoot backward to the far side of the platform so I can't see straight down to where I'll land. *Land*—interesting. Because it's not land. It's water. A whole ocean-full, backed by an

arching cove drinking up the high-tide, whirlpooling in rocky nooks. Water, that if I hit wrong, will smack as hard as the stones beneath my feet.

Taylor had landed on her butt: she cries in a pool chair off to the side, unable to stand. Lindsey forgot to point her toes: she sits next to Taylor, her feet blistered. Holly's palms are seared.

I hold my breath, take a running start.

Don't stop.

I point my toes, suck one arm to my side, pinch my nose.

I am only in the air for a second or two, but it's long enough to pick up speed, feel gravity add its weight to mine and shoot me into the waves. The collision stings then doesn't. I am lighter than the water that buoys me back to its surface, emerging breathless to my classmate's cheers.

PAGES

Smells like an attic, the dust, some mold, like damp cardboard boxes of old Christmas lights. It feels sweaty, but dry, heavy with words, the kinds that stick. Looks full. Sounds right. Pages play against each other, whispering. The spine cracks, yours tingles. Fan the pages, prick your prints, close the cover, hug it in. Deep breath smile sigh. Wrap your mind around and through, without, within, up close to chapter one. The plot pops, settings materialize, and you are in the Glade or Arena, his arms, that couch, or Hogwarts, Narnia, Hobbiton, the community, and characters can't stay on the page: Hagrid and Aibileen, Scout who'd befriend Lizzie Bright, likewise the Cat in the Hat, Belinda, the Giver, and Eragon, Lucy, Rudy, and Westley, but also Mr. Darcy and Alice and Simon before he was a vampire. Isn't it weird to see through someone else's eyes? Someone who is not your age, height, weight, sex, or species? Magic. Absorb the letters, let them burrow and shiver.

Once upon a time...

COCCINELLIDAE

They *clack* across my glass-topped desk, bundle in the bathroom corner, slip into the sink, stick to my socks. They interrupt my vinyasas, shell-faced, palm-clinging, and now my fingers smell like urine. Their shadows glide behind the blinds, orbit my head with a metallic *thwick* of wings. I brush them off my pillow, quilt, books. Last night, I'm pretty sure I woke to one clinging to my lips. In the middle of the night, I thought it was a finger-nail clipping, but in the morning when I flicked a few off my bed, I wondered...

Britney cuts off a square of packaging tape and collects them on the sticky side, unwilling to hear them crunch, tosses them, tape and all, into the wastebasket.

Two nights in a row, Britney and Alyssa lug the vacuum up the staircase, balance on the desk chair, and suck them off the ceiling fan, curtains, radiator, curtains again, windows, door frames, light fixtures, and the Australian flag, folded into a perfect, beetle-laden triangle.

Alyssa camps on the floor with an Osage orange (a lime green, bumpy sphere of fruit rumored to repel pests) by her head.

They infest our psyches, weave through our brains, this incurable itch of obsession: will they crawl in our mouths while we sleep? Drop into our drinks? Nest in our shirt sleeves? I flick one off my leg when I change my pants, brush another out of my hair, tape up the cracks around the window air conditioner where the ivy grows into our room. Yet they still *click* and *fizzle* along my walls, radiator, light bulbs, brain.

We dream of ladybugs.

THE PRINCESS AND THE BEE

We were about eight, playing Princesses and Pirates: Alyssa and I against Ryan and Sara. Naturally, as the oldest cousins, Alyssa and I were the princesses while Ryan and Sara were delegated to the undesirable position of pirates.

My back yard is about the size of a postage stamp, so it didn't take long for the pirates to catch the princesses. Sara and Ryan lined us up on the plank (the deck railing), our hands holding our wrists like they were tied together. But that wasn't good enough, the pirates wanted to bind us with (jump) rope.

“We already got you, so you can't run, k?”

Alyssa and I nodded.

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

Our naïve little siblings ran inside, and the second they were out of sight, Alyssa and I broke our invisible bonds, jumped off the plank, swam through the ocean (grass) and onto the safety of a nearby island (pile of sticks behind my house).

Little did we know, this island was infested.

It started subtly, a prick on my ankle. I turned, assuming a stick was poking me, but the sensation continued. I glanced down to see a fuzzy, striped bee latched onto my heel, its rear end tapping my skin like it was calling S.O.S. in Morse code. All at once, its brothers swarmed up from the stick pile, trapping Alyssa and me in a tornado of buzzing blurry yellow darts.

Alyssa was clear-headed enough to escape the stick pile, but I panicked, spinning and swatting, the overwhelming sounds and stings drowning Alyssa's cries. One pinch after another, compounding, overlapping as I danced around the stick pile in a whirl of pain and panic.

Something eventually clicked. Maybe I finally heard Alyssa yelling at me to run, maybe the pain hit a peak, I'm not sure, but I levelled out enough to escape the stick pile, catch up to Alyssa and race into the house.

When my mom told the story, she always said how she mistook our hysterical cries for laughter. The next thing I remember is lying cat/dog on the couch with Alyssa, watching Disney's *Robin Hood*. More than twenty cool washcloths draped our bodies, pasted with baking soda and water to soothe the stings.

That night, Alyssa and I got to share a bed, but we couldn't move, couldn't pull the covers over top of us, couldn't sleep.

BETHESDA CHRISTIAN SCHOOL: K THROUGH 12

K-4

I followed Rachel Moran around because I thought it was so cool that we had the same name. But she ignored me, made fun of me for shadowing her until fourth grade when she transferred out of Bethesda. I played a ballerina in the K-4 circus and held hands with the Ringmaster while eating popcorn and cotton candy.

Kindergarten

I found the boy I was going to marry. Josh Busch was a head above every other student in Mrs. Ludlow's class, and he gave me piggy-back rides during recess. But after I got my first major hair cut—slashed from waist-length to shoulder-length—he cried to his mom, and we broke up. A pipe burst, the closet flooded, and I thought the table would break when Autumn climbed on top of it to avoid the water. Mrs. Ludlow tried to make us hold our pencils with a “crab-claw pinch,” but I reverted to my three-finger grasp every time she walked away.

First Grade

Holly Johnson called me a girly girl. Sally Schrock and I pretended we wore magic watches that transported us to earthquaked lands, morphed into helicopters in which we flew to the top of the Eiffel Tower (the blue slide) to save our kidnapped babies, provided McDonald's

at will, and shrunk us down to travel through a giant's digestive tract on a shard of glass. Miss Cox sent me to the principal's office three times.

Second Grade

The only time I received the yellow card on Valentines' Day which meant I had a secret admirer. But I never figured out who it was. I smashed my finger in the bathroom door on the last day of school and got to pick a movie to watch until the parents arrived: *The Great Mouse Detective*. We pen-palled with Miss White's second grade class from Louisiana. Sally and I created the White mysteries, noticed it was too common of a color to be a coincidence. My teacher, Mr. Twa, ended up marrying Miss White a few years later.

Third Grade

We filled nine mouse traps, named each one Mickey. Sally was in the other third grade class and decided our friendship was no longer worth her time. Miss Sears set everything to music or rhyme. We learned the word "delectable" and applied it to the scones we ate at the third grade tea party. That was the first time I ever had my head checked for lice. I memorized my times tables and received a medal with my name inscribed on the back.

Fourth Grade

A blur of bad emotions, this was the first year I recognized how mean girls can be. Sally called herself the "popular chicken" but pronounced it "popalar," and everyone loved her. I gave Sally all my candy and fruit snacks so she'd like me. If I could get on her good side, the other girls would let me play "spies" with them at recess. If she didn't like me, I played alone or read.

Everything I did was weird and wrong, down to the music I listened to and the clothes I wore, the way I pulled back my hair. Once, Holly raced me to the recess spot at the back of the field and told me I wasn't allowed to play there any more...we ended up on the ground, punching and pulling hair until a teacher broke up the fight. That was the only in-school suspension I ever received.

Fifth Grade

Ben Sanchez changed the computer screen saver so that it scrolled the text—something to the effect of—“look at me, I love Disney World, Disney rocks, I can't stop talking about Disney like a five year old, Rachael Tague.” Sally told me the incorrect spelling of Pennsylvania so I would lose the spelling bee. Taylor and Sally rationed out their recesses between me and their other friends, and they would often abandon me on the same day. Once, when no one would play with me, I ended up leaning against a fence, crying, and Taylor and her friend Sarah marched over and laid into me for being a terrible friend who hogged all their time. Then they left me, crying.

There was an elite group of fifth graders who sat in a circle in the field during recess. No one could join unless they were invited, but one time I sneaked in and discovered the circle was for cussing out the teachers. Speaking of teachers, mine weren't my biggest fans. I swear, Mrs. Ringler and Mrs. Deering were out to get me, made me “flip a card” for the smallest of infractions. Once I was chatting with Mrs. Deering after a test, and, in what I thought was an admirable, even complimentary tone, said, “You wear that dress a lot.”

“Rachael, that was so rude! I'll have you know, I only have three dresses, and the one I wore yesterday was my daughters!”

That was my first detention. Later in the year, Mrs. Ringler made us write a call-and-response poem about the seasons changing. She'd say something like, "Why do the leaves turn colors?" And we were supposed to write a cheesy line about the beauty of it all. Instead, I wrote a lament about how fall signaled the beginning of the school year, and I referred to Bethesda as a torture chamber. I thought it was funny. Mrs. Ringler did not. She read all of them out loud but stopped halfway through mine and stuck it in the back of the pile, her eyes flashing, lips pursed. She called me up to her desk later, told me I had to rewrite it. My mom still has the torture chamber version in my memory box. Fifth grade was the only year of my 14 years at Bethesda that my teachers had nothing good to say about me during parent/teacher meetings.

Sixth Grade

A better year. I still gave Sally and Holly my favorite snacks at lunch to stay on their good sides, but Mr. Traxler and Mrs. Wolfe were great. Both fun and creative. I wrote my first research paper (on black rhinos, same as Sally) and my first short story (about a girl who escaped a kidnapping), and I performed a poem about sisters on Poetry day. I also debuted on the Bethesda stage as Sandy Beach for the Sixth Grade Chapel. We elected Holly as class president, but when the power climbed to her head, the sixth graders signed a petition to impeach her. The teachers did not accept it, but it felt good to sign my name on the sheet.

Seventh Grade

Emily Hampton joined the class of 2011 and had a huge crush on Adam Johnson, swore Adam loved her. When I dared to mention I thought he was cute, she yelled at me during lunch,

mocked me for being obsessed with Sally and being jealous of her friendship and popularity. I left the table in tears, and everyone laughed.

However, I also joined the ranks of mean girls that year when it came to Idanasi Momodu...yes that's her real name. But we called her NMFA...No More Fresh Air, because we had never smelled someone or something that bad in our lives and, therefore, had to hold our breath when we passed her in the halls. To my knowledge, she never learned of her nickname.

Eighth Grade

This was the year Sally and Holly decided they didn't like the way I looked. They mocked my buck-teeth in the bus on the way to a softball game, laughed at how short I was, accused me of having bushy eyebrows and a mustache, ridiculed my childish love of Disney and never, ever, ever let me forget I was flat-chested.

During an end-of-the-year pool party, Holly untied and stole Yeahnee's bikini top and refused to give it back, leaving Yeahnee to beg for mercy in the corner of the pool, her arms over her chest while Holly tossed the top to the other girls. I intercepted it and returned it to Yeahnee. Holly, furious at me for ruining her game, snatched my wrists.

"Holly, don't touch me." And in one of my proudest moments to date, I switched the grip and flipped her into the pool.

Freshman Year

In a shocking turn of events, my class elected me as class president, but I failed my first presidential task when we were supposed to sell dinners as a fundraiser before the homecoming soccer game. The night before the event, with no money in our class account, we had no idea

what to buy for the restaurant. I coerced a few classmates into working the booth and bringing chips and brownies, but our class sponsors hopped out of the picture and would not help me find an inexpensive entree. I decided the only meal we could afford was cold-cut sandwiches from Wal-Mart. Unfortunately, my parents were out of town that week, and I was staying at Sally's house, so I couldn't buy the ingredients. So the night before homecoming, I was forced to delegate to the only classmate available. I laid my hands on her shoulders:

"Holly, are you sure you can do this?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely positive?"

"Yes."

"You will have the time to go to the store and pick up the meat, cheese and bread?"

"Yes."

"Okay, remember, I cannot take care of this, so if you forget, we won't have a meal. Do you promise?"

"Yes, Rachael!"

And so I left, praying that Holly had it under control.

The next day, I arrived at school a couple hours before the customers were supposed to show up. All the other classes had most of their decorations set up and their food warming on the tables. Nobody told me we were supposed to decorate, but everything would be okay as long as Holly arrived on time and we could put the sandwiches together. An hour later, Holly still wasn't at the school. Everyone tried to call her, but she wouldn't answer her phone. We had to have the food ready in no later than a half hour. Finally, just as I was about to cry, she slouched through the door, a cooler in tow. I ran over to her.

“Thank goodness! Where are the sandwiches?”

She looked at me like I was crazy. “What are you talking about? All I had to bring was the cooler.”

We ended up buying chicken sandwiches from McDonalds. We bought a hundred and fifty...sold maybe ten. Suffice to say, we lost money at the homecoming fundraiser that year. I called my mom and cried.

Sophomore Year

Another Homecoming drama. My best friend Allie and I were elected to Homecoming court, which, at Bethesda, meant dressing up and walking across the gym before the soccer game. But Sally wanted to be on Homecoming court. When I asked my class mates what color dress I should buy, they suggested orange, bright pink, or yellow. I found out later, they were choosing the ugliest dresses they could imagine in the hopes I would buy one and look ridiculous. I instant-messaged Sally during computer class:

Hey, you're fashion-savvy, will you help me pick a dress for Homecoming?

Honestly, Rachael, I can't talk about this with you.

Why not?

It's not fair, you were so obnoxious, everyone voted for you for president and homecoming court, and you shouldn't have gotten both. I had planned to be on homecoming court with Jon, and you ruined my fairytale night with my boyfriend.

After that, Sally told Allie that I didn't want Allie on homecoming court and basically thought she was ugly and fat, so Allie was furious with me. During the class spirit events, no one would participate. I called my mom and left school early that day.

Junior Year

Before the school year started, I called my four best friends and told them I was done bowing to Sally and Holly. Everyone was so scared of them, and as long as they had control, we'd all be miserable. They agreed, and that was the first year since 7th grade I wore a Mickey Mouse shirt to school without caring what anyone had to say about it.

My softball coaches left my church (of which my dad is the pastor) under bad terms. Once, when we were playing an impossible game against an impossibly good team, I struck out and returned to the dugout smiling to try to keep up team morale, and the coach's wife bad-mouthed me to the entire team, complaining about my terrible attitude. They gave my position to Holly.

At Bethesda, the junior class council is responsible to plan the end-of-the-year Junior/Senior Banquet. The secretary and chaplain did not feel like helping, and we couldn't convince anyone in the class to join a committee, so the job fell to my vice president Allie and me. We had barely a thousand dollars in the class fund and neither of us had experience with event planning, but with our moms' help, we booked a room in Rick's Café Boatyard, a mock "seaside" restaurant that overlooks the reservoir, ordered the meal, mailed invitations, arranged the tables, decorated the room, and organized a special speaker.

We didn't have time to eat that night, but apart from an over-stuffed table due to some unexpected guests, the event was a raging success. The highlight was when we reduced the room to tears when we introduced the video of our surprise speaker, a favorite teacher who had left Bethesda to be a missionary in South Korea.

At the end of the evening, one of the senior girls approached me. "Rachael, tell your J/S committee they did an awesome job tonight. This was even better than last year." (For the

record, “last year’s” J/S was held in a giant ballroom in a ritzy hotel in downtown Indianapolis and cost the junior class thousands upon thousands of dollars).

I grinned. “No committee. Just Allie and me.”

Senior Year

I was better friends with my teachers than with most of my classmates. Allie and I would chat with Mr. Poynter all the way through Econ and Bible. I signed up for my first fiction class. I jumped off a thirty-five foot cliff into the Jamaican ocean on our Senior Trip. I was on Homecoming court. I got the lead in the fall play and in the spring musical. I dropped out of softball. I skipped the Junior/Senior banquet for a Disney Cruise. Holly unfriended me on Facebook when she found out I was the one who remembered we had tried to impeach her in sixth grade: one of the memories announced to the audience at graduation. I was salutatorian.

WHEN I HAD TO LEAVE CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY AFTER MY SOPHOMORE YEAR BECAUSE I RAN OUT OF MONEY

I remember my last night with my friends. I remember how the dregs of winter clung to the spring breeze and how we shivered at the bistro tables on the patio, and how I chased Joel and Alex when they stole my shoe. I remember when Alex dropped me off at my dorm. “Well, this is the last time...” and I cracked into tears, and he hugged me, my nose buried in his borrowed Mickey Mouse sweater, until I could breathe again. I remember trying to sleep that night in the room stripped of photographs and twinkle lights and dirty laundry. I remember when my dad picked me up, and I cried when I tried to smile.

Because once I left, I wasn't coming back.

I remember listening to Disney music while I unpacked alone, rearranging my room to accommodate moving back home. I remember crying off my mascara and not being able to fake a smile when my best friends came over to welcome me back to Plainfield. I remember the heavy headache, refusing to release for days.

I remember my eyes looked like they died overnight, bruised, swollen, crusty, and I remember how I stayed awake for only an hour before I fell back asleep and napped until dinner which I barely ate. I remember my arms feeling asleep, my legs stiff, head dull, nails unpainted.

I remember not being able to sing “How Great Is Our God” in church on Sunday. I wore Minnie Mouse ears to lunch that day.

A MANILA MARKET

We weaved through the packed streets of Manila toward the market in the heart of the Philippines, hands joined in a human chain, our backpacks strapped to our fronts to prohibit thieves from slashing them open. There was a dry section, mostly stocked with shoes, clothing, and bags, from which we could hardly drag my mom away. Then there was a wet section, through which wafted the fetid—this clogging-of-the-throat, stinging-of-the-eyes, settles-in-the-nose, heavy, wet, and slippery—stench of freshly killed meat: foot-long cow tongues, intestine bundles, whole cows, pig legs, ribs, and heads, all hanging over blood-puddled concrete.

But it wasn't enough to just see—and smell—all the dead animals. Our guide wanted us to watch the whole process, from cage to counter.

There they were, dozens of chickens squawking and flapping in a little metal coop. The Filipino put on a show for the Americans, sunk his arm into the mass of feathers and pulled one out by the legs. He bent its head backward and dragged his knife across its neck, displayed it for us like a magician proving there's nothing up his sleeves. My mom, recording the process from several feet away, groaned.

Next, he dropped it into a big blue barrel and let the chicken run itself to death. I couldn't see into the barrel, but I heard the chicken *thunk* against the sides and watched the container wobble back and forth for a good minute before it finally stilled. The butcher pulled out the twitching hen, and dunked it in boiling water.

“Makes it easier to pluck the feathers,” our guide told us.

The butcher scraped off the feathers with his bare hands in less than twenty seconds—I could hear the individual feathers *thrumming* off beneath his nails—and next thing I knew, the little creature that had been alive five minutes earlier now looked like a pink, slimy version of the rotisserie chickens at Wal-Mart...only with its head and feet attached. The Filipino lined it up with its slaughtered comrades on the counter, ready to sell.

My mom washed all our walking shoes in the bathroom sink that night.

BOB'S BIRD

His name is Bob Johnson, a 64-year-old, self-employed artist with a moustache and plop of hair the same color and consistency as the straw in his barn. He told me this story:

When he was in sixth grade, he discovered a baby starling in the apple orchard on his farm. He couldn't find the nest from which it had fallen, so he scooped up the little dusting of black feathers and raised it in his house. To feed it, he'd slice up a worm or water down dog food pellets until they were soggy, and he'd drop them in the baby bird's mouth. He nested it in a cardboard box in his bedroom, warmed by a light bulb. He never named it, but if he whistle-chirped to it, it would hop to him.

Once it was big enough to perch, it would curl around Bob's finger and sleep on the curtain rod in his room, and when it was hungry in the morning, it would hop onto Bob's chest and chirp until he woke up. After a few weeks, Bob experimented with teaching the little bird how to fly by tossing it up in the air until it could catch itself. When he thought the starling was strong enough, Bob took it outside to practice.

The starling's first flight was a success. Bob boosted the little bird into the sky and watched it soar in a big, arching circle around his yard. Victorious, the starling drifted back down to Bob, misjudged the landing, and tumbled to a stuttering halt on the sidewalk by Bob's feet.

And right in front of the family's cat.

"Did you cry?" I asked him.

"No, I had delivered dead baby calves before."