

The Community College Writer 2024



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First Place, Creative Nonfiction
A Moment
by Brycelynn Baker
Pearl River Community College

As night fills the room, I feel the pit in my stomach. It's the worst of times. I've been in the psych ward for two days. My heart and soul are full of crushing sadness and anger. I don't want to be here. I sit in my barren room, staring at the painting on the wall. It's a bouquet of flowers that resemble faces. They stare into my soul, and I feel tears begin to fall from my eyes. I wonder what time it is. There are no clocks anywhere in this place. It's disorienting. The only sense of time I have is the three meals that come like clockwork and the one time they let us go outside every day. Going outside is my favorite part of the day; it's the only form of freedom we get, and we only get it for a moment.

It begins to rain on the third day.

The rain has persisted for two more days. For three days now, we have been stuck inside. Stuck inside this suffocating little room at the end of the main hallway. Stuck with the screaming and crying of kids who don't know how to cope. It's raining outside, storming. That's what they keep telling us. When you're inside the room, you can't hear the rain. We can only see through the fogged-up bulletproof windows that it's raining. I've always been scared of how loud storms are, but a silent storm is somehow more terrifying than any clap of thunder. The trees outside have eyes, and they watch us. I hear them call to me, beckoning me to come to them, to climb. Five of us are playing UNO on the floor, but the game has come to a halt as we stare out the window at the eyes. I watch a tear fall down Drew's face. We are trapped in here.

My seventh day here comes and goes, and the rain persists.

I wake up with a start. My blinds are closed, and my roommate is still asleep, but it's morning. I can feel it in my bones, it's morning. I make my way to the main hall and begin the long trek down to the room with the cold, thin air. I walk with my head down, knowing today will be like the last. UNO, movies, poems. Drew, Aden, Alyssa, Trey, and I are looking out those windows and are searching for a purpose. The silent rain taunts us, and the trees stare. I have lived an entire life inside this room. They tell us to line up. So, we do, and we follow a tech to the big double doors that lead to the basketball court. The rain stopped. My heart flutters, and I look at Drew. He has the biggest smile on his face, and I have one to match. We race to the doors and shove them open.

Blinding light, burning sun. The chairs are full of water, we dump them out. It won't take long for that bright, burning ball of fire to dry them. Evaporation is a beautiful thing. I stand in the middle of the pavement. I've never been one to love the outdoors. I never thought I would be so happy to have the sun burn my face. They told us it was hot outside, but no heat could ever be as suffocating as the air was inside that room, so I thank God for the heat. I look up and squint at the sun, so bright. The sky is so blue, so clear. I look to my left at the eyes in the trees and watch the squirrels dance up and down them. I walk to the chain link fence and grab it. I listen to the birds. They sing sweet songs. I watch a cat sneak by the fence; we call to it, and it comes. I reach through the holes in the fence, pet its head, and listen to it purr. The small sounds represent such great joy. The wind blows, and it whispers to me. I long for the day I'm on the other side; it will come soon enough. For now, I take off my jacket and place it on a chair. I sit, lean back, and close my eyes. Silence follows. This time, the silence calms me, and I feel free. A butterfly lands on my chair for a moment. We stare at each other, and we talk for a short while. I can't help but stare at its wings. The oranges and yellows sing in perfect harmony. It flies away, and its beautiful colors paint a picture in the sky. I close my eyes and smile as a single tear of joy falls

down my face. Sometimes, the world is so beautiful I just can't stand it. For a moment, I am at peace.

Joy in a moment does not equate to happiness, though. Despite my newfound appreciation for the little things, I am still so unbelievably sad. Despite the flutter of a butterfly's wings and the rolling thunder, I am still plagued by the soul-crushing depression that I have dealt with for so long.

I am released from the ward on the ninth day. I step outside the steel double doors and breathe in deeply. I turn to my mom and smile. Once again, I feel this moment of joy. I am free. I am free and joyful in this moment, and that's all that matters to me.

Second Place, Creative Nonfiction
Best Friend
by Kirstyn Floyd
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Jackson Campus

I had managed to get a job at a security company, and that was the coolest thing in my world at that time. I grew up in a family where my father was a workaholic, my mother was emotionally unavailable, and the only way you were worth being conditionally loved was if you had something to offer others. So, to have gotten a job with a security company would add vital experience to my criminal justice degree and work history, and perhaps bring me one step closer to an impressive title; there was nothing that mattered more. There were no friends that would keep me from working, no bodily limitations -such as sleep, or the ever-persistent tonsillitis I had contracted in October the previous year - that would prevent me from continuing my progress. “I’m sorry, I have to work that day,” was the sentence most uttered by me that summer.

At that time, I did have a male best friend. It was that type of best friendship you hear of that, after 10 years, they finally realized they are absolutely in love with each other and get together as the whole world applauds and cheers of “about time!” and “I knew it all along!” erupt after the first kiss. Of course, we were only in year 8 of that timeline at this point. You know, around the time when they each are realizing “Hey, I actually don’t think I could live without you,” and “maybe there is something serious between us that we should look into.” By May of 2017, it had become the classic story of “he invites her over to hangout and she accepts; they start drinking and end up kissing,” and then the cringe-worthy “she freaks out the next day and back pedals because ‘he means too much to her’ while he admits he has always loved her.” I am quite certain there are at least five romantic comedy movies following this exact plot. All this is to preface the situation in June of 2017.

We are going to fast-forward now, as the mundane activities of work are never exciting to write about, much less read. Recall the aforementioned tonsillitis infection. I had been struggling

with tonsillitis since October, and I had finally scheduled a tonsillectomy for June 14th. This was guaranteed to mean time off work, and my thoughts were to invite my male best friend to hang out with me while I recover and talk about the developing relationship. He had mentioned that he had a race - as he did the racing version of demolition derby with run down cars - on June 10th, but that he would love to hang out. He even invited me to attend his race.

“I’m sorry. I have to work that day.”

June 9th, 2017, 10:32 pm. I just got back to my parent’s house, an hour drive from the location I had been stationed at that past week for my security job. Upon stepping into the shower, I finally decided on a nickname for my best friend, vroombug. He had been calling me dorkfish for the last seven years, and not a single nickname I tried to give him felt right. I texted him the new nickname, and he said he loved it.

June 10th, 10:43 pm. Having worked again that day and getting ready to take a shower, I contemplated calling my best friend to see how his race went. I decided against it before continuing with my shower and scrolling through my Facebook feed afterwards. My mother is asleep. My father in the living room working on his laptop. My best friend’s name is all over Facebook.

“You will be missed.”

“I can’t believe this happened; rest in peace.”

Shock fills me. After a quick message to his other best friend, I’m suddenly receiving a call, and the dread fills every inch of my body, I’ve never gotten a call from this individual before. The voice at the other end of the phone is telling me something. “There was a collision on the way to the race this morning. He’s gone.”

Third Place, Creative Nonfiction
Beauty Review
by Kymberlie Gable
Northeast Mississippi Community College

When I was seven years old, I knew not to touch the curling iron when the red light came on. Knew that when my mother tapped my shoulder with a brush, she needed for me to lift my head. Another tap, nope too high. A heavier tap, stop moving my feet. “When you speak, you move your entire body!” It was always followed by laughter, and my little sister coming to join us, eventually little sisters. I spent a lot of time in the in between. The on-stage, smile ‘til-your-face-hurts part only lasted about five minutes total. Maybe 7 if the person introducing you is a slow speaker, maybe 10 if you get selected to move forward. I rarely did. The “in between” as I like to call it, I thrived there. The moment before the car ride to the pageant. The moment before the anxiety set in. The moment right after I woke up and scarfed down doughnuts my mother had bought for the “special occasion”. Right after I sat in the chair and let my mother start teasing and sweeping and lining and brushing and curling. That’s where I stayed. Because there, I wasn’t in a beauty review. Emphasis on the *review*. There I felt pretty. As I got older, I stayed there. The in-between. After waking up and making myself check for new assignments, but before I entered the world where people stared and talked and judged. After waking my sisters up and telling them ‘No, you can’t wear my sweater. I haven’t even gotten to wear it yet!’ But before I gave it to them anyways because it didn’t look the same on as it had in the store. That moment where I was just teasing and sweeping and lining and brushing and curling. Some people think pageantry is something special, and I guess in some ways it is. You spend half of your savings on a dress and the other half on hair and makeup. You spend hours getting ready just to walk across a stage and have a woman tell everyone staring at you what you want to be when you grow up. But in my opinion, it’s the same old same old. You prettify yourself. Put your face on. Get your hair done up. Trauma/info-dump, albeit in different ways. All in hopes that the people who look at you think you look pretty. I do that every morning, Monday through Friday. I don’t have to spend half a million on it.

My first pageant, or as we say in the south “beauty review”, was before I knew the color of my own eyes. Shocking, seeing as there’s a trophy tucked in the back of my closet with a layer of dust so

thick it's also begun collecting dust labeled "Most Beautiful Eyes". I accentuate my eyes now. Glasses, I've been told, ruin the affect, so I stick mostly to contacts. Thick black eyeliner and probably clumpy lashes. But I still get compliments. I blush the outside of my cheeks. Takes some of the weight off the center. I fill the first half of my eyebrows, not the entirety. My mom used to call them unruly, but that was before 'fluffy' eyebrows were a trend. When she was a teenager, she says, she waxed most of hers away, so now she has to fill them all the way in. She told me I was lucky, but I didn't understand until I was older. I remember watching her. Some subconscious part of my mind taking note of her process. Concealer first, if any. Foundation. Bronzer. Heavy blush. Kind of blended eyeshadow. Dark brows, filled all the way in. Eyeliner. But not a wing, that wasn't a trend yet. Just a thick band right on the seam of her lashes. Mascara. Mac's Chestnut lip liner. A sparkly Mary Kay lipstick. Lipgloss wasn't really a trend yet, either. During my brief tomboy phase (because I was above it all, of course) I thought it was stupid. I said as much too. I've since apologized, but I don't think she forgot it. I hope she knows that I didn't either.

I did pageants until I turned 14 (the beginning of the aforementioned tomboy moment). I remember why I quit. When you're young you don't remember losing, and you don't understand why you lost. I remember being young and sitting in a room backstage. I remember walking on stage. Smile. Bigger and stop squinting your eyes. Don't curl your lip up like that, just smile like a normal person. No, you have to show your teeth! Take five short strides to the first X marked by red tape on the stage in my high school's gym. Spin around. Make eye contact with each judge. Pause. Let them examine. Let them judge. Move to the next X. Repeat. Turn around and face back. Let them examine and judge some more. Turn back. Smile bigger. Turn again and walk slowly off stage. I always struggled with the 'slow' part. The stage lights made me sweat. My face would get hot, and I'd suddenly become aware that people were aware of me. I preferred to move faster than the other girls. Surely it wouldn't take that long for the judges to decide if they thought my dress was pretty enough. I was ushered back into the backstage room that made me feel like Britney Spears. I remember we would all sit, and while we were waiting, see who could make their dress look like the biggest mushroom when they squat down. We would bang on the expanse of our stomach because the B-stones of our dresses made it sound like a drum. And then a woman would come backstage, call a list of numbers, and those girls would go on to the next round of judging.

And then the process would repeat. The day I decided I didn't want to do it anymore; I didn't feel very pretty. My mom had done my hair and makeup because she was a cosmetologist, and I liked the idea of her touching my face over someone else. And she made me look pretty, she always did. My mom was really good at hair and makeup. But I didn't *feel* pretty. That was the first time I realized I was the biggest girl in the room. One of my friends with red hair was the skinniest. She had on a green dress that made her look really tall. I became aware of how short I was even with my high heels on. I remember it was one of those cinematic moments. The music fades out of the background and the loud, obnoxious sound of everyone living around you becomes overwhelming. Like their volume got turned up. I remember doing a slow spin and realizing I wouldn't ever look like everyone else in the room. So, I stopped. My mom was upset, but she didn't tell me that. She just kind of frowned, kind of smiled and told me that it was okay. Maybe I'd changed my mind next year. She knew Maicee would still do pageants. My baby sister wasn't born yet. But Maicee, my only sister at the time, loved pageants. I didn't change my mind the next year or the next.

After the tomboy moment came the emo moment. I sharpie-d my eyebrows too dark and wore E.L.F.'s liquid eyeliner. I know because it's still in my makeup bag. I didn't like the way that makeup looked on me, but that was how NikkieTutorials did it on YouTube. And she looked pretty with it, so I just pretended like I liked it. I dyed the ends of my hair purple. When that faded, red. Then I did the 'big chop' and died the underside purple. Then purple, blue, and pink at the same time. Then blue. After that, I went through my boy crazy moment where I was aware of the fact that none of the boys found me attractive. I dyed my hair brown after that, while growing it back out. I started waxing my eyebrows. One day, while waiting for class, the boy standing in front of me turned around and called me fat. It didn't really affect me in the moment. I laughed at him. We were in seventh grade, and his voice had cracked when he said the word 'you're'. Then he turned around, and we walked into Mrs. Eaton's classroom, and I didn't think of what he said again until I got home and decided I was hungry. I ate an orange for dinner that night. Woke up the next morning and decided I didn't need breakfast. I went the next six years skipping breakfast and waiting to eat lunch until I got home from school. After brown, I kept my hair blonde. My face slimmed without the help of makeup. But I still wore it. I got a boyfriend. We broke up.

Got another one. We broke up. That happened a few more times. But it was okay. At least they didn't think I was fat. One of them told me I didn't need makeup, and I believed him. He cheated on me with a girl who wore more than I did though... so that confused me a little.

Maicee kept doing pageants. She's still doing pageants. The first time I did her hair and makeup, I realized that she looked exactly like me. It was like doing my own makeup from a third person point of view. I loved it. She was fourteen, and I was sixteen, and by that point I had my baby sister too (Joey now, but Jojo at the time). I had the James Charles x Morphe collaboration palette, and it cost \$60. She wore green eyeshadow that year. I spent the entire afternoon telling her and my nine-year-old baby sister how beautiful they looked. And they did. Maicee's eyes were sparkling, and she looked so skinny in her dress. It was a mermaid dress. Hugged her figure from the top until about mid thigh and then flared out. She couldn't really walk that well or sit down in it. But she looked beautiful. She didn't want me to cover up her freckles, so I didn't. We used Mom's blush and Mac lip liner. She looked so beautiful. Jojo wore a brown, slightly smokey-eye, and a pretty turquoise dress that made her darker, olive skin glow and already slim figure even slimmer. She had her hair in an intricate up-do that took my mom about two and a half hours to do. When Mom did my hair, it didn't take so long, she explained with a pointed look at our youngest. But *someone* wouldn't stop talking and laughing and moving. Me and Jo guffawed an identical laugh at that. She looked so beautiful and happy.

Maicee didn't end up placing in the pageant. But she left the gym with four different bouquets of flowers from our family. She smiled big the whole time we were taking photos, Joey did too. I still have all of them. But we sat beside each other, Me and Maic, on the way home, and I told her she looked beautiful again. She looked at me, her eyes just like mine and said, "I don't *feel* pretty right now." And I just stared into my own eyes. I told her I thought she was the most gorgeous girl in her division and all the ones above. And she looked at me and smiled before asking Mom to turn the radio up. I cried that night before I went to sleep.

By eighteen, all of my rebellion and anti-normal tendencies died down to none. I decided I wanted to look just like everyone else in every way possible. I bought the brands that my family couldn't really afford and started doing my makeup different. I had gone back to brown at this point, but only because I

couldn't afford the clothes *and* the blonde upkeep. Priorities. I had taught my mom and sisters how to do their makeup the way that I did. Mom's eyebrows had started to thicken up, and Maicee's teenage acne had finally cleared up. She was happy about that. Jo grew boobs overnight. She wasn't happy about that. College was fine. It was school. I made friends, I lost friends. Same thing. But it was still a beauty review. Except now it was also a character review. Some people were still shallow, but some people also required more convincing. Some people liked 'personality'. So, I changed that too. I kept changing it depending on who I was talking to. I could be whoever anybody wanted me to be, and I was happy to do it. My mom showed me how. I think women were born to change in an instant. That's why trends are a thing. God knows the men couldn't do it. We move too fast for them. Maybe that's why they hate change. They know they couldn't keep up.

Maicee was eighteen, Joey freshly thirteen, by the time I was almost twenty. I noticed Maicee switched from silver to gold jewelry. She claims I told her it was classier. Jo swapped her cros for platform vans because she wanted to look more like me. She also started paying attention to the music I played in the car. Started asking me what the names of songs were and who sung them. Maicee didn't really care about that. But she cared about makeup. "I can't do it the way that you do! Will you please just do it for me?" She strung out the syllables of every word. It kind of felt like walking through honey. She always had more Southern charm than me and Jo. But I told her I would do it. I didn't mind. I loved it.

By the time I realized my mistake, it was too little too late. I guess I spent too much time thinking out loud. Sulking at home, cringing in boutiques, crying while doing my makeup, sucking my stomach in. Because suddenly Jo, with my loud laugh, thought she was fat. Started dieting. Maicee and I had already been dieting, Mom too. She started saying that jeans were too tight and hugged too closely to her non-existent 'back rolls'. Started wearing baggy clothes to cover her muscles from cheer. Started covering half of her face with her hair to hide her 'acne'. Maicee, the one who had my eyes, started hating her smile. Changed it for school pictures. She started wearing her hair a certain way because it slimmed her face. Kept it blonde and long. She started wearing sweatpants more to hide the body that we shared. And I fell flat on my face. How could I put those thoughts in their heads? That it was okay to talk to themselves like that. That it was okay to talk about my sisters like that, even if the words were coming from their own

mouths. How could I let Maicee start covering her freckles and wearing her clothes a size too big. How could I let Joey start wearing makeup in middle school to cover her 'blemishes' and critiquing the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled big. How had I not noticed they were watching me?

So the story goes, you can fill in the blanks. Mom watched her sister, I watched Mom, Maicee watched me, Joey watched Maicee. We listened. We adapted. We changed. We became the judges before anyone else had the chance to.

First Place, Drama
Happy Anniversary
by Blake Ligon
Itawamba Community College

1 SCENE 1- MORNING, BEDROOM, APARTMENT 1

Eagle shot of couple laying in bed. SUMMER leans over and whispers "Happy Anniversary".

Montage begins of them getting out of bed and preparing for the day, they eat breakfast, put on clothes, and brush teeth. As EDWARD finishes getting dressed he hears a knock on the door. EDWARD quickly stuffs a wad of money into an envelope.

EDWARD opens the door and is met with his landlord, Frank. EDWARD gives FRANK a juveniles smile.

FRANK THE LANDLORD

"Hey Eddy, just stopping by to see if
you had the rent."

Edward smiles and passes him a thin envelope filled with lose change. EDWARD smiles and remarks

EDWARD MAKER

"Don't spend it all in one place."

FRANK THE LANDLORD

"Alrighty, be back for the rest later."

EDWARD closes the door and walks back in to finish getting ready.

SUMMER MAKER

"Was that Frank? He comes earlier every month."

EDWARD chuckles and agrees.

The song playing is Uptown Girl by Billy Joel. Multiple establishing shots showing apartment, close in on Calendar at one point.

Lingering shot on bedroom door. Slight ominous feel to the door.

2 SCENE 2- MIDDAY, OUTSIDE, DOWNTOWN 2

Establishing shot of the street, nasty guy in the background. Some random old scruffy, nasty, looking guy in in the shot somewhere. Shots of cars driving by, people walking around. Trying to get the vibe of the town around them.

EDWARD MAKER

So, was there anything else you wanted to do today other than this and dinner?

SUMMER MAKER

Ooooooh dinner?

EDWARD MAKER

Yea I got reservations this time.

SUMMER MAKER

How romantic...well they better be pretty late reservations because we are about to hit every store on this street.

EDWARD takes a deep breath, then we cut to a montage of the couple hitting the town. Multiple stores, SUMMER is grabbing and looking at every item in the store. SUMMER moves around the store like a kid in a candy shop. SUMMER is constantly changing her outfit as the scene goes on. EDWARD eventually loses her in one of the stores. This sends him into something of a frenzy, and the scenes turns more energetic as he is frantically searching. Eventually, SUMMER pops out of a changing room.

SUMMER MAKER

Whaddya think? Is it too much?

EDWARD MAKER

No No, its great.

EDWARD is very relieved that she is there, he looks around once again and notices a man looking at him. He shrugs it off and walks away.

3 SCENE 3- AFTERNOON, RESTURANT, DINNER TABLE. 3

The characters are eating at the table, EDWARD MAKER and SUMMER MAKER have just finished a long shopping trip. Bags surround SUMMER's feet. Small chat what they are going to order. Waiter walks up.

WAITER

Hi, are you ready or do you need a second?

EDWARD MAKER

(Looks to Girlfriend and back to waiter)
Yea I think we are ready. We will take two orders of Chicken Alfredo, and can we also get some breadsticks for the table?

WAITER
(Weird Glance)
Ok, Ill have that put in for you.

SUMMER
I'm going to run to the bathroom real quick.

SUMMER stands up from the table, her chair not moving an inch. As she walks away, we see EDWARD noticeably upset. This has happened many times, but this is by far the worst. Noise goes out slowly, replaced by ringing. This plays out for an uncomfortable amount of time.

The Waiter returns to the table, but EDWARD doesn't snap out of it. The Waiter tries to get EDWARDS attention, but EDWARD has no awareness of it. Eventually EDWARD notices the man and snaps right back into reality, acting as if nothing happened. Both plates are placed on EDWARDS side of the table, and EDWARD quickly pushes one plate to the other side. EDWARD stops for a moment to look at the food.

SUMMER
This stuff looks better every time I eat it!

EDWARD looks up, almost surprised that she is back so quickly.

they restart their previous conversation, and as she SUMMER talks EDWARD as they begin eating their food.

the camera cuts to a pan shot of the couple leaving after they finish their meal, and the food is finished on his plate but her water is finished but her plate looks untouched.

CUT

4 SCENE 4 ALLY WAY 4

The scene starts with them walking back home. They begin to finish the conversation they were having while they were at the restaurant. While they are

laughing about it, SUMMER lifts her arms up and her sleeve falls down, revealing a bruise on her arm.

EDWARD MAKER

Where did you get that bruise?

SUMMER looks down at her arm just as surprised as EDWARD.

SUMMER MAKER

I have no idea, must have happened
when you weren't there.

He pauses and stares off for a moment. He looks towards SUMMER then looks into his reflection on the storefront, seeing a scruffy look man. Edward then looks forward again.

FADE TO BLACK 5 SCENE 5- APARTMENT, NIGHT 5

The transition of the background cuts to them being in the apartment at the end of their trip. We slowly zoom out from the face shot to seeing SUMMER putting a CD into an old CD player.

She then walks over to her husband and embraces him. They begin to slow-dance. As the music slowly engulfs them, the shot will be from the back as he holds her in the darkening room. A knock at the door stops the dancing.

The footsteps trail to the door, EDWARD opens the door to see the Landlord.

FRANK THE LANDLORD

"So, do you have it?"

Edward stands quietly.

FRANK THE LANDLORD

"Eddy, look. I have to get you out of
here by the end of the night, man.
I've given you plenty of time. I know
now isn't good time given your unique
position, but I have bills to pay.
I'll help you move

EDWARD stares with a somber and emotionless glare behind his eyes.

FRANK THE LANDLORD

"I can even help you move, but we have
to get you out of here now."

EDWARD slowly starts closing the door.

EDWARD MAKER

"I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well.
Goodnight Frank.

EDWARD completely dismisses every word that the LANDLORD says. Not paying the slightest attention.

EDWARD starts to walk back to his room as "NEW YORK STATE OF MIND" starts playing. The LANDLORD unlocks the door with a spare and hurries behind him. A few steps in he is met with an ungodly smell. He immediately pulls out his phone and calls the police.

We cut back to Edward as he slowly walks into the bedroom and lays down beside his wife. He hears her whisper goodnight as he closes his eyes.

EDWARD MAKER

"Happy Anniversary"

Police flashlights flood the room and we see the real EDWARD laying next to the real SUMMER. Summer is dead. The lights focus in on SUMMER's dead body.

THE END

Second Place, Drama
Addendum: A D&D 5E Story
by Luke Nichols
Itawamba Community College

INT. DARK STONEWALL ROOM - NIGHT

A faint orange glow appears on one point of the screen before brightening to reveal to be candlelight illuminating a rolltop desk with a grey wizard's hat opposite the candle on the top of the desk and - seen from behind - a quintessential Lizardfolkman wearing a grey robe and writing at the desk on ivory paper with a 6-inch-long blue and black-striped quill in his right hand. Meanwhile, times new roman text appears on center screen as follows in 3 stages, taking up the same amount of space on screen each:

ADDENDUM -

A DND 5E STORY -

CHAPTER I

The Drafting Stage

NARRATOR

This is Pewterschmidt Saurley, and that's Saurley spelled S-A-U-R-L-E-Y, so get it right. He is a 20th level order of scribes wizard who works as a drafting franchise owner for Acquisitions Incorporated.

Camera cuts to right interior corner of rolltop desk facing slightly upwards for a full view of SAURLEY's upper half, who is still writing, his left hand resting on a quintessential documancer's satchel.

NARRATOR

He was a student at Strixhaven, in the college of Silverquill. originally ridiculed by many students for not choosing a specific school of magic like most wizards, he not only achieved top marks in every class he took, but proved the strongest wizard in the academy time and time again thanks to his composite knowledge

consisting of nearly every known book
of the main library, otherwise known
as the Biblioplex.

Saurley briefly pauses writing to raise his left hand for a nearly silent yawn, before resting it back on the documancer's satchel and continuing to write.

NARRATOR

Upon graduation, he was selected by
Acquisitions Incorporated for his
unrivalled brilliance and wizardly
prowess, where he drafts firm but fair
contracts for his franchise for a
living, hence his franchise position
of documancer.

Saurley briefly taps the soft end of his quill just below his reptilian right cheek while cocking his head slightly to his left and up from where he is facing, before resuming writing in his original position. The camera cuts to the spot just behind and above his right shoulder in space, so that said shoulder, his head, right arm, and the paper he's writing on are all in view, the latter of which is unintelligible to the audience.

NARRATOR

He has proven countless times to be an
indispensable member of Acquisitions
Incorporated in both business and
battle.

Saurley folds the paper into thirds and grabs an envelope with his left hand from offscreen as the narrator continues talking.

NARRATOR

And now, not only is he preparing for
his greatest challenge yet,

Saurley places the document into the envelope as the narrator continues talking.

NARRATOR

...but he will also unveil his
greatest work yet.

Saurley closes the envelope. Before, with his left hand, grabbing from offscreen and passing to his right hand a wax seal with melted red wax already on it. he then poises the

wax above the point of the envelope flap and just below his eye level, all as the narrator reads the penultimate sentence of the scene.

NARRATOR

His Magnum Opus, as one might say.

Camera cuts to above the top right corner of the envelope facing Saurley with a sharp look in his eyes and the seal stamp appearing just above and to the right of Saurley's head from the angle of the camera

NARRATOR

And one heck of a magnum opus it was gonna turn out to be.

Saurley slams the wax onto the spot with a resounding gavel like thud, after which the camera instantly cuts to black.

CUT TO BLACK EXT. BUSTLING MEDIEVAL YELLOW BRICK TOWN INTERSECTION - DAY

Camera fades in as multiple humanoids of multiple different species walk at leisurely paces in no direction in particular. Camera pans slowly upward and to the right revealing a shield-like emblem above a wooden gate in a wall with bricks the same color as the road.

NARRATOR

This is Greyhawk Britain - note: no relation to the real-world kingdom, nor the particular D&D setting - but a prosperous metropolitan nation all the same.

Camera cuts to in front of Saurley, now wearing a silverquill uniform and the wizard hat from before, moving with him as he walks down the street like a video game character.

NARRATOR

Saurley is a well known figure in the capital town, thanks to his wizard skills and high income thanks to Acquisitions Incorporated.

The audience is shown a parchment drawn and illustrated animated segment depicting Saurley handing contracts to humanoids in a line.

NARRATOR

His job was to draft contracts to solve common peoples' issues, no matter what the species.

the animation pans down the length of one contract before coming to a stop on the "sign here" line, before a black gloved hand writes an unintelligible signature.

NARRATOR

In any given circumstance, the terms and conditions enforced within never failed in fulfilling the client's needs.

Saurley raises his arms as a silhouetted crowd on the lower quarter of the screen cheers for him

NARRATOR

And thus, he was praised as a diplomatic hero.

Animation moves 1 frame to the side to reveal two quintessential nobles, one from the monster manual and one from the player's handbook, staring to the left of the screen then at each other sternly.

NARRATOR

But the local rulers, King Reginald and Queen Annemarie, were jealous of his fortune.

Scene changes to reveal Saurley standing just in front of the gate from before, then transitioning seamlessly back into the original visual style.

NARRATOR

He had been called to a meeting with them to discuss some "Business matters". and Saurley, ever the gentleman, agreed.

Camera cuts to Saurley's face as he stares upward before nodding and walking forward after the narrator finishes the next sentence.

NARRATOR

Being Saurley, he knew to not come unprepared.

FADE TO BLACK INT. PALATIAL THRONE ROOM - DAY

Saurley walks into the room and stops ten feet from the center. Standing adjacent to him are KING REGINALD and QUEEN ANNEMARIE, now the original style.

REGINALD

Mister Saurley, a pleasure to finally see you again.

SAURLEY

Likewise, your majesties. Stunning as usual, I see.

ANNEMARIE

Ah, yes. And you ever the gentleman, agreeing to arrive on such short notice, truly a noble being.

SAURLEY

Before we go any further into buddy buddy territory, I suggest we get down to cases.

REGINALD

Ah, yes, of course. You see, the reason we invited you here is -

SAURLEY

Please, don't say what I know you so foolishly will.

REGINALD

Excuse me?

SAURLEY

We all know why I'm here, why you wanted so desperately to talk to me. I know thanks to my divination magic. Neither of you have the best intentions for me, and I won't stand for it.

REGINALD

(Gasp)

ANNEMARIE

Now, Pewterschmidt; please don't turn this into a matter of -

SAURLEY

DON'T - call me - Pewterschmidt.

ANNEMARIE

(Gasp)

SAURLEY

You want me here for you to buy me out. You're here to take my fortune, to acquire everything I've worked up to -

REGINALD

(Silent gasp)

ANNEMARIE

(Silent gasp)

SAURLEY

- for LESS than market value.

REGINALD

Oh hoho! so you're saying WE'RE
engaging in treason. Hohoho, now
THAT'S rich.

ANNEMARIE

Now, Reggie. Goodness gracious
Saurley, How could you think
such a horrible thought! And
about us, no less?

SAURLEY

I told you, clairvoyance told me. And
it also told me that you believe I'll
just hand it to you for a pitiful sum
of 1000 gold.

Reginald stiffens his face and points at Saurley in a frustrated manner, while Annemarie gently presses down on his hand with her hand to maintain peace.

SAURLEY

We both know that that price is
nothing compared to what my franchise
makes in any given month as long as
I'm in charge of it.

Reginald and Annemarie's faces turn a shade calmer.

SAURLEY

But, perhaps I can make you a deal.

Saurley draws from his documancer's satchel the contract from the prologue, still in the envelope.

SAURLEY

I hold in my hand a contract, whose
terms and conditions you may find most
interesting and favorable.

Saurley passes the envelope to Reginald as Saurley finishes his previous sentence, and Reginald opens the envelope as Saurley begins his next sentence, reading the contract with Annemarie as he speaks.

SAURLEY

It details how, if you sign it, you have a chance to acquire a good portion of my franchise's monthly profits.

Camera pans down the length of the contract before cutting back to the king and queen looking back and forth between the contract and each other.

SAURLEY

However, in order for that to be done, you must send me the three greatest warriors in your kingdom, preferably a martial, a mage, and a mix of the two. If the three of them can defeat me, then they must agree to accompany me on a quest to acquire a legendary magic item that I have long dreamed of owning to make me complete. Alternatively, you can choose to have them embark on the quest to find the magic item on their own; but upon gaining it, they must give it to me upfront. Either way, once I own the magic item, you forever earn 25% of my franchise's monthly profits, while each warrior will receive 5% as long as they live. any sage worth their weight in common sense knows that those numbers add up quickly.

The king and queen look at each other with a grin before turning to Saurley as he holds his wizardly quill and uses body language to convey his following statements.

SAURLEY

However, this agreement isn't without its risks, for I am the most powerful wizard in Greyhawk Britain. If I can best the three in combat, then I shall embark on my quest alone, and the five of you will get nothing.

The king and queen's smiles slowly fade.

SAURLEY

So, do we have a deal?

The king and queen glance at each other, then both nod softly and decisively.

SAURLEY

Then just sign on the line at the bottom, both of you.

Reginald snaps his fingers and one of his servants - a quintessential hobgoblin from Monsters of the Multiverse - passes him a peacock feather, which he promptly uses to sign the contract before passing it to his wife. the hob goblin then takes the quill back before whispering in the ear of an almost identical hobgoblin.

HOBGOBLIN

This guy is good.

REGINALD

Very good then, Annie. Right, Mister Saurley. We shall organize a drafting session to choose what 3 warriors will be facing you. No, scratch that we shall have the warriors leave immediately to find this magic item. but before we can do that, we must ask; what is the name of this legendary relic.

SAURLEY

Very well then. It is called "The Grimoire Infinitus".

REGINALD

Understood. See you soon, then.

Reginald hands the contract back to Saurley, with the camera zooming in on a seemingly insignificant lotus-like symbol above where the writing starts.

SAURLEY

Very well, then. Off I go, in that case.

REGINALD

Come along then, Annie. We've got a warrior drafting to arrange.

ANNEMARIE

Agreed. Toodle, pip and cheerio, Mister Saurley.

Saurley and the rulers nod once in unison before turning opposite directions and walking away. Camera then cuts to in front of Saurley and moves with him as he walks toward the daylight and turns his head slightly to his left.

SAURLEY

By all means, plan your next course of action. I'll be waiting, with open arms.

Camera cuts to similar position in front of the king and queen as they walk into faint shadows.

ANNEMARIE

Good grief, I can't believe he found us out, Reggie.

REGINALD

Never mind that, Annie. even IF we cannot get full control of his company -

ANNEMARIE

Franchise.

REGINALD

- Yes, franchise. he's going to

provide us with unprecedented money .
. . Unless,

Reginald places his finger on his chin.

ANNEMARIE

Unless what now, Reggie.

REGINALD

I have an idea. Come with me, Annie my
dear.

EXT. YELLOW BRICK CASTLE DRAWBRIDGE - DAY

Saurley walks out of the shadows of an overhanging portcullis before coming to a stop in the center of the wooden, steel framed drawbridge already lowered by two chains over a crystal blue moat as the narrator talks.

NARRATOR

And so, the pact was made. Saurley, of course, knew to leave the rulers a laminated copy of the signed contract; as was customary of his franchise under his rules.

Camera cuts to directly in front of Saurley, who glances back behind him through the door as the narrator speaks until Saurley finishes his next sentence, at which point he looks straight ahead.

NARRATOR

Even though he knew they had already memorized what was most important to them, he was still going to give them a chance to read the fine print.

SAURLEY

I can tell, sooner or later, they're going to begin feeling an . . . unhealthy amount of confidence. But - as usual, of course - even if I ever

remotely appear suspicious myself, I
always play by the rules.

Saurley walks directly towards the camera, with the camera fading to black as
Saurley's upper body becomes the only thing on screen.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END

Third Place, Drama
William Holtzclaw – The Birth of Our Utica Institute
By Maya McFadden
Hinds Community College, Utica Campus

Cast of Characters

Narrator:	The narrator and speaker throughout the play.
William Holtzclaw:	The Founder of the Utica Institute, and the main character of the play.
Jerry Holtzclaw:	William Holtzclaw's father.
Addie:	William Holtzclaw's mother.
Miss Margaret Murray:	The secretary in charge of registration; also, Booker T. Washington's future wife.
Booker T. Washington:	Founder of the Tuskegee institute, and mentor to Holtzclaw.
Classmate A:	A skeptical student unsure if he should go to war.
Classmate B:	A proud, somewhat condescending man who is willing to fight.
Classmate C:	A very inquisitive, thoughtful student.
Sydney:	One of Holtzclaw's older brothers.
William J. Edwards:	Founder and Principal of Snow Hill University.
Mary Holtzclaw:	Originally Mary Patterson; Holtzclaw's wife.
Mr. North:	The superintendent of education in Raymond.
Dallas Page:	The young man, 18 or 19, whom Holtzclaw trades the bike with for \$2 and a watch.
Deacon Carter:	Also Alf Carter; Deacon of St. Peter's church.

William Holtzclaw – The Birth of Our Utica Institute

We begin with our NARRATOR on stage. They read the poem "The Black Man's Burden," and introduce the play.

Narrator: Pile on the Black Man's Burden.

'Tis nearest at your door;
Why heed long bleeding Cuba,
or dark Hawaii's shore?
Hail ye your fearless armies,
Which menace feeble folks
Who fight with clubs and arrows
and brook your rifle's smoke.
Pile on the Black Man's Burden
His wail with laughter drown
You've sealed the Red Man's problem,
And will take up the Brown,
In vain ye seek to end it,

With bullets, blood or death
Better by far defend it
With honor's holy breath.

The life of William Holtzclaw was far from easy. On the day he was born, his father was working. But, Holtzclaw was blessed, for he was born on the day of rest. He went from a child, starving so much that he had to fight his dog for pie crusts to a man, hungry to spread knowledge and education to his people.

For a time, it seemed as though he was stuck in the system of sharecropping — but Jerry and Addie Holtzclaw were determined to see their son educated.

The NARRATOR stands aside. JERRY (Holtzclaw's father and Addie (Holtzclaw's Mother) seem to be in the middle of a conversation.

Jerry: Out of all of our children, we have always known that Will is one of the brightest. He's smart, Addie. Remember when that teacher beat him for knowing too much?

Addie: Yeah, you know I do. You almost *killed* the darn fool, and I had to stop you from reaching for your musket. But Jerry, baby, you know we can't afford to send Will off to school.

Jerry: That's the thing, Addie, I overheard from the folk at the Commissary that you can go up to Tuskegee and pay your way through by working. Our boy has been working hard for a long time, and he deserves more than the life of a Sharecropper.

Addie: That's good and fine, baby, but how is he going to get there?

Jerry: He'll have to work if he wants it, but you know he will. It's either that, or he's stuck here for the rest of his life, and you and I don't want that.

ADDIE takes a deep breath, shaking her head. She knew Jerry wasn't wrong. But, she had the fear and reservations that any mother would have.

Addie: You're right, fine, I want him to go off, too. You can support us, we might struggle, but we've always struggled. We'll be fine, but wait until the end of the year. Christmas would be as good a time as any.

Jerry: [Nodding] That's fine by me. We need to talk it over more. Let's go to bed, for now.

They EXIT.

We move to Christmas Day, 1889. Addie is cooking in the background while the family sits around the table. WILLIAM HOLTZCLAW sits across from JERRY, finishing up breakfast.

Jerry: [wiping face] Mhm, now that's some good food. We don't get to eat like this often.

Addie: [kissing Jerry on cheek] We had a decent enough year. I'm glad you all like it.

Jerry looks over at WILL. HOLTZCLAW. WILL looks at him confused.

Jerry: Will, come into the yard; I want to talk with you.
WILL stands and follows his father outside. Before he could ask if he was in trouble, or what was going on, Jerry continues to speak.

Jerry: Will, some time ago, I heard some colored fellows at the Commissary talking about a school called Tuskegee where you can get an education by working for your room and board. Your Ma and I have decided that if you want to go and find that school, we would not object.

Will. Holtzclaw: [pausing in shock, then smiling] Thank you, Pa. That is what I've always wanted.

*WILL and JERRY hug. They EXIT.
The NARRATOR speaks.*

Narrator: Now, getting to Tuskegee was nothing short of a miracle for William. He wrote to Booker T. Washington himself — said, “I wants to go to tuskee to get a ejercashun...” He had no address on the envelope, and didn't spell the man's name right, but Mr. Washington got his letter, and wrote Holtzclaw back, sending him a catalogue about Tuskegee, too.

He worked until he had some money for his fair and walked thirty miles to Opelika before he decided to take a train. Funny thing is, no train ran through Tuskegee at that time, so he walked another five miles, finally arriving at the school.

The NARRATOR stands aside again. WILLIAM enters an office where he finds MISS. MARGARET MURRAY (Washington's future wife) waiting for him. He sits at her desk.

Will. Holtzclaw: I'm here to enter Tuskegee!

Miss. Murray: Well, you've come to the right place. I am Miss. Murray, what's your name, sir?

Will. Holtzclaw: William Holtzclaw.

Miss. Murray: Where are you from, Holtzclaw.

Will. Holtzclaw: [nervously] Roanoke.

Miss. Murray: [pressing] Where is Roanoke?

Will. Holtzclaw: Not far from here, I'm sure.

Miss. Murray: Is it in Alabama or Georgia?

Will. Holtzclaw: Alabama... I think.

MISS. MURRAY nodded, sliding a sheet of paper and a pencil across the desk.

Miss. Murray: Here's your entry exam; take your time.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW starts taking the exam. After a few moments, he finishes, handing the paper back to MISS. MURRAY. She takes a moment to read the paper, smiling as though suppressing laughter.

Miss. Murray: [smiling] Lips, teeth, tongue, and throat?

Will. Holtzclaw: [nervous] Yes ma'am — those are the parts of speech.

Miss. Murray: Well, there is always room for learning. Welcome to Tuskegee.

The NARRATOR steps forward again, beginning to speak about Tuskegee.

Narrator: And learning there was. Holtzclaw went to classes in the day and worked at night until, at last, he could enter day school, but it was far from easy. Tuskegee was poor at this time and full of problems, but Booker T. Washington inspired the hearts of his students.

He inspired them to work hard, and to want to be more than what they came from. He could even inspire his students to go to war. In 1898, the Spanish-American war was raging on. The chaplain of the 9th calvary came to Tuskegee asking for soldiers, but the young men couldn't decide whether or not to go to war. And so, knowing their plight, Mr. Washington spoke to them in the chapel.

The NARRATOR steps away. BOOKER T. WASHINGTON takes the stage, lecturing to HOLTZCLAW and three other classmates (CLASSMATE A, CLASSMATE B, AND CLASSMATE C).

Booker T. Washington: [serious, authoritative] Since we were freed from Slavery, we have ever sought to improve ourselves and our lives, that we may stand as equal next to the white race. We fought for our freedom during the Civil War, and although Reconstruction has failed us, that does not mean we should give up that fight. To live as black people, free and equal as the Founding Fathers originally pinned, we must be willing to fight when we are able. America was founded out of the flames of rebellion, leading to a swell of patriotism and pride — the very things at the core of being American. We, as the negro race, continue this legacy, having built this country on our backs, and fought for our rights to be seen as people.

Now, as freedmen, as Americans, we must be willing to rise to the occasion. We must work as men do, live as men do, and die as men do. Some of us may be willing to fight, but unable to do so. Others amongst us may be able to resort to violence, but unwilling to harm his fellow man. Some of us will die of illness or natural causes; others amongst us will die at the end of a bayonet, for there cannot be peace without war, and freedom does not come without bloodshed.

Now, that will be all for today. I hope that my words will stick with you, may the Lord be with you, and have a nice evening.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON steps off of stage, leaving WILL. HOLTZCLAW with CLASSMATE A, CLASSMATE B, AND CLASSMATE C. The four men speak amongst themselves.

Classmate A: [skeptical] Well, that seems like his answer, but, that ain't much of an answer if you ask me. He didn't even mention going over to Cuba once. If anything, he avoided the topic.

Classmate B: [condescending] Clearly you didn't understand, then. He said that freedom doesn't come without bloodshed, right? And, that we must be willing to live and die as men do. Clearly, he means for us to go to war.

Classmate C: [inquisitive] I think that's true, but Dr. Washington said that you have to be both willing and able. We may want to go, but be unable to. And, we may be unwilling to go, but that is okay, too. I think it's okay to be skeptical about wanting to go, but it is not okay to look down on those who don't want to. What do you think, Will?

Will. Holtzclaw: I think that Mr. Washington has the right of it. Obviously, he wouldn't outright tell us to go serve and die, but clearly he thinks it's a good idea. There cannot be freedom without war, nor peace without bloodshed — we have to think beyond this war, but about us. If we want to be American, then we need to fulfill our duties, and be patriotic. Even if we are not wanted now, if we fight to be, then those amongst the white race will one day come to see us as equal to them. And, even if they don't, if Mr. Washington asked me to die for him, then I would.

Classmate A: Well, it looks like we're going to war, then.

The NARRATOR speaks up.

Narrator: Holtzclaw did not, in fact, join the Spanish-American war. When he attempted to join, his health raised too much of an issue, and by the time he tried to raise a company of his own, the war had come to an end. But, it was safe to say that Booker T.

Washington had a place in his heart, as did the whole of Tuskegee.

As he worked, having finally built up enough funds to enter Tuskegee's day school, he fell ill. It took him some time to recover physically and financially, but within a term, he had done it. However, before he could reenter Tuskegee, death came knocking in the form of a letter that brought him back home.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW stand next to Jerry's bed. He is clearly sick, coughing up a lung, and dying of tuberculosis.

Jerry: [coughing] Nice to see you again, Will. Glad you found some time for your old man.

Will. Holtzclaw: [holding back tears] You know I wouldn't let you go like that, Pa. I came as soon as I got the news.

Jerry: I have... Lived a life, I suppose, good as any other. I got to see the end of slavery. I suppose it didn't make much of a difference. Worked my whole life, and got nothing but debt I'm leaving you and your siblings.

Will. Holtzclaw: Pa. You did right by me, Ma, and everyone else. You supported us for years, and it's because of you and Ma that I could go get an education.

Jerry: And by dying, I'm taking it away, too. You'll have to work, hard. It's selfish of me, don't you think? I still got some life in me.

Will. Holtzclaw: [contemplative] Everyone dies, Pa. I'll die one day, too. It is natural, not selfish. You lived a long life — almost 60 years. Don't worry about it, okay? Me and Sydney have a plan to take care of Ma and the kids, and we'll pay off your debt.

JERRY reaches up to touch Holtzclaw's hands.

Jerry: We raised you all well. Every last one of you. I'm proud of you, Will, but will you promise me something?

Will. Holtzclaw: Yeah, Pa?

Jerry: Lay aside the thought of studying law, son, and become a teacher of your people. Is that clear?

Will. Holtzclaw: Yes, Pa. I love you.

Jerry: [coughing] I love you too. Let me rest now.

JERRY closes his eyes, implied to have died. WILL. HOLTZCLAW sits next to his father's grave, tired. His brother, SYDNEY joins him. They sit down together, having just finished burying him.

Sydney: [sighing] That's it, huh, Will? We come from God, and we return to God.

Will. Holtzclaw: Amen, Syd, amen. It's too bad all we have left of him is memories and debt.

Sydney: [nodding] Memories, debt, and a family to take care of. Pa told you to teach, didn't he?

Will. Holtzclaw: Yeah, you know he did, but someone needs to work the farm, and I never completed my education. I might not be able to get certified, so I may as well be realistic about it.

Sydney: [shaking his head] Now, Will, we all know that you're smart and educated, so I'll tell you what. I'll work the farm and harvest crop while you find a school to teach. If you really can't get certified, then you'll work with me, deal?"

Will. Holtzclaw: Deal.

SYDNEY and WILL. HOLTZCLAW shake hands, exiting the stage. Once again, the NARRATOR comes front and center.

Narrator: Holtzclaw did, in fact, become a teacher. He taught in a poor community where he was so loved that they wanted him to stay there. He did more than teach from the book, but he taught people how to live: how to wash their fences, fix up their yards, and improve their surroundings.

For awhile, he dabbled in politics before returning to teaching again, sending money to his mother and saving so that he could return to Tuskegee. Holtzclaw was 26 when his mother remarried, determined to allow him to get a proper education. And so, he returned to Tuskegee and he *graduated*. Now came the important work: Holtzclaw's mission.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW and BOOKER T. WASHINGTON speak about what Holtzclaw plans to do now that he's soon to leave Tuskegee. They are located in WASHINGTON'S office.

Booker T. Washington: When you first came here, I hadn't yet married my wife, now here you are, ready to go. Remember when she asked you what the parts of speech were, and you answered lips, teeth, tongue, and throat?

Will. Holtzclaw: No need to remind me, Dr. Washington. No need to remind me. I am a changed man now, an educated man, and I intend to share that education with those most in need.

Booker T. Washington: [sighing] You know, I like you, William. It would be a shame to see you go. How about you stay here at Tuskegee? We need a printing teacher.

Will. Holtzclaw: [shaking his head] Dr. Washington, baleful ignorance is the black man's burden, as you have said so many times in your speeches; and it is my manifest *destiny* to lighten that burden. Thank you for your offer, but I am going to the backwoods of Mississippi to work among the most ignorant people in the south.

Booker T. Washington: You learned well, Will, you learned well. It's a shame to see you go, but I am prouder to have taught you, and to send you into that world educated, than to never have taught you at all.

Will. Holtzclaw: I'll miss you too, Dr. Washington. Now, if you excuse me, I will excuse myself for the day.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON and WILL. HOLTZCLAW hug each other in a show of comradery.

Holtzclaw exits the office, accidentally bumping into a man. He is MR. WILLIAM J. EDWARDS, a visiting alumnus of Tuskegee, and the founder of Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute.

Will. Holtzclaw: [adjusting his clothes] Excuse me, sir. I was too busy in my own head to see you coming. I don't think I've seen you before.

Mr. Edwards: I don't think you see much at all, that is to say, I graduated some five years ago. Name's William, and what about you?

Will. Holtzclaw: My name is also William, though, family calls me Will.

Mr. Edwards: [shaking Holtzclaw's hand] Well, I'll be. God works in mysterious ways, don't he? Well, I'm William Edwards, so you can call me Mr. Edwards. What's your last name?

Will. Holtzclaw: Holtzclaw. You can call me Will, or Mr. Holtzclaw. What brings you back to Tuskegee anyways?

Mr. Edwards: Well, I wanted to visit the old stomping grounds, see how everything was going. Check up on Dr. Washington, and tell him how Snow Hill's doing.

Will. Holtzclaw: Snow Hill?

Mr. Edwards: Yup, Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute. I own my own school down in the southern part of Alabama.

Will. Holtzclaw: [inspired] I want to found a school too, in Mississippi!

Mr. Edwards: Interesting. God works in mysterious ways. You know, it just so happens I do need some help, but we should talk about it some place better. You drink?

Will. Holtzclaw: On occasion. Since you're offering, you paying?

Mr. Edwards: Sure, why not, toast to a new friendship. Two men named William, hoping to follow their god given purpose.

WILLIAM J. EDWARDS wraps his arm around WILLIAM HOLTZCLAW, leading him to a bar. The two men sit and drink, talking about their lives, and what they want.

Mr. Edwards: Now, what exactly do you want, Holtzclaw? I mean, founding a school in Mississippi isn't an easy task. You can't just get up and go do it, you've got to *really* want it.

Will. Holtzclaw: The black man's burden is his ignorance, and I want to lift that from him. I can think of no place more that needs me. Alabama has you and Mr. Washington, but who does Mississippi have?

Mr. Edwards: [leaning back in his seat] Who does Mississippi have, indeed. You remind me of myself. See, I grew up in Snow Hill. I was raised by my Grandmother until she died, and my daddy took me and my sister to Selma. I fell so sick I couldn't move, so my aunt took me back to Snow Hill. Raised me. I read while I got better, worked my way through a book of mathematics. It took me some time, but by God's grace I got my mobility back. My family needed money, so I ended up working out in the fields. It was me, my aunt, and my nephew in a cabin.

Since I fell ill, I hadn't gotten to go to church in seven years, so I decided to go. I didn't have proper clothes, so I hid around the back of the church and I *listened*. That's when I heard the preacher talking about the Tuskegee institute. I told my aunt about it, and she encouraged me to go. It wasn't easy, and I would have left had Mr. Washington didn't convince me to stay, but I finished, and I returned home and founded Snow Hill. It was me, a log cabin. One teacher, three people.

The difference between you and me, Holtzclaw, is the fact that Snow Hill is home territory. Tell me, are you from Mississippi?

Will. Holtzclaw: Well, no, I'm not.

Mr. Edwards: So, what do you think you can bring to them that they can't bring to themselves?

Will. Holtzclaw: [pausing to think] Hope, above all. There may be those willing to learn, but unable to make the trip to Tuskegee or to Snow Hill. I didn't even know where Roanoke was on a map before I came here. So no, I'm not a native Mississippian, and I'm not returning home, but I'm making a new one for myself and for others who want to do more. *Be more.*

Mr. Edwards: You know what, I like you, Holtzclaw, and I want to see where this great work of yours will go. Snow Hill needs a Printer, and you need a job in order to make your dream a reality. Come to Snow Hill until you can carry out your work in Mississippi, why don't you? I promise not to try to keep you like Dr. Washington would.

MR. EDWARDS held out his hand to WILL. HOLTZCLAW, waiting for his answer. WILL. HOLTZCLAW takes his hand and shakes it.

Will. Holtzclaw: Deal.

WILL HOLTZCLAW and WILLIAM J. EDWARDS exit. The NARRATOR steps forwards to speak again.

Narrator: Holtzclaw spent longer at Snow Hill than he intended. He had to build Snow Hill's print shop from the ground up, and it made money. He began publishing a weekly newspaper. In addition to school work, he organized the "Black Belt Improvement Company," and at one point he almost went to Europe at the behest of Mr. Washington. Though, that venture didn't go according to plan.

His plan to go to Mississippi grew further and further away from him. Three times he went, and three times he failed. His dream was seemingly sealed when he met and fell in love with Mary Patterson, Dean of Girls at Snow Hill.

Mary Patterson became Mary Holtzclaw, soon enough, and they built a house together, settling with one another. They were in love in the way that only a man and woman could love one another, and a year later, they had a child: William Sidney. They were so happy, but... That happiness was not to last.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW and MARY HOLTZCLAW are absolutely devastated. MARY sits on their bed, her eyes fixated on an empty crib. WILL. HOLTZCLAW places a hand on her shoulder, sitting next to her.

Will. Holtzclaw: Mary, looking at the crib won't bring William Sidney back. He's...

Mary Holtzclaw: [broken crying] We read every book, Will. The books said to buy him a crib, because sleeping with the parents is wrong. All those nights, he cried, restless. He had a rattle in his throat. He was *cold*, Will. And, by the time we took him in our bed, where he fell quiet.

Will. Holtzclaw: [hugging Mary] It's my fault. I bought those books. I bought that crib. It's my fault, Mary. So please... Will you come to Mississippi with me? I know you don't want to leave here, but... I am destined to lighten the black man's burden, and I cannot stand before the Throne of Grace until I have tried again. I will burn my bridges.

Mary Holtzclaw: I don't want to be here in this house with the memories of that crib, or his final breath. I will come when you, when the time is right. I will come, and we will make a new life.

Will. Holtzclaw: Only death can divert me from this purpose, now.

The NARRATOR steps forward to speak. In the background, Holtzclaw travels.

Narrator: Through great loss was his purpose found again. During this time, a friend of his sent him a book called *Pushing to the Front*, and every chapter seemed to condemn him. Say to him, "You are a coward not to stick to what you know is your manifest destiny." It was do or die.

He took with him the bare minimum. Money, and his wife's bike to sell in Selma before boarding the train. That was the beginning of his problems. The Mississippi Delta did not want him, but still, he kept going. Through Jackson, until he found his sign in the little village of Raymond.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW walks into the county offices in the court house to see the Superintendent of Education, a man named MR. NORTH.

Mr. North: Now, just who are you?

Will. Holtzclaw: My name is William Holtzclaw, sir, and I've been in this lovely town for a few days. Now, I'm interested in founding my own school, and I've already got a donation from one of the local storekeeper's, too. Ten dollars. But, I know it's not as easy as that, but can I have a public school assignment somewhere in the county?

Mr. North: Well, Mr. Holtzclaw I like your spirit. I can see you're a fine man with goals and aspirations. Tell you what, I can arrange the county examination for today, and I'll have you placed and on the road.

The NARRATOR speaks up.

Narrator: Now, Holtzclaw passed his test with ease, of course, and so, he was given his location: Utica. He was to be the principal of a two-teacher school, but Holtzclaw had other plans.

A tired WILL. HOLTZCLAW walk along with his wife's bike as he makes his way into Utica. It is clearly a burden. He comes across a young man, DALLAS PAGE, about the age of 19. He waves to the YOUNG MAN.

Will. Holtzclaw: [waving] Hey there, sir, where are you coming from?

Dallas Page: Utica, sir. It ain't too far away if you're looking for somewhere to rest.

Will. Holtzclaw: That's where I'm looking to go, actually, I need to get to St. Peter's church to meet a Mr. Carter. What's your name?

Dallas Page: Dallas Page, sir.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW takes a look at his bike, then the DALLAS PAGE, who seemed to be eyeing his bike.

Will. Holtzclaw: Well, Mr. Page, I reckon a little bit of money would go a long way, and you've been looking at this old thing since the minute you saw me.

Dallas Page: I think that's a nice looking bike, and I can take it off your hands, even fix it up.

Will. Holtzclaw: Now, what would I be getting in return? You can't just make an offer like that without giving anything in return.

DALLAS PAGE reaches into his pocket, pulling out 2 dollars. Then, he took off his watch.

Dallas Page: I'll give you 2 dollars and this here watch. Maybe it's not much, but it'll help for sure.

Will. Holtzclaw: Well, look at that. God works in mysterious ways. Deal.

The two men shake on it, and for the first time in weeks, WILL. HOLTZCLAW feels hopeful. He knows that this is where his school would be founded. He handed DALLAS PAGE the bike and took the money, shaking his hand. With 12 dollars and a watch, he makes his way to St. Peter's.

He introduces himself to DEACON ALF CARTER by shaking his hand.

Will. Holtzclaw: Deacon Carter. Now, I know you don't know me, but I'm William Holtzclaw.

Deacon Carter: I may not know you, but I know of you. Mr. North was impressed by you, it seems, and so he placed you in little ole Utica. Seems you're fixing to teach.

Will. Holtzclaw: Yessir. I'll start right now if I have to, but I want to do more than teach. I want my own school, too.

Deacon Carter: Slow down, now. You've been traveling for days, and the Lord says to take the sabbath. You can stay with me for now, and I'll introduce you to the other Deacons tomorrow, but we've got much to talk about.

DEACON CARTER leads WILL. HOLTZCLAW to his home where the two men sit and talk.

Deacon Carter: It's nice that you want to teach here, but making a school might be a bit too much for the people of Utica.

Will. Holtzclaw: And why is that?

Deacon Carter: A couple of years ago, a man came into town claiming to want to build a school. We gave him money, and he ran off with it. You may be wanted here, but are *you* needed here?

Will. Holtzclaw: Well, sir. I'm not the smartest, nor the most influential, but I have travelled all across Mississippi seeking to uplift the black man's burden. I want to educate our people more than anything, Deacon, and I can tell I'm wanted here. Now, I have 12 dollars to my name, and I'll do all the funding myself if it gets my school built.

Deacon Carter: [smiling] Then, if you're willing to put in the work to earn the people's trust, go open up a bank account tomorrow after you meet the other deacons. We'll see about finding you some better living arrangements as my family is rather big, but a school you want, and a school you shall have.

WILL. HOLTZCLAW shakes DEACON CARTER'S hand, thanking him for believing in him. Both men exit to go to bed.

MARY HOLTZCLAW and WILL. HOLTZCLAW. They hold hands as MARY holds onto their newborn child, looking at a log cabin: the school.

Mary Holtzclaw: You did it, huh? The Utica Normal and Industrial Institute...

Will. Holtzclaw: We did. It takes a community.

Mary Holtzclaw: Aren't you afraid, you know? That this might kill you? This work takes up your every waking moment.

Will. Holtzclaw: It does, but I would die for it.

Mary Holtzclaw: I know, Will. I know. But, will it last? Really and truly? And what will you do if it doesn't?

Will. Holtzclaw: All things come to an end, but Utica isn't just a place, but the people that remember it. So, my legacy is the people's legacy.

Honorable Mention, Drama

On Taking Your Leave

By Jakira Hunt

Hinds Community College, Raymond Campus

CHARACTERS

VENICE DEED

ERICA CANTERBERRY

CARTER WENTWORTH

PLACE

A parlor

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 2

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE

[A luxurious parlor in the 1800s full of exotic plants, gaudy furniture, and paintings. On the left side of the room is a curtained window, and near it is the fireplace. There is a lamp on the right of the chair, which has gone out, so the stage lights are dim. CARTER sleeps on a chair, snoring. VENICE and ERICA enter, crossing over to the lamp]

VENICE

At precisely nine o' seven o' clock, here lies Carter Wentworth. He is exhausted. Bone weary! After a day of hard work.

[ERICA nods, attentive, and scribbles a note on a sheet of paper. VENICE places a candle on the lamp and the stage lights brighten.]

He drinks a cup of tea, smokes a cigarette, and writes about his day in a journal. He does all of this before ten o'clock, and he will raise hell on Earth if it is not done. He wants the journal checked for grammatical errors. To wake him up, you should tap him on the shoulder.

[A pause.]

ERICA

(whispers) What if he flails?

VENICE

A gentleman shouldn't "flail."

ERICA

What if he yells?

VENICE

No, he doesn't yell. He grabs your collar, see—

[VENICE taps CARTER on the shoulder. He springs forward and grabs her by the collar, shaking it furiously.]

—And rucks it up, shakes it like a baby, and remembers his prestigious ways.

CARTER

Oh, Venice! It's just you.

[CARTER lets her go, flopping back in the chair.]

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 3

VENICE

It's just me and Erica, sir.

CARTER

Oh, it's evening already?

VENICE

The sun has been down for an hour already.

CARTER

I fell asleep! Oh, I had such a terrible day today. You know about it, Venice, since we had to call the doctor for my sister.

VENICE

Yes, she fell out of bed.

CARTER

Just turned sixty a week ago, and the first thing she does in her young age is give me a heart attack.

[He picks up a teacup, flipping it over himself as he attempts to drink it. He shakes the empty teacup at VENICE.]

You forgot my evening tea.

VENICE

Yes.

[VENICE takes the tea set and gives it to Erica.]

We forgot his evening tea.

ERICA

We're terribly sorry about this, sir.

CARTER

(pointing) Who is that woman?

VENICE

Erica Canterbury—

ERICA

Mrs. Erica Canterbury, sir!

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 4

CARTER

Ah! Eric Camburrow! I remember you now, the butler told me our sweet Venice was being replaced.

VENICE

"Replaced." I retire this Summer.

CARTER

Thirty-eight good Springs, she's been with me. You—you didn't put any sugar in this tea, Mr. Camburrow.

ERICA

Mrs. Canterbury, sir.

CARTER

"Mrs?" Well, stranger things have happened in this country, haven't they, Venice?

ERICA

(slowly) E-R-I-C-A, sir. Can-ter-bear-ray. I am a married *woman*.

CARTER

Yes, I got ears. I'm an old man, not deaf.

VENICE

[VENICE takes ERICA's hand and pulls her to the other side of the chair.

CARTER doesn't look at them.]

He cannot hear out of his right ear, and his left one is beginning to fail him. His older sister is the one who requests no sugar.

ERICA

(scribbling on her notepad) No...sugar...is for...his sister. Thank you, Ms. Deed, I don't know what I would do without you. I'll fix the tea accordingly, Mr. Wentworth. *[A pause. She moves back to the left of him.]*

(louder) I will fix the tea accordingly, Mr. Wentworth.

CARTER

Please. It tastes awful without it, even as a child, it did. You know, Venice has known me since I was a fifteen-year-old boy. She was nineteen, and but a maid.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 5

ERICA

[Taking his teacup and drops one cube of tea in it, stirring.]

Was she?

CARTER

Yes. Yes! That's what I said. She was the youngest that worked in the manor at the time, and she turned a blind eye to many of the things I couldn't keep from the more senior staff. They'd report to my parents if they caught me with heroin or whatever it was that had my older brother keel over the banister---I stopped the heroin after that, mind you. *[He takes a sip of the tea.]* How much sugar is in this?

ERICA

Just a cube.

CARTER

Just a cube? I need at least three.

ERICA

You never told me that, sir.

CARTER

For Christ's sake, Venice, this is why I didn't want you to go anywhere.

VENICE

I turn fifty-seven in just a few months. I think I have earned some respite.

ERICA

Ms. Deed has worked for you for so long, and don't we all yearn for peace in our golden years?

CARTER

What nonsense!

[He gestures to VENICE but doesn't look her way.]

Mr. Camburrow here, he probably doesn't even know what my medications are, and how I prefer to take them with wine instead of water.

VENICE

Once he dropped the heroin, he moved onto a more refined indulgence.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 6

CARTER

Haven't a clue what the lady said, but she'd be correct. I haven't indulged in those behaviors in years! I expect the same amount of discretion from you, young sir. *[ERICA rushes over to VENICE, pulling her aside to the window.]*

ERICA

Can he see, Ms. Deed?

VENICE

Incredibly well. He once spilled a bottle of wine and managed to find the speck that I missed when I cleaned the mahogany floor.

ERICA

(whispering) If I may ask: Then why am I a mister?

VENICE

Carter Wentworth is so unaccustomed to change, the first time it happens to him, he decides that he must be done with it posthaste. He has not taken well to me declaring my retirement.

ERICA

He isn't...I am so sorry, Ms. Deed. But his head, his faculties, they are—

VENICE

Working as well as they've always been.

ERICA

...He is being rude to me on purpose.

VENICE

Don't get in the habit of thinking yourself unique.

ERICA

You mean, this isn't the first time this has happened? It couldn't be the same position.

VENICE

The very same one, Erica. Perhaps, if he is vulgar enough, you will storm out of this parlor, and I will be stuck here for another thirty-eight years.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 7

ERICA

[Turning to face her.]

You deserve your retirement, Ms. Deed.

VENICE

Thank you, I already knew that. Now, he's not the only thing to attend to in the parlor, but it would be inappropriate to clean while he still resides here.

ERICA

I understand, Ms. Deed.

[She takes the teacup and adds two more sugar cubes.]

CARTER

(booming) Thirty-eight wonderful springs. She's seen me through thick, through thin, through deliverance and sin. I have never come across a worker more dedicated than she! And I fear that with her passing, I shall never receive such treatment ever again. Not the least from you, Mr. Camburrow. *You* are but nineteen.

VENICE

[To Erica.]

“Passing.” I’m only retiring, and well in advance.

ERICA

Ms. Deed was nineteen, you said, too.

CARTER

And I was young, and easily impressed. I’m not so much anymore. I get my cigarettes from a specific brand, from the very same corner shop that I’ve always gotten them at for the last four decades. Venice picks them up on her day off.

ERICA

How many packs?

CARTER

How many? That’s something for you to know beforehand!

VENICE

Five. Three last him Monday through Wednesday, and he smokes less over the weekend. My day off is every Thursday.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 8

ERICA

But what brand? What corner store?

CARTER

Venice has known this for years! I see no reason she must be replaced.

VENICE

It’s a dinky place called “Harlow’s” going towards St. Peter’s. He only smokes the best: the cheapest thing in there, you’ll recognize it by the garish blue-green packaging.

ERICA

I see no reason she must stay.

CARTER

The very reason why you must go, Mr. Camburrow! You are an uneducated, untried and untrue, fledgling slave! You have no sense of submission!

ERICA

Well, at least the cat's out the bag, now.

CARTER

[Springs up out of his chair, disturbing the lamp and approaching ERICA. VENICE steadies the lamp before it falls.]

You!

ERICA

Yes, me!

VENICE

Of all things, sweetheart, don't let him incite you.

ERICA

But this is unfair!

CARTER

I agree! It's immensely unfair, and if you hate it *so* much, you should take your leave!

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 9

ERICA

You know, you can't keep Ms. Deed here if she doesn't wish to stay. She has earned her retirement.

CARTER

And I want my convenience, Eric Camburrow, and one of those is worth more than the other.

ERICA

You worked for this man? For thirty-eight years?

VENICE

[Moves back to the left of Carter and taps him on the shoulder.]

Mr. Wentworth, don't you take a cigarette before bed?

CARTER

I do!

[He goes to sit back down]

(calmer) I could use one right now, actually, if you would please.

VENICE

Light him a cigarette, Erica.

[ERICA takes a lighter from VENICE and sighs, lighting the cigarette. VENICE takes her own from the box. ERICA hands it off to CARTER and he yelps, clutching his hand.]

CARTER

She burned me, the madwoman!

ERICA

You admit I'm a woman!

CARTER

Sorry, *he* burned me.

ERICA

[To VENICE.]

Oh my God. Please tell me we are done here.

[CARTER snatches the cigarette from ERICA, taking an exaggerated inhale.]

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 10

CARTER

Venice, what time is it?

VENICE

(smartly) Nine o' eighteen o'clock, Mr. Wentworth.

CARTER

I ought to write, then, before other business catches me.

ERICA

What other business would you have?

CARTER/VENICE

Sleep.

CARTER

My bed is so appealing, this deep into the night. That, or I'm just getting older.

ERICA

And he wants the journal checked for grammatical errors, you say?

VENICE

Correct.

ERICA

He calls me "uneducated."

CARTER

Correct! It is not appropriate for you to oversee my private thoughts.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 11

ERICA

If the thought is private, why would anyone have to see it?

CARTER

Shush! Venice, please fetch my journal. That and a pen. I'll have written an astounding account tonight.

ERICA

Well, for your information, I attended grammar school like everyone else.

CARTER

How illustrious.

VENICE

That's all the education one needs in this situation.

ERICA

(under her breath) I just don't get it.

[VENICE takes a small book and pen off a dresser, and CARTER receives them with gratitude. He viciously writes into the paper while ERICA and VENICE move stage left.]

ERICA

For what benefit?

VENICE

For what, working here? Well, I never knew what a dollar was before I started working, and it pays me well. It's very secure, once you get to thinking about it. I've got a place to sleep, a meal at the end of every workday, and no reason to believe that my job will become obsolete. There will always be someone looking for service, and it's not a part of my role to really question those I serve.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 12

ERICA

Oh, you poor old lady.

VENICE

(offended) Old lady?

ERICA

Think about it this way. You consider the Wentworth's a prestigious family, don't you?
[VENICE nods]

Is there anything honorable about what he's writing right now?

[They both crowd around his chair, ERICA with a disgusted look on her face, and VENICE squinting. VENICE takes out an extra pair of glasses to observe.]

VENICE

"Weck?"

CARTER

That word's wretch, Venice. In regard the young lady.

VENICE

"Harriot?"

ERICA

How does he get that? My name is Erica.

CARTER

It's harlot, Venice.

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 13

ERICA

Oh.

[ERICA and VENICE back away to the curtain.]

VENICE

Maybe you have a point, then.

ERICA

You've been holding that cigarette, but I haven't seen you smoke it yet. *[A pause. VENICE takes it up to her mouth, then stops.]*

VENICE

I've been meaning to stop. It's a bad habit when you start it late.

[ERICA takes the cigarette and throws it on the curtain.]

ERICA

No choice but to quit now, is there?

CARTER

How do you spell smoke? The smell.

VENICE

(panicked) S-M-O-K-E, Mr. W-Wentworth.

CARTER

(sighing) They're probably ruining a roast in the kitchen.

[CARTER clasps his journal shut. A flash of red light erupts on the curtain, and CARTER flips out, causing the lamp to fall and "ignite" the chair.]

You! You? Which one of you did this?

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 14

ERICA

[ERICA grabs VENICE and shoves her in front of her.]

Ms. Deed, sir! She's so sick of you, she decided to take the whole house out for herself! She's quitting *today!*

VENICE

I never said---

[ERICA covers her mouth, muffling her. CARTER tries to douse the flames in tea.]

ERICA

We're terribly sorry about this, sir.

CARTER

Are you really?

ERICA

(laughing) No!

CARTER

Oh, come on---Venice! Fetch me a bucket of water.

ERICA

She will fetch no more buckets!

CARTER

A bowl, then.

ERICA

She will fetch no more bowls!

ON TAKING YOUR LEAVE 15

CARTER

Let her speak for herself!

[VENICE breaks away. She stumbles over to each of the fires, but returns to ERICA, taking her hand.]

VENICE

(relieved) I... I don't think I've taken the stand like this in a while. There's a lot that I could say, now that I put my mind to it, but---It's too different. I haven't any clue where I could begin.

[Taking a deep breath, she bolts for the door.]

BLACKOUT

First Place, Literary Essay
Home Sweet Home: Prison or Palace?
by Molly Luttrell
Northeast Mississippi Community College

Home sweet home is usually where people find a safe, nurturing environment that enables them to become the best version of themselves. However, in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," home represents a spiritual and emotional prison for the main character, Louise Mallard. This masterful short story describes Mrs. Mallard's desire for freedom above comfort or social respectability and employs powerful imagery that reinforces her perspective of being trapped within a comfortable yet stifling prison.

Louise Mallard lives a quiet, sheltered, and comfortable life that is slowly smothering her by forcing her to give up her freedom and personal autonomy. She is astonished to discover that the reports of the death of her husband bring her a sense of relief and anticipation for her future. Upon learning that her husband has died in an accident, Mrs. Mallard has an unexpected revelation during her grief. Although she weeps in the immediate moments following the tragic news, her grief is quickly pushed aside by her joy at realizing that his death has freed her from living a life of forced expectations and conventionality. "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin). Mrs. Mallard confronts the realization that though she has a comfortable home and a loving husband, the price of her comfort is the denial of her sense of self and personal freedom. Author Robert C. Evans submits in his analysis of Chopin's story that "Louise and the reader discover that at some very deep level of her being she feels liberated by her husband's death" (Evans).

Louise Mallard has a life that society presents as the pinnacle of feminine existence. She has a safe, pleasant life with a husband who is kind and caring. She has been told that she should feel fulfilled. Yet, she longs for freedom and the opportunity to live her own life and make her own decisions. Moments after learning that her husband is dead, she feels overjoyed at the possibilities of her future as an individual and not just as a wife. Despite her life of privilege,

Louise Mallard is haunted by the absence of the most fundamental right of all; the right to make her own choices. Perhaps she has only felt vague stirrings of dissatisfaction in the past, but when she is confronted with her husband's death, she is surprised to be confronted with her passion for freedom and autonomy. Suddenly, she sees the possibility of a brighter future all around her.

Shortly after hearing the news of her husband's accident, Mrs. Mallard retires to her room to be alone and to process what has just happened. The patch of blue sky she observes from her window juxtaposes the bright, hopeful sense of her newfound freedom with the clouds that surround her momentary grief and the rigidity of her past. This effective imagery emphasizes the dawn of hope in Louise's life. She has resigned herself to a life overshadowed by propriety and decorum. However, that life is unexpectedly upended and her chance at freedom breaks through the shadows of her unfulfilling past. Author Kate Chopin describes Louise's view from her bedroom window. She is drawn to the outdoor scene just moments after being told of her husband's death. She sits in her comfortable armchair and looks at the spring awakening occurring just outside her window. "There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window" (Chopin). Louise Mallard feels sadness and grief that her husband is dead. Her current pain and the unacknowledged trauma of living a life devoted to pleasing others are represented by the images of clouds she sees. Yet, as she realizes she is free to live wholly for herself, she notices the patches of blue sky peeking through the clouds. The promise of the future conquers the pain of the past, just as spring's blue sky will eventually dissipate the gray clouds. In his analysis of Kate Chopin's story, Joseph Rosenblum notes Chopin's effective use of imagery. "The clouds again represent her married life, which cast shadows on her happiness, but now the horizon of her life is clearing" (Rosenblum). Louise's marriage has been overshadowed by bitterness caused by unfulfilled potential. With the death of her husband, Louise is given a gift of freedom. She does

not have to summon the strength to fight against society's rules or expectations. She is simply presented with the opportunity to live her own life, by her own rules, out of the clear blue sky. Her future is bright, clear, and promising. The window that offers Louise an open, unobstructed view of the outdoors, the spring sky, and her hope for her future is in marked contrast to her actual life within the protected, confining house.

Throughout this story, the Mallard home and its rooms represent situations and revelations that have a crucial impact on Louise Mallard. The room where Louise retreats to grieve represents her life of domestic responsibilities and her lack of personal freedom and opportunities. She has sacrificed her sense of self for safety and a label of respectability. As she isolates herself within her room after she learns of her husband's death, she vows that her future will be different from her past. She realizes that she is free and her life belongs to her absolutely. Louise acknowledges that her life of self-sacrifice is over. "There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself" (Chopin). Mrs. Mallard is exhilarated by the thought of freedom and by being able to escape her confining life of domesticity. The locked door of her room and the small window in it define the limits of her life as a respectable wife. Her future life outside of her room and her home offers her opportunities she had not considered possible until she heard about her husband's death. Joseph Rosenblum's analysis states that "In contrast to the world of nature is the cloistered, confining house, symbol of domesticity" (Rosenblum). The Mallard's home represents their ordinary, conventional life. While there is nothing inherently wrong with that life, it leaves Louise Mallard frustrated, unsatisfied, and empty. Her limited view from her room in her home is contrasted with the freedom she sees as she gazes out the window at the rebirth that accompanies spring. From the small space of her room, Louise Mallard's rebirth ironically accompanies the news of her husband's death. Her

world opens and expands as his ends. His death allows her to dream of a life free from the tyranny of struggling to follow the rules.

The best short stories are powerful despite their brevity. This is certainly true of “The Story of an Hour.” Shockingly short with an ironic twist at the end worthy of O. Henry, Kate Chopin’s story follows the beautiful and repressed Louise Mallard as she glimpses a beautiful life of freedom from society’s conventions. She longs for that unexpected freedom with a desire that is as real to her as the flashes of blue, spring sky she watches breaking through the clouds outside her window. This masterful short story describes Mrs. Mallard’s desire for freedom above comfort or social respectability and employs powerful imagery that reinforces her perspective of being spiritually smothered and trapped within the comfortable yet stifling prison of a home that does not truly belong to her.

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Second Place, Literary Essay

Han Solo and Neo: Scoundrels or Misguided Heroes?

by Abram Kelly

Pearl River Community College

Popularizing the hero myth pattern, Joseph Cambell writes, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder” (30); certainly, his classic work on the monomyth concept continues to influence writers and producers of contemporary films. Heroes are a common facet in almost every modern movie. Whether directly gifted with supernatural strength, speed, or another variant of superpower or simply heroic in their mannerisms and personality, they are a frequent staple of cinema. Given that films are often produced with a driving conflict in mind, it’s only natural to have a presence to oppose that conflict, whether literally or metaphorically. In any case, heroes themselves often undergo a specific cycle that later propels them into whatever role a director or writer intends for them to fall in line with. Two characters that embody the arc and journey of a hero are none other than Han Solo from the *Star Wars* franchise and Neo from *The Matrix*.

Han Solo, a known ruffian throughout many star systems in the Star Wars universe, is arguably one of the furthest non-villain characters you could get from a hero. He’s uncaring, dismissive, and fixated only on money. His drive is wealth and anything that ventures beyond that often loses interest quickly. He’s set on material goods with the aspiration for unfathomable financial profit. Han actively partakes in shady doings and lacks any and all interest in helping anyone beyond himself. Han is ... anything but heroic.

This changes, however, upon meeting *Star Wars: A New Hope*’s protagonist, Luke Skywalker. Luke, who has previously embarked on his own heroic journey, enlists the help of Han Solo. Given Han’s esteemed reputation in regard to flight capabilities, he’s hailed as a top pilot. His ship, the Millennium Falcon, is equally admired for its speed and agility throughout the galaxy. He initially scoffs at the idea of even remotely assisting Luke in his endeavors;

however, after being presented with an enticing princess and the promise of a bountiful financial reward, Han suddenly has a change of heart. Han has taken his first step into his heroic journey. He later finds himself barreling through one of the most necessary aspects of the Hero's Journey, that being conflict. While in a trash compactor that comes dangerously close to snuffing him out of existence, Han seems to have yet another change of heart. Following the ordeal and a few other minor arguments Han tells Luke that he refuses to continue on. No amount of money is worth his life.

By this point, many would assume that Han's journey has come to a close. However, as war is waged against the Death Star by the Rebel Alliance, all seems lost. With men being shot down by Tie Fighters and Darth Vader advancing on Luke Skywalker's X-Wing Fighter, it's fair to think that the Rebels have lost. Yet, at the very last moment, Han returns triumphantly and successfully takes out the tie fighters paired with Darth Vader's special-grade fighter. Vader is sent spiraling into space, whereas his accomplices are immediately engulfed in the flames caused by their ship's implosion. Luke is then granted his moment of opportunity to destroy the Death Star and does just that before everyone heads home. Rather than met with money beyond his wildest dreams, Han is instead gifted a medal of honor and immense recognition before a bountiful amount of people. It may not be what he bargained for, but the smile he wears very clearly indicates his content with the outcome. Han has returned home triumphant, changed, and more selfless than before. His allegiance is now firmly rooted with those who defy the tyrannical empire, thus completing his heroic arc.

Neo, the protagonist of *The Matrix*, is as equally self-serving and fixated on his own personal gain in the same sense that Han is. Neo is "an ordinary person leading an ordinary life" within the confines of the Matrix. However, similar to Han's shady doings, Neo frequently partakes in deals that are undoubtedly illegal. In fact, in the opening of the film,

we're greeted with a deal he's conducting. It's not exactly specified what exactly is on the disk he's trading for a few thousand dollars, but it's safe to assume that it's far from legal given that he explicitly tells his buyer not to get caught with it. Neo is a hacker, code breaker, however one might want to phrase it. He ventures into shady technological undertakings for extra profit, given that his main nine-to-five job doesn't seem to do well at paying for a nice home.

Things change for Neo, though. Prior to his shady deal, he's awoken by a message on his computer screen telling him to "wake up" because "the matrix has you." The message ends with telling him to "follow the white rabbit," which turns out to be a tattoo of one of the girls involved in his aforementioned deal. He does as instructed, following the group to a club of sorts before eventually finding his way to Morpheus. As the life he knows is explained to be a lie conjured by The Matrix, Neo struggles to accept that the life he's led is entirely fake. In fact, he doubts it so much that he's torn between which world he's supposed to consider "real." Eventually, he elects to pursue Morpheus' teachings and leadership, abandoning the life he's known and taking his first step into his own heroic journey.

As with Han, Neo is faced with a plethora of people who wish to cause him harm. Well, not so much people, but one person who can replicate himself endlessly: Agent Smith. Smith's goal is to force those who have awoken back into their slumber. However, those who are enlightened refuse the notion of going back into their fake realities. Neo spends his time training with Morpheus, preparing for the moment he'll have to battle these Smith clones. Throughout his time growing and "freeing his mind," he visits with an oracle who claims that he is not "The One" who will free humanity from The Matrix. This ultimately serves as the first encumbrance to his journey, as he soon begins to doubt himself. Following this with the struggle to best an Agent Smith replica, Neo's sense of identity and assurance falls under heavy scrutiny. It is only

towards the end of the movie, once Neo has accepted who he is and fully opened his mind, can he read the matrix in its entirety and beat those within it, ultimately attaining his zenith of heroic development. While not rich and arguably in a more dire situation upon seeing the aliens that have enslaved humanity, he has reached his pinnacle. Neo has evolved from that of a lowly-dealer to a hero of humanity.

In both *Star Wars: A New Hope* and *The Matrix*, we're presented with two characters that are anything but heroes. Both are greasy, sleazy, rough men with very little concern for anyone other than themselves. However, in both instances, we, as the audience, are gifted with the opportunity of watching them become more. Both heroes, in their own way, undergo a series of events that encourage them to embark on a path they normally would stray away from. Despite both being filled with flaws and even questioning whether or not they should continue down their chosen paths, both Han and Neo ultimately stick to the journey of a hero and rightfully earn their places as heroes. By the end of both films, we see they were never just shady dealers or ruffians. They were misguided heroes waiting for their journey into heroism.

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Third Place, Literary Essay

The Psychology of Dreams and its Influences: A Close Reading of “Yellow Woman”

by Abigail Smith

Pearl River Community College

“Yellow Woman” by Leslie Silko tells the story of a woman who believes she has been kidnapped from her family by a ka’tsina, just like the myth her grandfather would tell her. Reality and dreams blur together to show how disoriented the narrator is and what she really wants while she is with the ka’tsina. She eventually finds her way home but feels like she has changed after her experience. In the story, the narrator is experiencing a dream but believes it is real. Her dream is heavily influenced by her mental state, her relationships with her family, and her connection to her grandfather’s stories.

In the text, the narrator is dreaming, although she convinces herself otherwise. Many things point to this being the case. To start, the narrator proves unreliable, so we can never trust that what she sees is real. She wants to stay in the dream and have it become her reality. The narrator wants to change her life away from her family, so her subconscious grasps a way to experience that, which happens to come in the form of dreaming about being the Yellow Woman. Aside from her desires influencing what she experiences, we can tell that she is in a dream because she is constantly in a dream-like state, dazed, confused, and feeling far away from reality. She tries to take in every detail, but she is never fully present mentally and things change too often for her to do so properly. Even she is uncertain of what is really happening the majority of the time. Her surroundings are inconsistent and change often. One moment she “stopped to look down, but the pale sandstone had disappeared and the river was gone and the dark lava hills were all around” (Silko 3). Another time she “thought [she] saw the little town”, then in the next “[she] was looking in the wrong place, [she] just thought [she] saw houses” when Silva said otherwise (6). When she needs to be somewhere, she is able to get to her desired location in a timeframe that tends to be strange and confusing. The world shifts based on her perceptions and

changes within seconds. Additionally, she feels like she can never resist what is happening. She is drawn to what happens and feels compelled to follow the story through to its completion, thinking that she “did not decide to go. [She] just went” (6), ending it when she has seen all that can happen and coming back home to reality. These things are precisely the type of confusion and logic you would see in a dream. Despite that, the narrator still believes that what she experiences is real. I believe this is because she is experiencing dream-reality confusion combined with symptoms of dissociation. Dream-reality confusion is the “difficulty or inability to determine whether an event or experience occurred during the waking state or whether it was part of a dream” (Skrzypińska par. 4). She also shows symptoms of dissociation, what Matthew Tull writes is a “disconnection between a person's sensory experience, thoughts, sense of self, or personal history” (par. 8) during the text, which include feeling disconnected from both yourself and the surrounding environment, having a blurred sense of reality, feeling like you are daydreaming, and having an altered sense of time and space. These symptoms line up with what we witness in the narrator throughout the text. A few examples include how disconnected she feels from her identity and her family, how she is always daydreaming, and how she struggles with staying aware of her surroundings during the story. These conditions are a significant factor in why the narrator’s dream is so disorienting the entire time and why believes what she is experiencing is actually real.

The narrator’s relationships with her family, her grandfather, and her grandfather’s stories greatly influence her way of thinking during the story. In psychology, Sigmund Freud, one of the most well-known early psychologists, suggested that our thoughts and lives affect our subconscious and influence the dreams we see. According to Saul Mcleod, Freud believed that dreams “provide valuable insight into an individual’s unconscious desires and conflicts, ... are a form of “wish fulfillment ... [and show] a distorted version of the wish that the dreamer’s mind

tries to fulfill” (51). Our dreams are heavily influenced by what we experience in real life and things that we consider important throughout our lives. We see what we truly desire in our dreams, and scenarios in our dreams are created around that in order to see those desires come true. For the narrator, her family connections and the folklore she knows affect her dreams. The story's narrator experiences this dream because she feels disconnected from her family. She notes that the only tether she has to the real world is her family, but that she feels like they are “far away below [her]” (Silko 6). Her dream reflects the distance she feels within her family dynamics, even thinking that they will easily be able to “go on like before” (6). She desires an escape from her family when thinking about the lack of a connection she feels to them. This is where the folklore she was told about comes into play in the dream. The folklore stories are very important to the narrator. She heard them all the time throughout her childhood. These stories are especially important to her because they are things that she shared with her grandfather. The only family member she truly felt attached to is her grandfather, who now only lives on in her memories and the stories he told her as a child. This is why she comes up with the scenario involving a ka'tsina kidnapping her as the Yellow Woman in her dream; it is directly connected to her grandfather and his favorite myth. Her subconscious would naturally gravitate to dreaming this because it connects to her grandfather and provides a way to fulfill the hidden desire of the narrator.

In Silko's story “Yellow Woman,” the narrator has a disorienting dream that she believes to be reality. This is because of her mental state and her relationships with her family at the time.

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First Place, Poetry
Garden Poem
By Caroline Douglas
Hinds Community College, Rankin Campus

My mother loves her garden,
she spends hours in the Mississippi heat
cultivating and caring for each plant.
Never complains when she's plucking thorns from her skin.
Ironically, I have been described as thorny.
I have been told my face is set to mild irritation,
annoyance climbing up my features like roses on a trellis.

I never had my mother's green thumb,
but I do love words, I love knowing things -
so I know the scientific names of all of her flora,
I can rattle off everything about them like it'll help them grow.

Here's the thing – despite my thorny demeanor,
I tend to wilt away when I become uncomfortable.
When I was bent over a counter, looking at an item to buy
a man came up behind me.

He touched my bleached curls and told me I had pretty hair.
I was uncomfortable – felt my nails dig hard enough into
my palms to leave marks for hours.
I felt like I was rooted to the floor – caught between
not wanting to cause a scene and the disgust blooming
in my chest, the *I know, don't touch me* flowering in my throat.

So, I just said thank you.

My favorite flower is the *impatiens capensis*,
a quite particular plant.
When it is touched, the seed capsule violently explodes.
More commonly known as *touch-me-nots*.

Second Place, Poetry
Creating for You
By Arin Franks
East Mississippi Community College

I begin pulling yarn from its sheath, sizing up its worth. Are these strands of yellow and gold worthy enough for you? Will these colors compliment your deep brown eyes? Yarn over.

Half double stitch, all of this for you. I'd paint the world your favorite shade of green if it'd make you smile. You tell me you love collecting all my art, you're proud to show me off. Yarn over.

In the end will you keep the masses of yarn and clay I've fused together for your praise? Will you throw away the hours I spent crafting my love into tangible items for you? Yarn over.

Even though I know you'll take me out to bins alongside the gifts, I can't help but wish one day down the line you'll feel a chill and wish you kept that beanie I made you. Yarn over.

I'll continue to make these for you. Create and create until you grow sick of my weekly awards for putting up with me. I'll do it all a million times just to see you satisfied. Yarn over.

Third Place, Poetry
Dermatillomania
By Savannah Sylvest
Pearl River Community College

My skin peels away from the flesh
And I forever pick at the wound
The underneath layer pink and fresh
Now exposed, throbbing and crude

Separate the skin from my fingernails
Bleeding at the quick
Through the pain, I will prevail
So I continue to pick

The disrupted epidermis
Now white and detached
Hardened, nothing but callous
Complete with ridges where I scratched

How many layers can I remove?
Excoriate it all
Can I dig to the connective tissue
Flay my body until it is raw

It used to be a mystery
Why I manically peel at my skin
But I think my soul wants to be free
I try to escape this prison of sin

My flesh doesn't fit
It feels wrong every day
I wish my body was a suit I could unzip
So pain and blood would go away

First Place, Short Story
Who Is Good?
By Kymberlie Gable
Northeast Mississippi Community College

Prologue

700 years before the rule of Fireheart, before the era of peace and the era of quiet. Before the times of struggle and dark. Before Queen Achlys, of the Northern half, and King Lucian of the Southern tribes united the kingdom and began bleeding life into its core. Before the ocean calmed and the demons hid in shadows. Behind our nation is a past of war. Before, we were rage. This is the story of two sisters of opposite halves.

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The tang of blood rests heavy in the air turning it acrid. The feel of it on my skin isn't much better. I feel their presence before I can see it. The stillness of them. The weight of their eyes on our backs. The fleet surrounding me is almost silent as I grow more aware of just how outnumbered we are. I can see from the corner of my eyes as their darkness sweeps across the fields floor. The grass where their feet touch becomes dead beneath them. Their power draining the life before my eyes. I see the shadows sweeping through the makeshift battlefield, know what happens when they find their target. My pulse is loud in my ears as I pretend the dripping sensation on my back is sweat. My eyes work double time trying to find the person those shadows belong to, their particular breed of darkness being different. Alive. I waste precious seconds scanning the mass of bodies charging towards us, their shadows several feet ahead of them. My arm acts on instincts alone as I raise it to continue fighting. Push the line forward, those were my orders. Just keep pushing forward.

When my eyes meet hers, I know both of our fates before the battle even begins. Neither of our soles will walk from this soil. But better neither than hers. My sister, Amaris, marches at the back of the army. Her shadows sucking the light from the already fading sun. A red band of

coal circles the quarter of her face around her eyes, marking her rank. Queen. Her head is held high in a way that a soldier never could, her arrogance a blanket over her once kind face. But I can see the weight of her exhaustion on her shoulders. Even from a distance, I can tell she's maxed out her powers. Pushed too far. I feel the same weight on my chest but continue pushing forward. Continue wiping enemies out of my warpath. I don't think of their lives ending at the end of my sword. I don't think of my light burning them from within. Only winning. I don't have time to war with my morals. I don't even have enough time to register the faces of those who fall. I keep my eyes locked on my sisters, watching them darken and grow heavy.

I feel my breathing deepen. Feel my own eyes, so different from hers, press down down down. We stand only feet apart now. Close enough for me to see damage on her armor. Her once gold chest plate now splattered with blood and mud and grime. I see how the years have changed her face. She's grown into her sneer. What was once just cold eyes, and a cruel curve of her lips has spread to the angle of her nose and shadows of her hair. I don't know this woman. I don't feel sympathy for her losses. Their lives were spared from living under her hands. "The years haven't been kind to you, dear Diya," her accent is foreign to my ears as she crows my name. I stifle the urge to role my eyes, instead rolling back my shoulders, beginning to circle her, "We're monologuing now?" The air around her darkens, and I feel her reaction rather than seeing it. "You never were good with words, were you?" She always did know how to strike a nerve and that ability hasn't been lost by time and distance as she cooes at me like a child, "You know we don't have to do this." "I think you sealed that deal when you decided to claim these lands as your own," I bite back through my clenched molars. She's buying herself time, and I know this. The lower the sun sets in the distance, the easier it is for her shadows and darkness to spread across this grass and sand. The ocean on my right roars almost as loud as my gut telling me to strike now while I have the chance. "Aren't they, though? Wasn't this all promised to us," her

arms sweep out around her as she gestures to the earth around us, “We were the chosen ones. This is our destiny. It’s not my fault you settled for something as unbecoming as a common foot soldier.” Her last words shift her face back into that all too familiar sneer and smirk, “You were meant for so much more.” “I never wished for more.” “No, but you should have,” no sooner do the words leave her mouth than the final moments of light fade into the blackness of night. The sun has set. I feel her power surging around me before it floods the plains behind and in front of me. Her once powerful pitch black is nothing more than a murky fog due to exhaustion. I hear her sword unsheathe as we both prepare for death, “How disappointing.” She strikes hard and true as always. Quick as an adder she’s upon me, and it’s clear that she’s aiming to kill.

My breathing is haggard, the oxygen I’m pushing down cutting like a dull blade. My eyes and body burn, but we keep fighting. Both of our movements have slowed, seconds becoming minutes becoming hours. The clash of our blades causing my brain to rattle beneath its bones. A cut on my cheek was bleeding some while ago, it’s since clotted on its own. Her shadows have receded to nothing, leaving her wavering form fully exposed. The blood pooling at the chink in her breastplate has turned brown from the time since the initial blow was made. I can see the light sweeping from her eyes opposite mine. I can feel my own slipping away. And yet we continue swinging, continue pushing into one another. Brutal and barbaric at best. Primal at our cores. She stumbles backward on the impact of my head into hers. Her sword arm goes just limp enough for her sword to fall. I’m upon her in moments, closing the deal. I watch through another body as I kill her. I watch her body fall to the earth, hear the thud of her weight. I watch, not quite myself, as her life is absorbed by the night. I see the fear of her childhood in her eyes before they go dull with death. My eyes sting in a way they haven’t in years, an annoying ache behind my ears as hot tears flow past my eyes.

Their bodies are piled into the water by various generals and soldiers. I watch the tide reach for them, claiming their weight as its own. Still seeing through those other eyes, thinking through an unending fog, I feel my humanity seep in. I feel the loss of everyone who met their end at my hands. I see the men making fools of themselves, drinking and slurring their words in victory. My haze is unseeing as I begin to wonder if we've saved the kingdom or simply put a smaller target on it. Is there any way to save a nation under the rule of men? There will be another war soon. I'm sure. Someone will wish to take over or invade, someone will wish for cheaper silks and produce. A war can start in the span of an hour. I search my memory for why I fought in this war aside from being commanded. I come up blank. I sit on a dune far from the water, watching it continue to pull bodies out into the inky unknown. I see my sister in the distance. Her crown of red coal paints the water around her as her body sinks.

Second Place, Short Story
Faded Footprints
By Elizabythe McBeth
East Mississippi Community College

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the worn floorboards of the abandoned house as Emily stepped cautiously through the doorway. The old structure, once filled with life and laughter, now stood as a silent witness to the passage of time.

As Emily's eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering through the dusty windows, memories of her childhood flooded her mind. She remembered the days spent running barefoot through the grass, the sound of her grandparents' laughter echoing off the walls, and the warmth of the family enveloping her like a comforting blanket.

With each step, the creaking floorboards beneath her feet seemed to whisper secrets of days gone by. She passed the faded photographs hanging on the walls, frozen moments captured in time. There were images of her grandparents, Sherwin and Bill, their smiles radiant and full of life, surrounded by their three young granddaughters, their faces alight with joy.

Aynsleigh and Ashtynn, sisters by blood and cousins to Emily by technicality, had always felt more like true sisters to her. Aynsleigh, the eldest, exuded authority and often assumed the role of the boss, while Ashtynn possessed a wild streak, often finding herself tangled in mischief. Emily, in contrast, embodied the shy and reserved persona, akin to the guardian angel perched upon her cousins' shoulders, advocating for caution and obedience.

Outside, the neglected garden lay in disarray, the once-vibrant flowers now wilted and overgrown. Emily could almost hear her grandmother's gentle voice as she tended to her beloved blooms, her fingers caressing each delicate petal with care.

Nearby, the rusted remains of the old swingset stood as a silent sentinel, a relic of happier times. Emily could still feel the wind in her hair as she soared through the air, her laughter mingling with the chorus of birdsong that filled the air.

But now, the cabin stood empty, its walls echoing with the ghosts of memories long past. The laughter had faded, the swingset lay silent, and the garden had withered away. And yet, amid the decay and neglect, traces of love and warmth still lingered, hidden with the cracks and crevices of the old cabin.

As Emily stood in the fading light, a bittersweet ache tugged at her heart. She longed for the days when the cabin had been alive with laughter and love, when her grandparents had been there to guide and protect her. But time pushes on and memories fade, leaving only echoes of the past to linger in the stillness.

Third Place, Short Story
Grandma's Strength
By Demeria Moore
Holmes Community College, Goodman Campus

All my life, I've known my grandmother to be a strong woman. She was the definition of "I don't look like what I've been through." Along with her strength, she was also full of grace and kindness, yet she never let anyone walk over her. In fact, she is a part of most of my childhood memories.

One of my favorite memories of her is when I asked her about the source of her strength. I had explained to her that I dreamed of being as strong as her when I grew up and wanted to know where her strength came from. It's been a decade since, but I still remember her words as if they were spoken to me a day ago:

It was a long time ago. Back then, Grandma used to drag me and my siblings to the church house every Sunday and Wednesday. We couldn't get out of it. If we were sick, rub that holy oil on us and tell us to get dressed. If we tried to hide our church clothes, she'd make us come in one of her dresses. My Lord! That woman was determined. Although I went to church consistently, I saw no joy out of it. I just wanted to sleep in back then.

Then, one day it happened. It was just another Sunday, Grandma picked us up to head to church. It was sum'n about that day. I don't know if it was the way the voices of the congregation carried throughout that holy temple or how the first lady welcomed me in with gleaming eyes when she led me to the altar. Or, it was probably how them holy ladies looked at me with such pride. But, it was at that moment that I felt Jesus with me. It was like this overwhelming feeling of peace and comfort. Like a foggy haze lifting from my mind and everything becoming clear. I learned that he was with me day in and day out.

That day changed me, ya' hear? I started to cast all my worries to him. I learned that whatever was goin' be would be His will and that brought me a bunch of peace. Let me tell you, I was less stressed, and it brought out a strength within me that I never seen before. That was the day I started my relationship with God. And let me tell you, Darlin', I never let him go after that and don't plan on doing so anytime soon either.

I had never seen my grandmother speak about anything or anyone so passionately. It brought me to the conclusion that if I wanted to be strong like her, I would also have to build a relationship with God. I remember her being so excited that she started taking me to church with her every chance she got.

I must admit I was so happy to find out that our outings brought her as much joy as it did for me. I will never forget her last words: "Naomi, I have to go the holy temple, now, I'll see you soon." I will forever love you, and I look forward to meeting you there. See you soon, Grandma.

Honorable Mention, Short Story

Don't Go

By Tytianna Brooks

Itawamba Community College

Life and death are different words that carry the same roots. It's as simple as waking and sleeping...eternal living and eternal rest. All of it is everlasting. Of course no one physically lives on this earth forever... But, cherishing your loved ones even after they've left you behind... that's what keeps them here eternally. I should know...

For I've watched my loved ones vanish before my very eyes. First my mother, who'd caved in to an illness; Next, my father, who'd been mauled by angry beasts. Thirdly, my husband, who somehow died of a deadly poison circulating within his bloodstream. And last, but not least, my beautiful children: Isaiah, Roman, and Luther. One by one, they vanished, Isaiah dying of depression as he allowed himself to starve day in and day out after losing Roman, who died the same tragic way of his grandfather... protecting Isaiah from an angry beast. I didn't blame him for his brother's death, although he was told to stay inside, wandered off anyway.. And it just so happened that Roman's life was the price paid to teach Isaiah a valuable lesson. And lastly, Luther. He was a charming young man, seventeen years of age. He protected them both. But one day, his body had been found afloat a nearby river. Commoners claimed he died of drowning. But he was an excellent swimmer, so naturally, I had my doubts. He was my first born.. and my first loss.

"I'm certain asking you how you've been, under your given circumstances, would be a mistake, therefore, I won't," a crisp, cunning voice breathes aloud, flowing effortlessly through my ears like a calming song.

Without hesitation, I find myself staring into the enchanting green eyes of my superior, or at least it seems that way. Michael J. Vincent is his name. Not only is he my therapist, but he's also experienced similar tragedies as I, losing his wife and children all in a single car accident..

And somehow emerging from the vehicle without a scratch... every limb intact. To this day, his story makes me wonder how he's still alive.

"Honestly, after all you've been through, I would've thought you'd be in a straight jacket by now," he huffs, taking a seat at his desk. "And to my surprise, you're here quite early.. I'm certain my office door was not unlocked."

He lights a cigarette and places it between his lips, those green eyes piercing my soul. I have to admit, I'm a little jealous. I've always wanted a gaze as engrossing as his...and It's quite nauseating to say I still do.

"Actually, it was. And I am here on the account of the appointment that YOU arranged for me. Trust, if it were up to me, I'd be elsewhere," I reply, leaning upright in my seat.

"Elsewhere such as?"

"Why am I here, Mr. Vincent?"

"Well, every crazy person visits this place at least once in their life, right?" he acquires with a sickening grin.

"Sucks to say there's one working here," I reply, returning the gesture.

He smiles. "You never fail to intrigue me, Rayne."

There's no doubt. Ever since I had first met this man face to face, he had been the single ray of sunshine that pushed it's way through my gray clouds. It wasn't very often that an individual would bump into someone of similar hardships... especially hardships as specific as my own. As embarrassing as it is to express... I feel an extremely lethal attraction toward this gentleman... an intense desire to be just a little closer to him... a desperate longing for his attention..

"There's no point of us wasting each other's time, would you agree?" he utters aloud, exhaling a cloud of smoke accompanied by a sigh. "With that being said, you're dismissed."

He didn't bother asking me anything... this renders the appointment worthless. I glance over and immediately look away as he rises from his chair and slips his suit jacket over his mouthwatering torso.

"I have other business to tend to...business much more important than this."

To my own understanding, he's practically saying I'm useless to him. How coldhearted... But, I can't help wanting him even more.. The harder a prize is to attain, the more productive one feels once he or she attains it. The jingle of his keys pulls me from my trance.

"Don't go..."

He looks back, giving me a questioning glare.

"You're a hard working man, Mr. Vincent. Why not relax a while, let off some steam." I acquire with a cunning smile. "Tomorrow night. Come over to my place for a hot dinner and a movie."

"Not interested." he growls, turning his back to me.

"We can even play a game if you'd like."

A smirk finds its way slipping across my face, for I know I've gotten his attention.

"A game, you say?" He turns around, revealing an excited glare with the company of a crooked smile. "I'll be there."

"I'm honored, Mr. Vincent," I whisper, blushing at the thought of him being within the comfort of my home.. And being there.. To *stay*.

"Oh, and.. Rayne?"

I give him a questioning stare, curling my lip with anticipation.

"Do keep in mind... Tomorrow will be the first.. And last time you'll ever see me within the comfort of your home."

“No worries, I agree,” I giggle softly, covering not only my smirk, but every intention lying within it.

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I heave an exasperated sigh as I stride weakly toward my front door. The car ride back was treacherous... It’s finally happened.. I’ve reached the point where I can no longer function correctly without him.. I *NEED* him.. I need him right now..

“Patience.. I shall have him to myself soon enough.”

I reach for the doorknob..but the door swings open before me, and I find myself staring into a mirror. My tired eyes are emotionless, my hair a mess... but on my face, a crippled grin.

“You’re home early,” my reflection speaks. “Rayne.”

“My apologies, Raine.” I exhale weakly as I push myself past. “Busy night?”

“The usual,” she replies, waving a butcher knife.

“Be careful out there. Not all pigs are easy to catch.”

“Of course they are, my meer image. All they need..is the right attraction.”

I nod at her, taking a seat on the sofa.

“You should try it. It’s quite an addicting habit.. and It would most definitely take your mind off of.. things,” she chuckles. “It’s certainly saved me.”

“I’ll pass,” I grumble. “Gutting ‘pigs’ isn’t really my thing.”

She smiles, giving me an assuring nod before exiting the house. I don’t blame her for the actions she take, although I do find her quite haunting sometimes. But she’s my sister. I have to constantly remind myself that she poses as no threat to me... even if she does pose as a threat to everyone else. But usually, her eyes are sought on one specific classification of targets.. Men.

“Men are such pigs... And pigs get slaughtered.”

Those were her very words years ago.. As she towered over her current boyfriend who couldn't speak for the gash in his neck.. But he wasn't alone. For the female he'd boned behind Raine's back was also at the scene, suffering the same fate. Ever since then.. Pig slaughtering has been her escape from her worst heartbreak. And she's yet to be caught.. For no one knows how she strikes and vanishes without a trace. None except me, who doesn't dare to utter a word for the fear of being murdered next.. Raine has become heartless, numb to all affection. I wish I could feel that way... be as guarded as her. There's no doubt she's definitely stronger than me, even if we're opposites. Because.. Lord knows, as much as I want to have a dispersing hate illuminating from my tired body, my aching bones, my ever yearning for death soul... I can't.. For I've fallen.. Once more.

“Michael... If only you knew how long I've —”

An intense, subtle knock on the front door startles me. I know it isn't Raine. She usually slaughters beyond midnight, and second and foremost, she never knocks. I inhale deeply, pushing myself from the sofa and cautiously walking toward the door. Soon enough, it swings open on its own, in marching Mr. Vincent, looking at me frantically upon first glance, as if he didn't expect to see me here.

“I'm sorry for barging in on you, Rayne. I- I thought.”

I wave my hand assuringly, “Don't worry, it's fine. But dinner was supposed to be tomorrow night, Michael. If you wanted to come sooner, you should have said so.”

“My apologies, Rayne.. I forgot..”

We lock gazes awkwardly. I genuinely meant for him to visit *tomorrow*.. For Raine is the one who brings in months worth of dinner. Pigs not only get slaughtered, but consumed as well. There's no point of letting a hard earned meal go to waste. But it just so happened that we'd run all out of meat last night.

“Rayne.”

“Yes?”

“We need to talk.”

I nod, feeling a tingling sense of happiness fluttering within my stomach. I didn't expect this tall drink of water to show up unannounced and without me *having* to give him my address.

Love is so *mysterious*.

“I'll put on a movie,” I mutter excitedly as we both settle on the sofa.

“Hey, Rayne.. Just curious. How do you cope with your losses.”

Distracted from scrolling, I look at him, slightly offended by his question. No one asks me such.. I heave a sigh.

“Well, how do you cope, Mr. Vincent? How does any human cope?”

“Others, I don't know. We all mourn differently.. As for me.. I don't cope at all...I don't have the time.”

“Do you not miss them-”

“Of course I do.” He growls. “ That's why I.. That's why I try to avoid you.. I look at you.. And I see her...”

I should feel moved by his words, but something else is nagging at me..

“Michael,” I mumble, looking into his eyes, “How did you survive that crash..”

He gives me an offended glare. In return, I raise an eyebrow, patiently awaiting an answer.

“I don't know how I survived... Everyday, I wish it were me that left this earth.”

“That sounds more like guilt than mourning.”

“Tell me. How do you cope..”

“I don't, Michael. They're still here with me,” I whisper, thoroughly clenching my chest.

“In your heart, hm?”

“Other places, too.” I mutter with a warm smile, “It goes far beyond that alone.”

I feel him staring at me, his mysterious gaze peering at my soul.

“You’re so intriguing.. In more ways than one,” he groans, lowering his voice and caressing my cheeks, “How could someone so beautiful... go through so much pain...”

A rush of embarrassment is soaring through me, for the warmth of this man’s palm on me is exciting in every possible way. Slowly, I respond to his touch, sliding my right palm thoroughly around his wrist, anticipating his next move. He exhales vigorously, leaning in closer. My heart rate is beginning to increase rapidly, and surely, he slides his hand down and slips it around my neck.

“Mm..,” I can feel the warmth of my blood rapidly masking my face.

The tension within the atmosphere is everrising, so thick, the sharpest knife wouldn’t be able to slice through.

“Don’t speak,” he breathes, his gaze locked on mine, “Let me heal you.. Rayne.”

He presses his lips against mine, kissing me passionately. I return it, allowing him to deepen the exchange, sparking the start of a lusty battle that I pray will never end. The warmth of his left palm joins in, searching my body, the firm grip of my neck remaining emplaced. This is *IT... I HAVE to make him mine.. And MINE alone.*

The pressure around my neck becomes relieved as he lowers his right hand toward my waist, lifting my figure and pulling it onto his lap.

“I have some questions, Rayne,” he groans softly. “Answer honestly, and I will give you what you desire most.”

“Far too...excited for questions,” I whisper, gleaming into his emotionless, green orbs.

“Behave,” he breathes, “As a part of an undercover law enforcement, I am under obligation to ask you about the disappearance of several men within the last three months.”

“Men vanishing? I know nothing of the sort,” I assure him, “For I have eyes for one.. And only one.”

“Rayne.. Don’t lie to me.”

“Why the cold stare,” I whimper, “I’ve told you all I know.”

“Then tell me this. What is it that you desire most?”

“You, of course.”

His cold gaze doesn’t budge.

“Then, you wouldn’t mind if we played a little game then, correct?”

“Hm?” I mumble, removing myself from his lap. “What kind of game?”

“Hide and Seek. Of course you will be it. But since you know your home better than I do, you will have an advantage.”

“What do I get if I find you?”

“You get me,” he grumbles, rising to his feet.

“Forever?.. Tell me I’d get to have you forever,” I demand, impulsively.

He nods. “Yes, Rayne. Forever.”

I lower myself to the floor, resting my head on the sofa within the comfort of my forearms.

“One. Two. Three...”

The sound of his footsteps gradually grow distant as I count patiently. The sound of the front door swinging open behind me catches me off guard. Is he leaving?.. Please, darling. *Don’t go...* but I don’t dare to move from my position, continuing the count.

“Eight. Nine. Ten..” I heave a sigh, slowly pushing myself from the floor, “My dear, Michael, *I’m on my way.*”

The house is dead silent... not even the slightest foot step can be heard. He’s turned this into a hunt. And I’m all for it. I creep towards my room, thoroughly, listening for the slightest creak, the slightest peep.. Even the slightest breath. He doesn’t know what he’s signed up for. Policeman or not.. He *WILL* be mine.

“She’s making this easy for me.”

I turn around immediately, searching for the sound of his voice. There’s no one in sight... just darkness.. And a dimmed light refracting from the night lamp on the furthest end of the dreadful hallway. A shadowy figure flickers across it.

“I’ve found you,” I hiss, walking hesitantly toward the darkness.

I’d always hated that hallway.. It’s haunted me for years.

A pit - pat of footsteps fast approaching startles me. I immediately turn around once more, realizing no one’s there.

“Your biggest enemy.. Is yourself.”

“WHERE ARE YOU,” I hiss angrily, turning in a circular motion.

“Did you ever think to ask yourself..”

I look toward the voice.. Nothing.

“-How I got into your house.. No address.. No key.”

“I don’t care how you got here,” I hiss. “Reveal yourself.”

“As I said.. This will be the first and Last time you ever see me within the comfort of your own home.”

The dimming lights crash out, the entire house becoming engulfed in darkness. I hate the dark.. I.. I’m afraid.

“NOO!” I shriek ecstatically.

“You want me.. *Come find me.*”

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I press my back against the wall, lowering myself down slowly. Rayne’s past had always been something that bothered me in more ways than one: Her husband mysteriously dying of poison, her children dying in a domino effect.. Her parents dying of attacks and an illness. Something’s always stood out to me about her.. : although she mentioned her father and her son died to an angry beast, she never told me what sort of angry beast it was..

“Michael... come out.. Please,” her angelic voice calls to me.

I won’t budge. I must stay hidden.. I clench my shirt, accessing the tiny mic.

“There are secrets within these walls.. Secrets I may never live long enough to reveal.”

“Michael... please.. I’m afraid of the dark..” she whimpers. “Please.. Come out.”

I rise slowly to my feet upon the sound of approaching footsteps. A flashlight gleams in my face.

“I found you!” she exclaims happily. “What were you doing way down here, though?”

“What do you mean, we’re just down the hall,” I groan.

“No, silly. Look around.” she replies. “We’re in the basement.”

I glance around the area, realizing she’s right. It’s so dark, I can only see areas her phone light reveals. I heave a sigh. There’s nothing here to pin against her.

“Hey, Rayne.”

“Yes?”

“How about one more round. I’ll be it this time. What do you say?”

“That’s fine by me..”

I walk toward the entrance.

“Don’t go...,” she whispers.

I stop and look at her.

“What is it?”

She shakes her head.

“Why not count here. I’ll go hide.”

“Fine,” I huff.

I watch as she leaves the room, her light going dim as she vanishes into the darkness.

“One. Two. Three.”

I can hear her walking around out there... doors opening and closing. But there has to be something she’s hiding. If I finally crack this case, those men will finally rest in peace... Or.... carefully, I slip a blade from my pocket. I could kill her.. And prevent any further cessation. This shouldn’t be a problem.. Plus, stalking her and breaking into the house wasn’t hard. And never has been. But although I’ve broken into this house several times, she’s never seemed to notice.. But neither had she’d been home when I did. This will be far easier than waiting on the actual law to take action. I’ve killed before.. therefore... there’s no way she’s so innocent. And if it just so happens that she’s innocent... ending her life will be just as simple.

“Eight. Nine. Ten..” I exhale deeply. “It’s time.”

I make my way to the entrance, first relying on the darkness for my advantage. She said she was afraid of the dark, meaning wherever she is right now, she has to have a light near. I look toward the hallway, the dimmed night light is out.. Of course. The power went out. The creaking of a door echoes behind me. I turn around, noticing there’s no one there.

“Rayne.. Pray I don’t find you,” I growl with a smirk.

“Pray you don’t find me? How offensive.”

I turn around. She’s cloaked within the darkness. I can’t see her.

“Lord knows how much I want you, Michael. Why pray against that.”

“Come out then, beautiful. I’m here.” I mutter in attempt to lure her in.

“Afraid I can’t. That would ruin the point of the game.”

I turn around, glaring into the darkness in desperate attempt to spot her.

“Since when did rules matter to you, Rayne?”

“Since you made them, darling.”

That’s coming from behind me. I turn around once more. NOTHING. She’s really starting to piss me off. I reach into my pocket, slipping my phone from it. I’m going to find her. ONE way or ANOTHER. I click on my flash.

“YOU’RE afraid of the dark too!!”

I fall backwards, my heart pounding through my chest. She’d been standing in front of me the whole time. Immediately, she takes off, running towards the master bedroom. Now, I know exactly where she is. I push myself from the floor and reach into my left pocket once more, pulling out the folded knife.

“I’ve found you, Rayne.”

“Have you?”

I turn around. She’s.. standing there, giving me a questioning glare.. She doesn’t seem so excited to see me this time.. What.. is this.

“You’re.. Armed.”

“I.. I can expla-”

She bursts into uncontrollable laughter.

“You’re ARMED.”

I take a step back, realizing what I’m up against.. I’m a serial killer, for sure.. But this girl.. She’s a real psychopath.. A battle with her is one I won’t win..

“Stay back!” I yell, backing away as she approaches, leaning forward in a drunken stance, her crooked smile glistening in the darkness.

There’s blood all over her clothing, and in her hand, a butcher knife. She’d been prepared long before me.

“How intriguing,” she purrs, slowly approaching, “Weren’t you the one who was supposed to be seeking? It looks to me like you’re trying to hide.”

“Spare me,” I whisper backing away.., “You won’t get away with this if you go through with it.”

“I wouldn’t?” her smile fades and she comes to a halt, tilting her head in confusion.

I allow a smirk to creep across my face.

“You will die.. Either way.”

*“You.. can’t go. You told me you’d be mine. **Forever.**”*

I laugh hysterically at her ridiculous statement.

“I’d never be yours. Even if my life depended on it.”

She lowers her head in disappointment, her bangs lingering over her eyes.

“I.. didn’t want to see you go.”

What is she talking about?

*“**MICHAEL,**” a voice shrieks from behind me, her gentle arms wrapping around my neck ever so thoroughly.. A sharp pain sifting through my throat.. It feels like a clean stab..*

I stare ahead.. My gaze locking with hers.. But she’s standing at least six feet away.. How is she behind me?.. My vision is beginning to blur.. And I can feel the warmth of my blood skeeting from my throat. Accepting my fate, I lower myself to the floor...

Rayne towers over me, mourning depressingly.

There’s...

“Michael... Don't Go....” she whimpers.

..... **Two ... of them**.....

As I'd mentioned before, life and death is no different than being awake or sleeping permanently. Keeping your loved ones close.. Even after they've passed away, is the best way to cherish them for life. *Wouldn't you agree?*

“Michael..” I whisper, kissing the frontal of the skull before placing it near all the **Others**.
I told you.. You'd be mine forever.

“You're a perfect addition to the family. Isaiah, Roman, Luther, say hello to your stepfather. Unlike your real father, he never cheated on me.” I laugh, “Because he wasn't given a chance to.”

I smile at my parents' skulls. “Mom, Dad. Don't judge me. He's far more handsome than Carlos ever was. And he tasted better as well, I must admit.”

I heave a sigh before kissing each of them. “I miss you all every night.. I think.”

“I've.. **Found You.**” a voice snarls from behind me.

I turn around, slightly confused.. He's handsome, his eyes a cold, mysterious green. My heart skips a beat.

“Michael?”

He smirks. “You killed the wrong one.”

“Did I?” I ask. “How shameful.. I must admit the green eyes were worth it, though. They look so good on me.”

“Do you want to know how I survived that car crash? It's quite simple.” His crooked smile reveals itself once more. “I was never in it. I put a bomb in the car and encouraged them all to go for a trip to the mall. Once it exploded, they were no longer my problem.”

“And as for dead Michael?”

“My twin brother. He’d been a serial killer his entire life. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I see.. So, you’ve cornered me.” I whisper, “I suppose it’s time I joined my own family.. But first, allow me to tell you what *Really* happened to your family.”

He pulls a gun from his back pocket. Unbothered, I continue anyway.

“They never died in an *Accident*. As a matter of fact, they were safely inside the Public Market before your little bomb went off. How do I know? Well, I was right there with them,” I smile. “Michael.. I knew you’d been stalking me. So, I felt I should return the *favor*.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You told me they died in a car accident. So, since you sincerely believed they were all dead, I decided to make it a reality. Just take a look to your left,” I tell him, gesturing to another set of skulls. “See, there’s little Chloe. Sad to say she was only a toddler. Right beside her is big brother, Carter. Only ten years of age. Their lives were so short lived. *Oh*.. And last but not least, your beautiful wife, Lisa. She was absolutely gorgeous. I wanted her place so bad.. *Wait*.. I have that. I took her place.” I burst into laughter. “Don’t attempt to ruin another woman’s life without realizing how bad you’re ruining your own.”

He glares at me, the rage ferociously filling his eyes. I know I have his twin’s eyes.. But I want *his* too. The emotion within them are so fulfilling and beautiful.

“Another thing, Michael.” I mutter, “They did not die *in vain*. Their corpses were fresh and so nice, tender and easy to chop. And the meat tasted so divine, I had them sold freshly at a market: MystMeat, I’m sure a man as complex as you has tried it. And enjoyed it. For a family as delicious as yours.. You’ve got good genes.”

He laughs hysterically, bowing his head.

“I told you.. This will be the last time you see me here.”

“And... I told you, I agree,” I sigh.

He presses the cold metal against my temple. I stare into his eyes with a questioning gleam.

“But, before you pull the trigger, there’s something else I think you should know...”

He tilts his head in question, his cold glare yet to soften.

“Hello... *Michael*,” an angelic voice speaks.

“Wha-..”

I smirk, matching my mirroring image as she stands happily behind him, her smile all that’s visible in the darkness she’s cloaked within.. armed with but a blade.

He drops the weapon, a frightened expression written all over his face.. and he lowers himself to the floor.

“I told you this would be fun, right, Rayne?”

We tower over him, giving an emotionless glare.. And.. Rayne speaks one last time.

“Leaving so soon, my love?...”

..... **“-Don’t Go”**

