





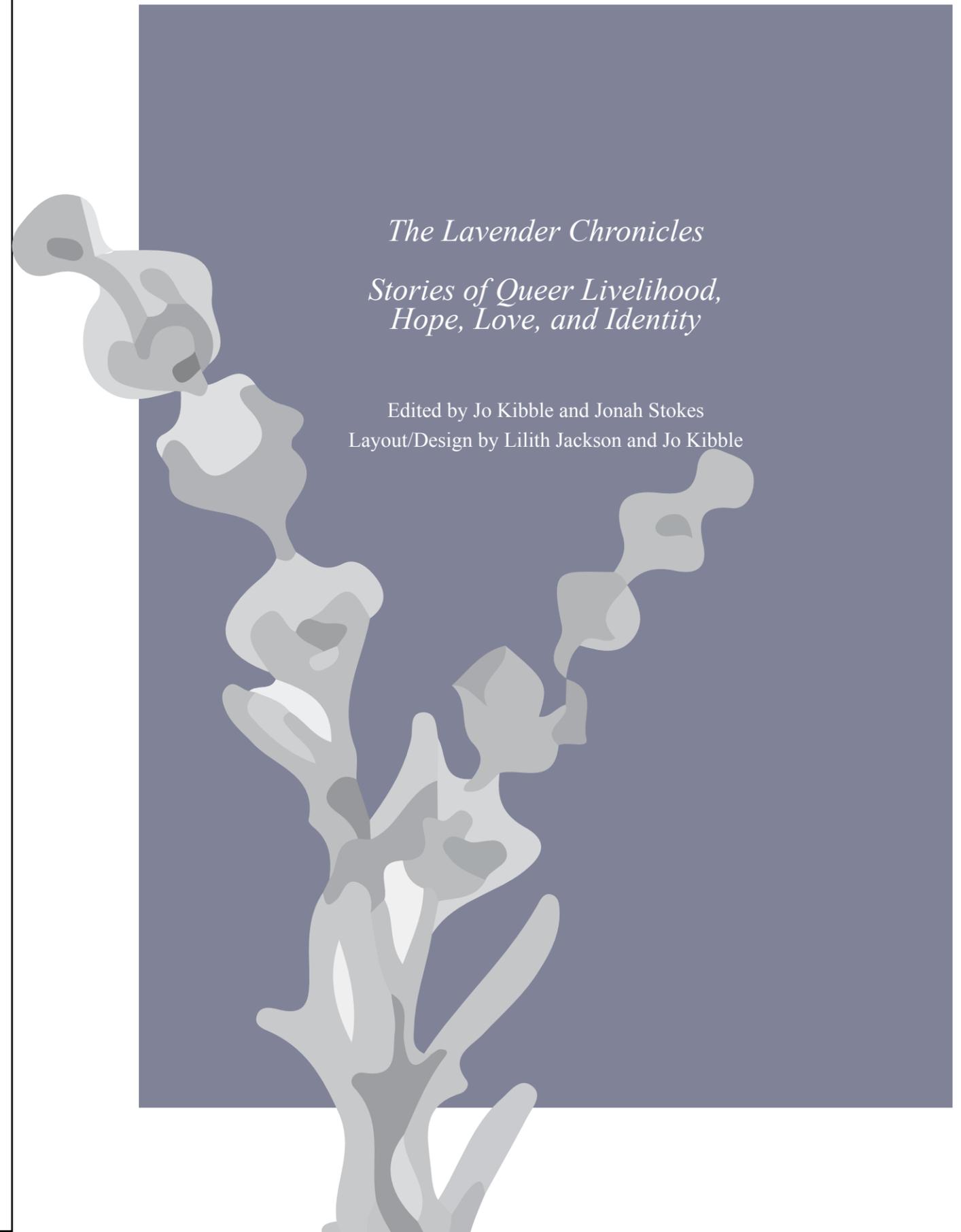
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**Published 2021 by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga**  
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*The Lavender Chronicles*  
*Stories of Queer Livelihood,  
Hope, Love, and Identity*

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*For all of the Queer and LGBTQ+ artists and writers who came before us.  
Thank you for paving the way.*



## Introduction

*The Lavender Chronicles* is an anthology that celebrates Queer identity. From lesbians to nonbinary folks, we want to acknowledge and celebrate the wonderful beauty and humanity within the LGBTQ+ community. Since Queerness is largely diversified in its definition, we tried to create a name that could be representative of all Queer identities. To do this, we looked to Queer history, and when doing so, one theme stuck out for us as a reclamation of Queer oppression and livelihood: lavender.

The color first began as a color of desire, thanks to the seventh century BC poet Sappho, who wrote papyrus fragments detailing her desires for women with “violet tiaras.” Fast forward to the 1920’s, and violets were still drawing members of the lesbian community together, who’d give each other violets as symbols of their affection. In the 1930’s, though, lavender began to be negatively linked with gay men. Aestheticism, a European art movement, was born, and its members were denounced as effeminate. These included the likes of Oscar Wilde, whose reminiscing about his “purple hours” spent with rent boys and homoerotic undertones in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* caused quite a scandal.

The 1930’s were a particularly dark time for this color, and included the infamous McCarthy-era Lavender Scare. This was a moral panic modeling an anti-communist campaign known as McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare during the Cold War. Beginning in the 1950s, the Lavender Scare sought to rid Queer members of the United States government from working in the political sphere. For anti-communists, Queer people posed a risk to Capitalism and American livelihood. The fear was that Queer people’s sexual orientation and gender identity would be used by Communist powers against the American state, signaling a space in which Communism could enter into American politics.

By 1969, lavender came to represent empowerment, as lavender sashes and armbands were distributed to many during “gay power” marches to commemorate the Stonewall Riots, but the color cannot always be linked to Queer pain and protest. Over the years, it’s become a subversive color, a hue that allows LGBTQ+ people to express their full humanity. For example, the late writer and actor Quentin Crisp’s infamous lavender hair was used to subvert gender norms and traditional gender expression; Lavender Graduations are conducted at universities across the United States to honor the achievements and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students.

Lavender, in this sense, has connections to Queer history, and is a symbol of Queer resistance. Our hope in creating this anthology is that it can create a space in which history and fiction can be blended. This history is everpresent in the minds of Queer writers generally and the writers that have been included in this anthology. For the purposes of this anthology, historical oppression against Queer people has been reclaimed to represent the positive aspects of Queer experience. Instead of focusing on exclusion, pain, turmoil, and oppression, the pieces that are included in *The Lavender Chronicles* are exemplary accounts of love, identity, hope, and perseverance.



Our hope for the readers of this anthology is that they will be able to get a glimpse into a diversified account of Queerness in all of its forms. The pieces that are in this anthology are representative of Queer oppression, yet show the beauty of what it means to be Queer. However it is identified, Queer experience has largely been placed in a box of negative human experience in the realm of fiction. A lot of books with Queer themes focus on death, sickness, abuse, and violence. Although the pieces in this anthology do contain some of these elements, we took care to include pieces that went one step further. The writers of the many pieces included attempt to focus on the human experience of being Queer, meaning that the beauty of humanity is the centerpiece.

While this anthology is ultimately a celebration of a diversified Queer livelihood, some stories in this collection handle mature and potentially triggering themes and topics. As Queer writers, many elements of the pieces that are in this anthology are drawn from negative experiences, and thus, show some of the darker themes of what it means to be Queer. These include elements of abuse and violence against children, alcoholism, the use of discriminatory slurs, depression, sex, profanity, gun violence, drug abuse, and overdose, among other topics. Out of respect for our readers, care was taken to include trigger warnings in the form of Editor's Notes where needed in the transition from one piece to the next.

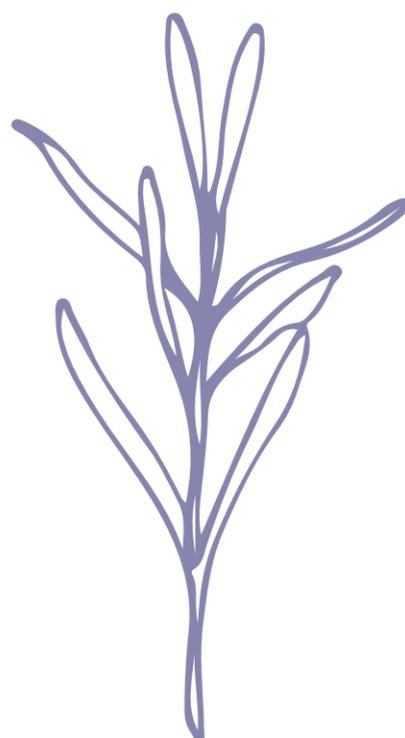
At its heart, *The Lavender Chronicles* attempts to state one crucial quote by LGBTQ+ activist organization Queer Nation: "We're here! We're Queer! Get used to it!" The pieces contained within this anthology are unapologetically Queer, showing cases of Queer identity in every form. From coming out stories, coming-of-age narratives, themes of love, and the hope for a more inclusive future, the fictional pieces within *The Lavender Chronicles* are not only Queer, but a positive display of what it means to be truly human.

Enjoy,  
Jo Kibble and Jonah Stokes, Co-Editors



## Puppy Love

Britney Chappell



“Isabel...you want to go on a road trip with me?” Jesse’s voice rang through my phone. “I found the puppy. He’s perfect. Also, I am about to be at your house in ten minutes so please say you will go with me,” Jesse said, then paused, waiting for my response.

“I mean, how could I say no to that?” I replied.

“Awesome! I will see you in ten!” she said then hung up the phone.

I was laying in my bed still in my pajamas when I got off the phone. I sat up in my bed and looked to the alarm clock on my nightstand that read 2:08 pm. I got up and started getting ready quickly, knowing that I only had ten minutes. I slipped on a pair of black Aerie leggings, a black short sleeve cropped T-shirt, an oversized jean jacket and a pair of all white Nike Air Force 1s. I went toward the bathroom to put a little concealer under my eyes, ran mascara through my eyelashes, and brushed light pink blush on the apples of my cheeks. As I was walking out of the bathroom, I heard my phone buzzing on my nightstand. I walked over and the name read “Jesse ❤️.” She changed her name in my phone, adding the heart a couple of weeks after we started dating. I thought it was cute and didn’t want to change it.

“I am here!” Jesse exclaimed as soon as I answered the phone.

“Okay I am coming!”

I have known Jesse for three months and in those three months I don’t think a day has gone by that she hasn’t talked about getting a puppy. On our first date she spent at least 20 minutes showing me pictures of all the dogs she has had in her life. I didn’t mind it though, I thought it was adorable. For the first couple of months when she would talk about getting a dog, it was more of a hypothetical dog. Jesse wasn’t actively looking for a dog. She just knew that she really wanted one. Slowly, Jesse started actually looking for a puppy and the hypothetical puppy quickly turned into reality. At this point we were not officially in a relationship but had been seeing each other for about three months.

One night, about a week before Jesse really started looking for a puppy, she looked at me and said, “I know you’re not technically my girlfriend yet, but if I got a puppy would you help me? I really want one, and I know I can’t do it alone.”

“Of course, I will help you, I want this for you and anything I can do to make it happen I’m going to do it,” I replied back to her.

After that conversation Jesse deep dived into finding a puppy. She found a beautiful German-Short Haired Pointer for sale for 350 dollars only a few hours away. She contacted the owners, and they really seemed interested in selling her this puppy. When the day came that she was going to go meet him, the owners changed their minds and decided they wanted to keep the puppy. Jesse was very disappointed. She had already started picking out names and telling people about this dog. After that she got discouraged, and slowed down her search for a puppy.

I walked outside my house to see Jesse sitting in my driveway in her gray 2019 Dodge Charger.

“Hello sunshine!” I said as I got into the car.

“Hello gorgeous,” Jesse said back to me, giving me a little peck on the cheek.

“So where are we even going? And what does this dog look like? And how did you find him? I really need some details,” I said as I buckled in my seatbelt.

Jesse instantly got a goofy smile on her face, then started laughing.

“So, we are going to Alabama to get the puppy. He is a black and white Pitbull Lab mix,” Jesse said.

“Okay... then why are you laughing? What is the catch?” I replied.

“We are getting him from Kylie.”

I paused for a second, trying to think who Kylie even was. After a second it finally dawned on me who she was talking about.

“Your ex-girlfriend Kylie?” I said after a couple minutes of silence.

“That would be the one.”

I didn't really know how I felt about the situation, but meeting someone's ex is usually not very fun.

“She posted on her snapchat that she was giving these puppies away, so I messaged her. She said I could have the last little boy in the litter for free if I drive down and get him,” Jesse said, trying to explain and make me feel better, because she could see the slightly concerned look on my face.

“Jesse, it is okay that you are getting this puppy from your ex. I don't care. I mean, I am always down for a road trip, but before I can fully commit, I am going to need to see what playlist you plan on playing since we have a two-hour drive ahead of us.”

Jesse then very confidently pulled up her Apple Music and turned her phone to me displaying several different playlists: “2018 Summer Vibes,” “Beach Playlist,” “Songs When Sad,” “Songs When Happy,” and several others with similar names.

“Okay, which one do you want to play. I know all of them are amazing, so it is your choice.”

I looked through a few playlists, then decided to play the one titled “The Good Stuff.” I pressed shuffle and “Kevin's Heart” by J.Cole started playing over the radio.

After spending about an hour singing and rapping to every song that played on the radio, Jesse reached and turned down the music. “So...I have to tell you something. I am only going to tell you because I am not sure if it's going to be a problem or not. I want you to be prepared just in case.

“What is it?” I said feeling a bit uneasy.

“Kylie has no idea that you are coming with me, and she tends to be a bit...jealous.”

“Jesse!” I yelled as I smacked her on the arm. “Why would you not tell her I am coming?”

“I really didn't know how to say it, so I thought I would just hope for the best.” Jesse reached over and squeezed my hand, “Please don't be mad. I really don't think it will be a big deal.”

“Well...I'm not mad but maybe a little nervous. I haven't had to deal with any of your exes yet, so this will definitely be interesting especially if she's mad I'm there.”

The rest of the car ride I tried not to think of the different scenarios of how meeting Kylie was going to go. It was hard not to think about. I am not really good with confrontation. I didn't know much about what happened between them, except that it wasn't exactly mutual, and that Jesse was the one that ended it after only a few months. It had been at least eight or nine months since they were together and this was the first time they were going to be seeing each other since they ended things.

After about two hours, we pulled up to a quaint little white house that had dark gray shutters, a porch that wrapped around the sides of the house and a brown fence that blocked in the backyard. The house sat on about two acres of land, with neighbors a couple of yards away on either side.

“Okay are you ready to do this?” Jesse said as she took my hand.

“I'm a little nervous, but let's do it...I guess.”

Jesse pulled her phone out and called Kylie to tell her that we were there. Shortly after she hung up the phone, Kylie walked through the gate out of the backyard. Jesse and I both stepped out of the car and started walking to greet her. As soon as we made eye contact Kylie's face dropped from a slight smile to a face that looked bitter.

“Kylie, this is Isabel, Isabel this is Kylie,” Jesse said with a little tremble in her voice.

“Hi, it's nice to meet you!” I said, smiling at her.

Kylie paused for a second and slowly looked me up and down; her stare almost felt icy. No one said anything for what felt like 15 minutes, but in reality, it had only been about 30 seconds.

“Anyways,” Kylie said, finally breaking the silence, “just follow me and I'll show you the dog,” she said in a snarky tone.

We followed her in the backyard where there was a little puppy playpen set up with about five puppies running around inside. As we walked up to the pen, the puppies started yapping and trying to break out. Our little guy was the runt of the litter. He was trying so hard to join in with his siblings but was just not quite big enough. Kylie grabbed him out of the pen and handed him to Jesse. He was only about five pounds and a little bit bigger than her hand. He immediately started licking her face and wagging his tail as fast as he possibly could. Jesse handed him to me, and he covered my face in slobber.

“Okay, okay, as much as I would love to keep watching this love fest, can you just take

the dog and go? I really would like to be anywhere but here right now,” Kylie said with attitude in her voice. “Honestly, after this little stunt you pulled bringing your new girl here with no warning or anything, I should charge you for him, or just not let you have him altogether”

“Kylie I am so sorry, but how about we just leave now, and I will never bother you again,” Jesse replied.

“Just leave.” Kylie said, pointing towards the gate. We quickly took our new puppy and headed to the car.

Before getting back on the interstate to head home Jesse stopped at a gas station to get some snacks and to make sure the puppy didn’t need to use the bathroom.

“Will you go inside and get the snacks while I take the puppy to use the potty?” Jesse asked as we pulled into the gas station.

“Yes, what do you want?”

“Surprise me.”

I went into the gas station and walked down the chip aisle, observing the several different options. I already knew what I was looking for, so it didn’t take long. I picked out Kettle Cooked Jalapeño Lays potato chips, a Strawberry Kiwi Propel for Jesse, Spicy Sweet Chili Doritos, and a Frost Blue Gatorade for me. I walked outside and got back to the car about the same time as Jesse and the puppy.

“He peed a little bit, but no poo, but I think he will be fine till we get back,” Jesse updated me.

“Here’s your snack,” I said as I handed her the chips and drink.

“Wow. You know me so well, that’s exactly what I wanted.”

As we pulled out of the gas station our puppy cuddled up in my lap, with his body on my legs and his head resting on the middle console. He had the sweetest puppy dog eyes, ears that made him resemble Dumbo, paws that were too big for his body, a little pink heart-shaped nose and a shiny, soft top coat of white fur with black spots placed around his body. He was perfect.

“I’m a little surprised that she acted that way. I thought she was more over it, but at least it is over and now we have the sweetest little guy,” Jesse said reaching over and petting the top of the puppy’s head.

“Yeah! I know. I tried to be nice, but she was not here for it at all. You’re right, it’s over now, and we have him.”

We spent the whole car ride back discussing all the logistics of having a puppy. Jesse wanted to wait to get all the things she needed until she actually had him, including naming him.

“Do you have any name ideas?” I asked.

“I have a few, but I haven’t fully decided on one yet. By the end of the night I will

have my decision, so ask me again later.”

After two hours we pulled into the Walmart that was just down the street from Jesse’s apartment.

“Can you take dogs into Walmart?” I asked Jesse.

“I’m not too sure, but we are about to do it anyway,” Jesse said shrugging her shoulders. I carried the little guy in my arms as we walked through Walmart. We headed back to look at kennels first.

“I have literally no idea how big he is going to be, so I think I might just get the biggest one and hope for the best. What do you think?” Jesse asked me while she was intently studying each kennel.

“Sounds like a solid plan to me. Plus you would rather it be too big than too small.”

After picking out the kennel Jesse picked up some dog food from a very specific brand that she had already researched, making sure their food did not contain things like grain or raw-hide. We snagged a few toys, a leash, and picked out a tiny collar that was navy blue with little silver bones on it. No one really noticed I was holding the puppy until we got to the check out, but the lady just thought he was cute and didn’t seem to mind.

We got back to the apartment and brought all the new items inside, including our little guy. He seemed instantly comfortable in Jesse’s room. He was actively trying to chew all the toys we got him at once. He was so small, and so full of energy. Jesse and I both sat in the floor with him to play.

“I just love him so much already, it’s like he was meant for us,” Jesse said.

“I know, he’s perfect, but he still doesn’t have a name. Will you please tell me now? What have you decided?”

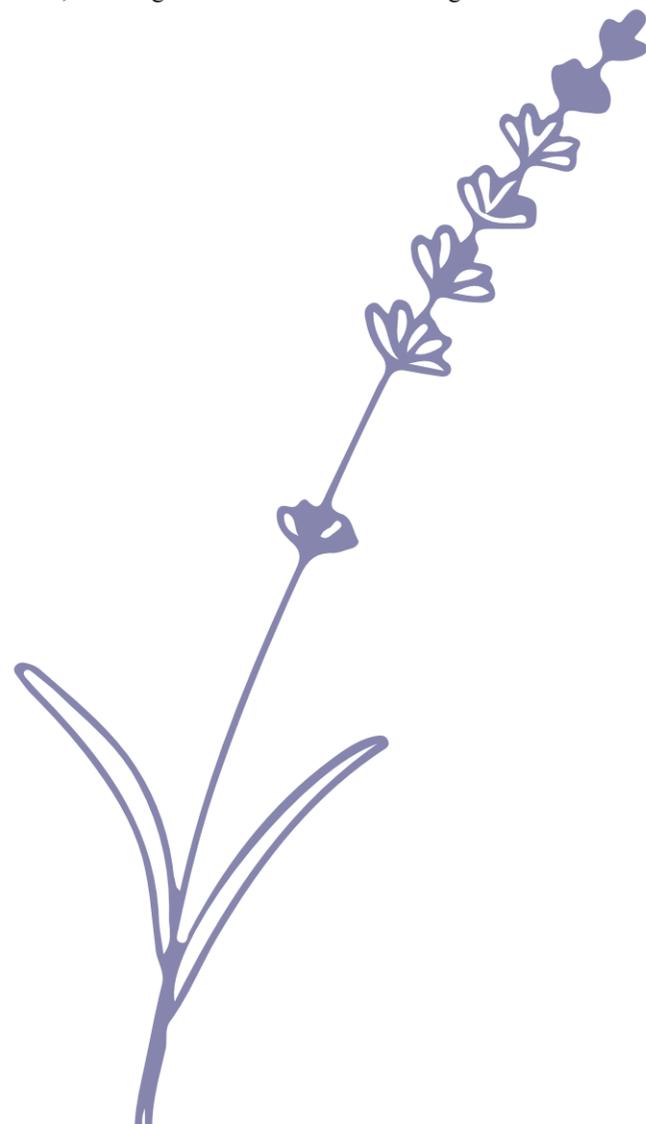
“Kash,” Jesse replied with a smile on her face, “His name is Kash.”

“I think it fits him perfectly.”

## Stained Glass

Bry Jones

Editor's Note: This story depicts themes of child abuse, child abandonment, and drug use. Take care when reading.



Alice wondered if her mother could tell that she was staring at the stained-glass pane that depicted Mary with light bursting from behind her, instead of paying attention to the sermon. She doubted it—not once had she been caught in the seven years that Alice had been willfully ignoring the preaching. Sometimes she would vary and stare at the dusty, faux flower arrangement that hung a few feet over Pastor Oblick's head, and had been there unmoved since 1981 when she first came as an 8-year-old. But really, she would stare at anything she could to amuse herself with her own thoughts and avoid hearing him preach about homosexuals.

The thought caused her to break her prolonged eye contact with Mary's cold, glass eyes and she blinked moisture back into her own. He was speaking about the importance of tithing now and she sighed in relief, relaxing as much as she could in the South Carolina heat, returning her gaze to the Holy Mother. She found herself tracing the outline of her flowing hair on the back of her hand and allowed her mind to wander back to Pastor Oblick's sermon two weeks ago, when he had spent nearly half an hour shouting to God that he was sorry that the church had allowed the "sin of homosexuality" to become so pervasive. She hadn't been able to force herself to tune him out then; she had had a gnawing pit in the bottom of her stomach that refused to subside. She didn't know why—or maybe she did—but she desperately tried to push those thoughts away, pushing them back into that gnawing pit that was becoming too hard to ignore.

"Momma, can I go to the creek?" Alice was staring at it out of the window in the kitchen, her hands pruning in the dishwater from Sunday lunch dishes. She knew her mom would say yes, so she was out the door before she even answered, running through the fence behind their suburb.

There was a well-trodden path that led to the copse of trees hiding the little body of water, and Alice jogged around the curve that hid her house from view. She had only ever seen other people there a handful of times and liked to imagine that it was her own personal haven, away from her mother, the crosses on the wall, and Mary's piercing, knowing eyes.

But today there was a girl.

Alice slid to a stop in the mud by the line of the trees and gawked awkwardly. There was a small pile of clothes closer to the water and the girl was wading thigh-deep in the creek. Her long, bleached hair covered her back and reached the top of her bikini bottoms-or was that underwear? As the stranger turned at the disturbance, Alice saw that she was only wearing a bra.

They stared at each other for a long moment over the waves of tall, marshy grass. Alice's mouth felt dry.

"Damn, you must like what you see!" The girl's high, lilting voice floated through the humid air and stuck to her skin. Alice knew that she had stared too long, and she opened her mouth to try and mediate the damages.

"S—sorry, there's usually not any people here, I—"

“Don’t shy away from it now—so what if you like how my body looks?” The stranger interrupted her with a laugh, and Alice swallowed hard.

“I...” Alice was confused, her thoughts crashing together like the water sloshing around the stranger’s pale hips. She wished more than anything that she could pull her gaze away from the soft stomach that just barely hung over the top of her underwear, but she was powerless over her own actions.

“It’s normal, don’t let anyone tell you any different. Stonewall was 20 years ago, the fucking stigma around it is completely unwarranted at this point.” She said it casually and Alice was too stunned at her cursing to say that she had no idea what Stonewall was.

“Danny!” A deep voice shocked the silence around them, coming from behind the trees, and both of them turned towards the noise.

“Duty calls.” The girl, Danny, grinned at Alice, putting two fingers together and making a mocking salute. Danny hurried from the water and scooped up her clothes, disappearing down the path before Alice could say another word.

Alice spent the rest of her afternoon in a daze. She mulled over what the girl had said, mulled over what Pastor Oblick had said two weeks ago, and mulled over the way Danny’s hair had brushed her as she passed. When she collapsed into bed later that night, she was surprised to find that the image of Danny’s body was burned into the back of her eyelids. She drifted into a restless sleep and dreamt of the creek water kissing their skin.

Alice’s body woke her up at 7:30, and she laid there for a few drowsy minutes before dragging herself to the kitchen. Her mother was shuffling around the kitchen humming hymns, and Alice leaned against the counter, crossing her arms.

“Why are you up? It’s summer break.” She poured both of them a coffee and handed one to Alice.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, what are ya planning to do today? Hang out with friends?” Alice resisted the urge to laugh at her mother’s question. They both knew she didn’t have any of those.

“No.” She felt bad for being so short and when her mom didn’t respond, she sighed.

“Might write Dad a letter.”

Her mother was turned towards the microwave, but Alice saw her stiffen. She wished she had anything else to talk about but writing to her dad was really the only thing she had on the schedule for the day.

“Well, I’m going to the service tonight. If you walk into town at all today, you should come.” She watched her mom zip her lunch-bag and didn’t reply to her suggestion. They also both knew that Alice wouldn’t go to the Wednesday night service. Once her mother left for work, she dozed on the couch, intermittently playing video games between naps and reruns of

*Days of Our Lives*. By eleven, she had finally worked up an appetite and padded back to the kitchen to sloppily prepare a bowl of cereal.

She stood by the sink while she ate her “breakfast” and had only finished half of her Frosted Flakes when something outside the window caught her attention. She was surprised to discover that it was Danny tearing through the field behind the small house across from hers, the one that had been on sale for at least three years now. She hadn’t noticed that it had sold but it did explain where Danny had come from and how Danny had seen the creek. Alice had broken into the house last year and found that the back window had an amazing view of her little paradise, one that no other house in the neighborhood had.

As she watched Danny reach the path, she noticed that she was already tugging her dress off. Alice didn’t think about it—she slammed her half-eaten bowl of cereal on the counter and was out the door and halfway to the creek before she halted. She was scared—scared of Danny’s words, her body, her confidence. But she couldn’t resist her wild laugh, feeling as though it was literally pulling her forward, drifting back through the trees and encompassing all of her senses. She swallowed her fears and approached the bank.

Danny turned at the sound of a stick breaking beneath her bare feet.

“Ah, so you’re back for more?” She joked and motioned to her almost naked body. Alice ignored this.

“What were you talking about on Sunday, the whole being normal and Brickwall?” It was all she could do to get the words out without stuttering. She winced at Danny’s sudden laugh, feeling like she’d done something wrong.

“You mean Stonewall?” Danny asked. Alice felt heat creep into her freckled cheeks at her mistake. “Well—hey, what’s your name?” Danny interrupted herself.

“Alice.”

“I’m Danny.”

*I know*, Alice thought, *It’s all I could think of for the last three days.*

“Anyways, I’m talking about gay people. You are gay, right?” Alice felt the familiar pit in her stomach at Danny’s question, and it threatened to make her sick.

“No!” She knew the term—knew its connotations—and yet, she hadn’t yet considered the title for herself.

“Well, I was already undressed, and you were still undressing me with your eyes so...”

Danny shrugged, as if it were obvious.

Alice bent over and vomited.

She felt a wet hand on her shoulder, and she glanced up, meeting dark brown eyes that she knew would rip down any walls she might have.

“It’s alright if you are, you know. My uncle is, so my parents are all for it.”

“But it’s—I thought that it was wrong.” Alice struggled to get the words out. Danny rolled her eyes.

“Yeah? Who told you that? The Bible thumpers who’ve never once left this town?” Danny sashayed away as she spoke, stopping by her bag and pulling out a cigarette. Alice didn’t know what to say, so she watched Danny until she had lit the thing and taken a few drags. When she finally did reply, her voice was timid and unsure.

“My mother tells me it’s wrong. So does Father Oblick.”

“Do you think it is?”

“I don’t know.” Alice said. Danny smiled now, but it looked pained.

“Love can’t be wrong. That’s what my parents say.” It was the first time Alice had ever heard it called love. “Alice?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think women are attractive? Do you want to kiss them?” She threw the butt of her cigarette into the grass and stepped closer. Alice shuddered, despite the heat. The thought made her want to throw up again.

“I don’t know.” She repeated.

“I guess there’s only one way to tell.” She leaned forward, her hair making a shield around them, and softly pressed her lips to Alice’s. Her whole body electrified at the touch. It was her first kiss ever, but somehow, she knew it wouldn’t feel the same if it were a boy on the other end. She would have stood there forever, cocooned in Danny’s hair and lips, but the girl pulled away, winking again. She left of her own volition this time and Alice stayed still, the hot wind playing in her hair. She brought her fingertips to her lips and closed her eyes, imagining that Danny was still there. She didn’t feel the pit now—she felt whatever the opposite of a pit was—and she floated home to search for a forgotten diary so that she could document the experience. It wasn’t until her mother returned home from work that reality set in, and she felt the familiar guilt chipping away at her euphoria.

Alice met Danny at the creek every morning for the rest of the week. She loved to talk, and Alice loved to listen. Sometimes, she would tell her about different advocates who began the fight for equality. She talked a lot about President Reagan and how much she despised him, and a lot about how she hated her dad after he came back from Vietnam.

At church the following Sunday, Alice glanced down at her watch so many times that her mother pinched her side.

“Pay attention,” she hissed. Alice stopped, looking at her watch, and fixated on the flower arrangement which hung over the stage of the church, letting her thoughts wander to Danny.

“Alice, get up!” Her mother pulled her to her feet, breaking her out of her trance, and she realized with great relief that the sermon was over. When they stepped into the sunshine, Alice was brought to a stop by a firm hand on her shoulder.

“Momma?” she asked, confused.

“What are you so distracted ‘bout? You’ve been like this plum near all week!” She spoke in a heated whisper and Alice shrugged her arm out of her tight grip.

“It’s nothing! I’ve just been...swimming a lot, so I’m tired.”

“You already don’t go to Sunday night and Wednesday service! Is it really too much to ask that you devote a little of your attention to our Lord and Savior when you are in His house?” her mother cried. Alice blushed as people streamed around them, parting like the Red Sea to eavesdrop on her scolding.

“I’m sorry, Momma.” The words felt like bile trickling out of her mouth, and she wanted to shout back, to say that she wished she never had to go back to that damn church anyways. Her mother’s countenance changed in a breath and she drew herself up to her full height, still only reaching Alice’s shoulder.

“This is your daddy’s fault, ain’t it? What’s he been saying in those letters? Do I need to start readin’ ‘em first again?” Alice felt frustration well in her chest, and she resisted the urge to stomp her foot like a toddler.

“No! You stay out of my room and out of my things! Daddy doesn’t say anything to me about church and honestly, I prefer it that way! Is it really so hard to believe that I could have made up my own mind about it, that I could have seen through all of the bullshit the same way he did—” The word slipped out before she could stop it and her mother paled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Pastor and his wife both turn just as they began to get in their car. She blushed harder and lowered her head.

“Get in the car, Alice.” Her mother’s voice was frigid.

“No, Momma. I wanna walk.” She couldn’t believe the words even as she said them.

“What in heaven’s name is goin’ on with you, child?” Her mother was on the verge of tears now and Alice just shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, slowly beginning to back away. “Nothing’s going on, Momma. I just want to walk.” She turned before her mother could respond and broke into a run, hiking up her long skirt to reveal her skinny legs and booted feet that kicked up the dirt around her as she disappeared from her mother’s view.

She cut through the woods that separated their suburb from the town and felt relief in her gut when she finally reached the little path that led to the creek. She hoped that Danny was there and knew that even if she weren’t now, she would be soon. Her excitement was cut short at the sound of multiple voices coming from beyond what she could see. She peeked around the last tree and saw Danny and five or six other people swimming in the creek. She felt tears well in her throat and thought about going home, but she was more scared of her mother than of these people. She swallowed hard and entered the clearing.

“Alice!” Danny’s voice sounded different, but she still forced a smile. All of the older

teens piled onto the shore and crowded Alice, reminding her of ants flocking to new crumbs. “Hey, girl. These are some people I met at the bowling alley...” Danny proceeded to introduce the three guys and two girls whose names Alice promptly forgot. They all smelled peculiar, like when a skunk would spray in the woods around them and she wrinkled her nose. Alice felt somewhat bitter at the fact that she had been going to school here for seven years and didn’t have one friend to show for it, yet Danny could just appear in the middle of summer and have more friends than one person could even need. She wanted them to leave so that she could yell at Danny for betraying her and for ruining the purity of the creek with these people, even though she knew she had no right to be upset.

“Cute skirt.” Her internal complaints were interrupted by one of the girls and she forced another smile.

“Thanks. My mom made it.” They all giggled at this and her cheeks burned once more. Now, she thought about what she looked like. She had thrown on a stained blue T-shirt and a long gray skirt, not even bothering to mess with her shoulder-length, tangled, brown hair. She was breaking out across her cheeks, although she doubted that they could tell with all her freckles. She wanted to retreat, to run away and never have to see these people again, but she didn’t. She couldn’t.

“Come on, I have another rolled.” She followed the group to a blanket that they had set down and sat with Danny, who was chatting endlessly. Alice didn’t mind—she was content to listen and stare. Danny hadn’t mentioned their kiss at all and had taken to treating her with the indifference of an older classmate. She was seventeen and Alice, at fifteen, wondered if the bridge between them was due to the age gap or just due to her own ignorance about, well, everything. One of the guys grabbed his backpack and pulled out a fully white cigarette.

“Alice, have you ever smoked?” She was confused at the question, because Danny herself had let her take a few hits of her cigarettes, and she knew Alice hated the smoke.

“Yes, but if I go home smelling like cigs, I’ll be in so much trouble.” They all laughed again, and she clenched her fists.

“No, have you ever smoked weed?” Danny scoffed. Alice frowned.

“No.”

“This joint is pretty strong stuff, might not wanna knock her on her ass like that.” The guy who had produced the joint spoke up now and she opened her mouth in protest.

“Yea, you’re right.” Danny replied, taking it from his hand and using her lighter to spark the end. Alice wanted to hold her hand out and demand it but part of her knew they were right. She wasn’t ready. Despite this, she hated feeling like a kid. She leaned on her hands and focused on the water instead.

“Will you go to the high school here?” Alice asked Danny after a lull in the conversation, suddenly thinking of the question.

“No, I graduated early. I’m starting at the community college in the fall.” She took a drag of the joint and blew it in Alice’s face. She coughed a few times, causing another roar of laughter.

“I wish you were, so we could go to school together.” Alice said once she had stopped coughing. Danny frowned at this.

“Why? It would be so lame. High school in the middle of nowhere? Fuck that.” Alice clammed up the way she did whenever Danny talked so condescendingly. She knew it wasn’t directed at her, but it still hurt her feelings. They all murmured in agreement and she looked away.

She returned to her house at nightfall, expecting her mom to have fallen asleep on the couch. She hadn’t, and Alice tiptoed into the hallway, assuming that she had just gone to bed. Her door, at the end of the unlit hallway, had been closed when she left and now it stood open, the light pouring into the darkness. She knew something was wrong before she even reached the threshold, and she entered to find her mother standing at her window, turned away from her. Her body was convulsing with sobs and Alice scanned the room, panic flaring in her chest as she saw letters from her father torn and strewn across the bed. The pillow in which she kept her diary was on the floor and the pillowcase that had been on it was at her feet, soaked in tears. Alice wanted to run, but she forced her legs forward and set a trembling hand on her shoulder.

“Momma?”

“Don’t touch me, you queer!” She reacted violently, throwing the diary into Alice’s face. It collided into her cheekbone and she yelped. She could barely take a breath before her mother slapped her right where the book had moments earlier and continued her assault.

“Momma—Momma, please!” Alice fell from the force and curled into a ball. Her mother’s foot found her soft belly a few times and she cried out.

“Get out of my house! I won’t have a faggot living under my roof! Get out! Get out! You’re gonna burn, you’re gonna burn with all the other faggots!” She tried to pull herself to her feet to leave and her mother’s fists descended on her back, knocking her back down onto her sore ribs. She began to crawl away, but her mother grabbed a fistful of her hair, dragging her down the hallway and to the door. Alice screamed the whole way, clawing at the skin on her mother’s arms. To this, her mother responded by leaning down and slamming her face into the ground. She opened the door and yanked her damaged body over the threshold, pushing her down the stairs.

“Momma? Wait!” She pulled her pounding head up to watch as her mother slammed the door without a second glance, and Alice laid down in the mud to cry.

Later, she knocked on Danny's door twice, knowing she looked ragged, what with the dirt and blood on her Sunday dress and her face and her tear-streaked cheeks. She was thankful that it was Danny who answered, and she couldn't help herself when she saw genuine concern flash through the older girl's eyes. She was also glad that Danny didn't ask any questions and instead stretched out her arms, into which she collapsed and cried for her mother. And she cried for her old life that, even though only 30 feet away, was now forever out of her reach.

Alice awoke with raw eyes and was momentarily confused at waking up on a strange couch, but in an instant the memories from yesterday and the injuries that she had endured began to throb. Danny stood in the kitchen, speaking in low tones to her parents. Alice was wearing some of her pajamas and she took a second to inhale the scent of her shirt before pulling herself to her feet and sheepishly moving to the next room.

"Hey, honey. How are you feeling?" Danny's mother had a kind smile that Danny shared, and Alice instantly felt more comfortable. Her dad was clearly a strict military man but even he looked sympathetic.

"Um, better." It was all she could manage. A small boy ran into the room, already dressed for the day.

"Time to go!" he shouted. Everyone in the room smiled and her dad grabbed his wallet and keys.

"You're welcome here as long as you need," he gruffly mumbled and Alice mustered a smile.

"Thank you, sir." Her mother fussed over the pair for a moment once Danny's dad and brother had left, cleaning Alice's cuts again and re-bandaging her. She kissed Danny's forehead and then hurried out the door, leaving them alone.

"What will you do?" Danny asked as she prepared them each French toast.

"Go live with my dad."

"Yeah? And he won't have a problem with it?" Alice shook her head in response.

"No. He's an 'atheist hippie,' in my mom's words." Danny chuckled at this.

"A man after my own heart," she joked.

"He left my mom when I was five; he lives in Tennessee. Sometimes he sends me letters." Alice was thinking about the last time she'd seen him as a seven-year-old when suddenly, she had a jarring thought. "Oh no!"

"What?!" Danny demanded, alarmed. Alice stood from her seat at the table.

"I'll have to leave you." Alice was on the verge of tears again, and Danny furrowed her eyebrows.

"That's...that's ok, Alice. We've only known each other a week."

"How can you say that? I—I love you." The confession sat between them and Danny

swallowed. They stood toe to toe and Alice took a deep breath before leaning forward and kissing the shorter girl. She expected the same spark she'd felt the first day they kissed, but instead it felt cold, like she was kissing a corpse.

Danny grimaced.

"Alice, I think you're so sweet but...I..."

"But you kissed me!" Alice felt panic well in the back of her throat.

"Yeah, as a joke!" She winced at the look on Alice's face. "Obviously, if I had known it would affect you, I wouldn't have."

"I wouldn't even be in this situation if it wasn't for you!" Alice screamed. She felt like being hateful, and Danny sighed sadly, looking away.

"I think you should leave, Alice. Go be with your dad. I'll just hurt you more if you stay. I'll give you a few outfits to wear and the money for the bus fare." She disappeared into her room, coming back after a few minutes with a small blue bag and 50 dollars in cash and handed both to Alice. Alice was shaking in anger and hurt, and she couldn't even look at the other girl as they made their way to Danny's rundown truck. Silently, Danny drove her to the bus stop for the 11:30 to Nashville. At 11:28, they sat in the car watching the other passengers board the bus.

"I'm sorry, Alice. But now you get to go meet a girl who deserves you," Danny whispered as she leaned over and kissed Alice's forehead gently. Alice got out and forced herself not to look back.

"Baby, do you wanna try to go inside?" Alice turned from her place in the middle of the brown spot that used to be the creek. She could see the stumps from the trees that used to protect her haven and she silently mourned their lives. Most of the houses in her old neighborhood had been demolished now, including Danny's.

"No." She answered Clara after a moment and walked closer to the fence where she was standing. Clara Kent was her partner of eleven years and she had a proud baby bump in one hand and the hand of their oldest son in the other. Twenty years had passed since Alice had graced the town, and in that time, she had tried to reach out to Danny so that she could apologize to her for how they parted. She had never been able to reach her.

"Are you sure? It's your childhood home." Clara rubbed her shoulder and Alice sighed.

"I can't look down that hallway again." Alice said. Clara knew better than to push it. Ben held out his chubby toddler hands and Alice scooped him up, kissing his cheek to hide her bleary eyes. They slowly walked back to their car and after clipping him into his seat, she stood up and glanced back at her mother's old house. The FOR SALE sign in the front made it look foreign, and she wondered whether or not she truly remembered the inside at all or if time and grief had changed it into something darker in her mind.

She didn't want to find out.

She climbed into the driver's seat and took Clara's hand across the console, squeezing hard enough to stop the shaking of her fingers. The drive to the church felt shorter than when she was younger, and she didn't feel prepared when they pulled up. Clara pulled Ben out of his seat, expecting Alice to be behind her. When she realized she wasn't, she leaned back into the car. Alice stared straight ahead, rubbing her sweaty palms on the legs of her slacks.

"Alice?"

"I can't."

"You can." The two simple words calmed Alice's nerves, and she smiled at her.

"I love you."

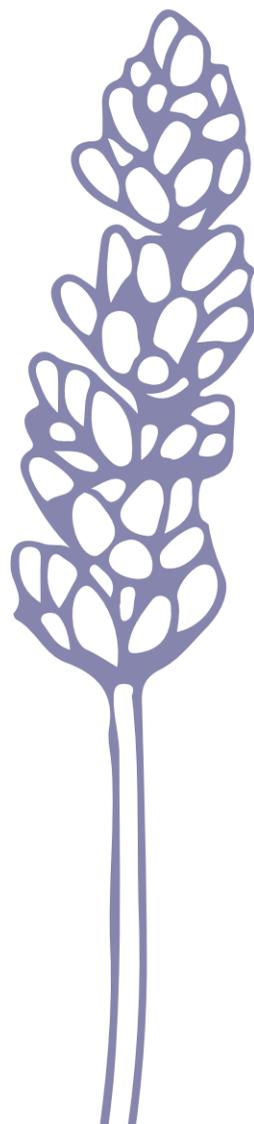
"I love you."

"I wuv you!" Ben chirped in his baby accent, reaching for Alice like he always did. She fixed the jacket of her suit and placed him on her hip, taking Clara's hand as they entered the church. A hush fell over the gathering of people and she met Pastor Oblick's gaze, noting how old and defeated he looked. He had seen too much of his congregation pass away and he was tired. To Alice's surprise, he smiled at the pair, just happy to see a familiar face. The large picture of her mother that was surrounded by flowers stared at her during the memorial service, and Alice instead met the everlasting gaze of the Holy Mother for the last time. Alice didn't recall that she had been smiling when she was a girl, but now, there was a kindness in her face that was unmistakable.

## Thirsty Thursdays

Olivia Ross

Editor's Note: This story depicts themes of depression.  
Take care when reading.



Her hair draped messily across her pillowcase that, by the texture of it, hadn't been washed in weeks. Staring at the ceiling, she heard a knock. Glancing over to the door and watching the knob slowly turn, she watched her roommate Hannah enter the room.

Hannah scanned the area, taking note of the empty cups and bowls scattered around—spoons caked with dried food and glasses parched. Not a drop of water in sight.

“We’re going out tonight,” Hannah said, “I know everyone misses having you at Thirsty Thursday. It isn’t the same without you, you know?” She pulled at her sleeves and gave a soft grin.

“Maybe next week. I think I’m just going to stay in and work on some homework,” Vivian replied apologetically, obviously lying.

Hannah nodded her head and pursed her lips. She’d heard it before. She closed the door. Keys rattled around as Vivian heard Hannah step out and lock the deadbolt—just like last week. Five Thursdays in a row. Five Thursdays that Vivian supposedly had more pressing matters than enjoying her last semester of college with her friends.

Vivian rolled over, tugging the sheets closer to her body. Her lungs seemed to be failing her as she found it difficult to breathe. Her attention soon shifted as she heard the deadbolt being fiddled with once more.

Hannah barged into the room—this time without warning.

“It’s our last semester too, you know? We want to have fun too. It’s hard to enjoy a round of shots when everyone is constantly questioning where you’ve been and what’s wrong with you. It’s hard. On all of us. You don’t let us in so we will never know what’s wrong with you or how to help. It’s selfish.”

Vivian continued to stare blankly into the distance—like peering into a never-ending void. Her eyes began to fill with pools of self-hate. Hannah’s voice sounded shaky. She was never one for confrontation.

Most Thursdays went to plan. Hannah would ask Vivian to go out with her and their friend Amelia. Vivian would decline. Hannah would come home hours later with a new love interest or inevitable sickness. Vivian would deal with the aftermath. The crying, the vomit, the overall cleanup. It all went to plan.

Hannah picked at the frayed edge of her sleeve.

“I just don’t understand. You won’t talk to me. It all feels pointless. Trying to be there for you seems pointless. What are you keeping from us?” Hannah said.

The room felt heavy. The air was thick and hard to inhale.

Vivian let out a deep breath and sat up slowly. A single tear fell from her cheek to the bedsheets. She stared longingly at her friend. Like she held a secret so delicate it could alter time. Unable to muster up any other words, Vivian let out a breathy statement.

“I can’t talk about it yet. I’m sorry.”

Hannah bit her cheek. She looked at her friend top to bottom then shut the door and left.

The deadbolt once again locked, and Hannah once again left.

Alone. Staring into some void of nothingness. Jaw clenched and palms clammy, she returned to her prior state. She reached for the sheets again. This time pulling them over her head to drown her cries in the soft cotton.

Five Thursdays in a row.

Vivian had no interest in telling her friends, as she really had no interest in admitting anything to herself. Years and years of pushing away the thought, until now she tried to come to terms with it. She wasn't boy crazy like them. She wasn't interested in the casual flirting at the bars. She wasn't fascinated by the long talks about men's physique. She wasn't into boys. And she hadn't yet found out how to deal with it, let alone tell her friends.

Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" wailed as excited, drunken young adults sang the lyrics off key and incorrectly. Smoke circled Hannah's glass, making her whiskey look like the site of a manhole.

"So, what's the excuse tonight," Amelia said, taking a seat next to Hannah.

"Homework, apparently," Hannah said, gripping her drink tighter, staring at her chipped manicure.

Amelia grimaced, clearly lacking any form of sympathy.

"It's the last semester. Who the hell cares about homework still? Jesus, I need a drink," Amelia replied as she pushed her chair away from the wooden table.

She worked her way to the bar, waving at a couple sitting down the way then getting distracted by the tall new bus boy. Forgetting about the drink she so badly wanted, she went in for a conversation that would most likely end with an Uber back to her place. She was good at that. The bar was her homeland.

Vivian, Hannah, and Amelia had known each other since the 5th grade. All living in the same cove, they became inseparable. First dates, driver's tests, college acceptance, that long night in Miami that they took shrooms from a stranger at Lost Boy Lounge. Inseparable. The trio started as a group up for anything. No dare was turned down and no truth left unsaid. Junior year of college, the three moved out of the dorms and on their own. Amelia went to live with a random guy she found on Facebook Marketplace. They had a thing until he got tired of Amelia's habit of bringing strange men home from the bars. Amelia started doing her own thing, leaving Hannah and Vivian to get closer. Hannah and Vivian signed a lease about 10 minutes from campus. All was well and normal in the world until about 2 months ago. Vivian kept her door closed, turned down any opportunity to go out, and simply seemed miserable. Attempts made by her friends were nothing but annoying. Vivian seemed to be holding onto something heavy but didn't want any help letting it go.

"This is Kenny, he's an engineering major, part-time bus boy," Amelia said, holding onto

Kenny's forearm and giving a wink to Hannah.

Kenny smiled then quickly went back to conversation with Amelia, trying his best to only peek at her breasts every 20 seconds.

American Spirits and watery house shots lined most tables. The burnt orange glow of the tacky chandeliers lit Hannah's face a nice, warm color. Hannah clutched her whiskey, picking at her cuticles.

"I've gotta go talk to her. Whisk-annah isn't making an appearance tonight, not with this baggage," Hannah let out a small laugh, blowing just a bit of air from her nostrils.

"I'll text you, Amelia. Nice to meet you Kenny," Hannah said.

Amelia gave a long "boo" to signal her disapproval of Hannah's leaving, then went right back to rubbing Kenny's arm and giggling like a ditz.

Vivian perked up in her bed as she heard the rattle of Hannah's keys in the front door. Letting out a sigh, Vivian knew she was in for her typical routine of meeting Hannah's random hookup or cleaning up some mixture of Jack Daniels and chicken tenders. She looked around her room, disgusted with its state. There was still a path from the door to her bed, so she deemed it fine enough for now. Remembering her lie about staying in to do homework, Vivian searched for her laptop to make it seem like she had been busy.

Vivian's phone lit up. A text from Hannah asked if they could talk in the living room. Vivian complied, trying to make herself look awake enough to pass for doing a couple hours of homework rather than sleeping.

Hannah sat on the couch real intervention-like—her legs crossed, and her hands folded in her lap. Vivian immediately regretted her decision of leaving her room but took a seat.

"Hey," Hannah said with a breathy, sober enough voice. "I'm sorry, but we're all worried about you. I want to help. We can all see something is going on." Hannah locked eyes with Vivian. "I thought we told each other everything," she said.

Vivian bit her cheek and shifted her eyes, glancing from sock to sock.

"Just stress. Lots of decisions coming up after graduation, ya know," Vivian said trying to appear relatable.

"I know you. Just stress doesn't do this to you. If something is going on, I want you to be able to trust me with it," Hannah said.

The pools of self-hate filled in Vivian's eyes once again. Drawing a deep breath from her core and releasing it with tears, Vivian sat and cried. Choking a bit on the words she wanted to say—that she had feared saying for a while now to her friends and to herself.

"I...I'm." Vivian shook her head, closing her eyes in an attempt to push the tears back in. "Hannah, I'm gay."

Hannah sat shocked, a small smirk on her face. She seemed relieved.

Waiting a moment, the statement hung in the air.

“That’s it? Viv, oh my gosh thank you for telling me. I’m so happy you are finding yourself. But that’s it?” Hannah went in for a hug, letting out a laugh as Vivian continued to cry. “You’ve cooped yourself up for months over this? Why didn’t you talk to me or Amelia?” Hannah said.

Continuing to cry and confused by Hannah’s short bursts of laughter, Vivian reciprocated the hug.

“I couldn’t tell you two--the most boy-crazy, hypersexual people I’ve ever met? I feel out of place. I don’t feel normal in this group anymore. I don’t feel normal to me anymore,” Vivian said, struggling to explain herself.

Hannah grabbed Vivian’s arms. “Viv, you know us. You know we love you and don’t care what the hell you’re doing with your love life. Hell, I wish I didn’t know what Amelia was doing with hers. That girl’s a wreck. I’d judge her flavor of the week more than I’d ever judge you liking girls,” Hannah said.

Still struggling with the truth she had revealed, Vivian situated herself on the couch. She massaged her palms with her thumb, then let out a laugh.

“I’m tired of hearing about the size of y’all’s men. It’s gross.” Vivian laughed. “I see that shit in my nightmares, dude.”

The two shared a laugh under the cool tones of the light overhead. Vivian wiped away tears and sighed, the corners of her mouth turning upward.

“Thank you for telling me,” Hannah said.

Vivian nodded a bit and recomposed herself. She finally understood the cliché of a weight being lifted off someone’s shoulders.

“You’re gonna have to deal with me and Amelia talking about sizes though. It’s bonding. You can tell me all about the glorious tits you see, or whatever it is you’re into,” Hannah joked.

“Shut up. Don’t be weird,” Vivian said, feeling validated and excited for the annoying road ahead with her two straighter than imaginable best friends.

“The room has gotta be cleaned though. I’m not taking anymore sad Viv around the house. Women like a put together lady, right?” Hannah continued with the dumb jokes. She was trying, that was all that mattered to Vivian. “I can tell Amelia if you want, make things a little easier?”

Vivian nodded her head and gave a slight smile. The burden of her secret lifted, leaving room for Vivian to work on herself—her true self.

Four glasses were lifted into the air as “Sweet Caroline” played in the background.

“To the gays,” Amelia said with a drunken, hearty stupor.

Vivian rolled her eyes and laughed.

“We’ll work on it,” Vivian said.

“And to our lady’s new lady, Ava,” Hannah added, smiling toward Vivian.

“To the gays and Ava.” Vivian rolled her eyes and tossed the shot of whiskey back. It burned her throat on its way down. First shot in a while.

“I don’t think I mind cheering to the gays.” Ava laughed, leaning in closely to Vivian as the music played too loudly for a normal volume conversation. Ava put her hand on Vivian’s thigh.

Vivian met Ava online a few weeks after coming out to her friends. She was relieved at how easy talking to girls came. The silly mistakes and awkwardness she seemed to always have with men did not translate over to women. Vivian and Ava were effortless. Spending time together quite often, the two felt comfortable enough to go public.

“Alright, lovebirds. I’m out, Kenny is looking damn good in that apron,” Amelia said, rubbing her hands together. “I’ve got something he can bus.”

“Jesus, Amelia, go,” the group said in disgust, watching Amelia turn on the charm and walk up to Kenny.

“Wanna go dance?” Ava asked Vivian, standing up and holding her hand out.

Vivian looked to Hannah, who sat enjoying the scene around her. Hannah smiled and added in, “Yeah, go dance with the lady.”

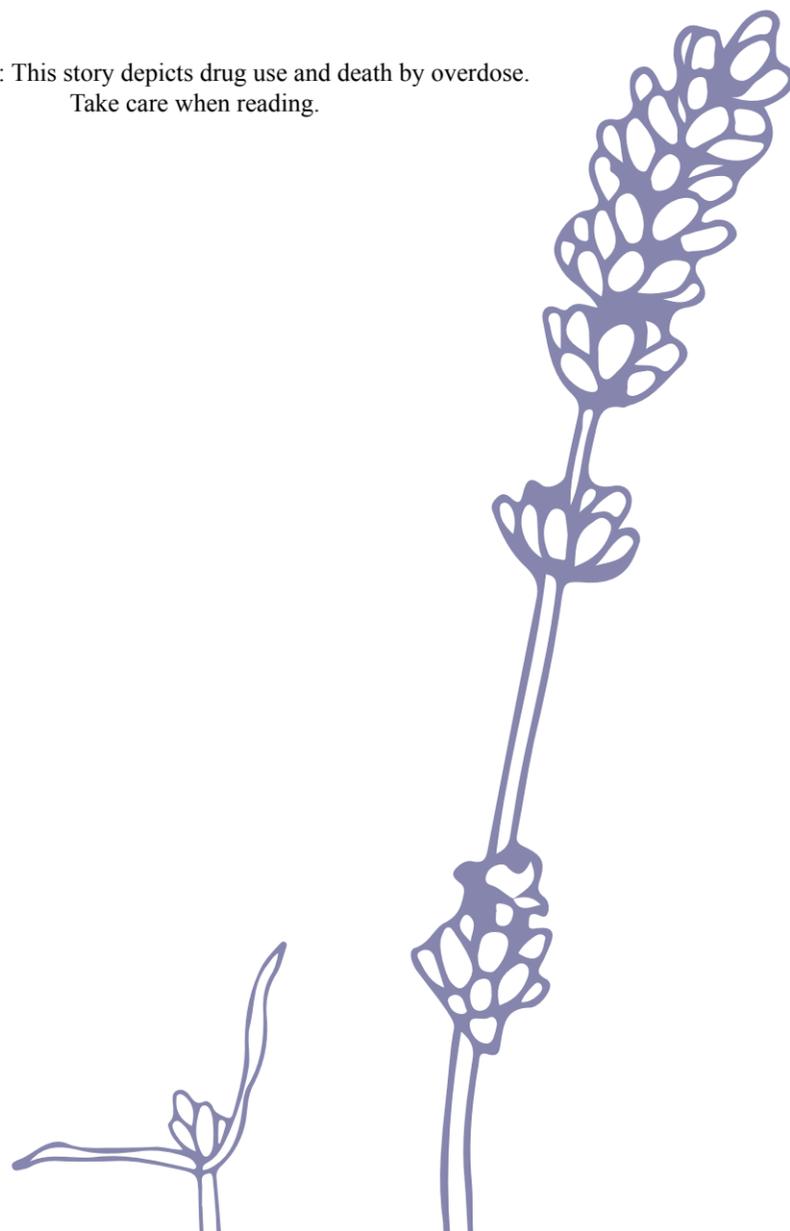
Ava cast her invisible fishing pole and reeled Vivian out to the dance floor. Vivian made her way to Ava, lacking any sort of rhythm.

The smoky atmosphere and the warm, tacky chandeliers set the perfect scene to fall in love. Hannah sat and watched, proud of the true self Vivian was allowing herself to finally be.

*Ian*

Alicia Gladman

Editor's Note: This story depicts drug use and death by overdose.  
Take care when reading.



If Ian hadn't moved to Salmon Arm, he would have died three years earlier. He would never have raised chickens, would never have hung his photographs in the Rift Gallery, never learned how to use a chainsaw, wouldn't have broken Nick's heart in the slow, erosive way that he did. Instead, the heartbreak would have been a clear cut, sudden and absolute, and Nick would have been left in their house, held hostage by Ian's absence. He would have had to find a new roommate, someone to fill a room that smelled of Ian. He would have had to look at Ian's photographs, pack up his things and decide what to keep and what to throw away, a forced betrayal. There was not room for three people in that small home, even if one of them was nothing but memory.

Instead, when Ian died, he was alone, although the chickens were in the yard out front. Ian's next door neighbor, coming home from a bartending shift at the legion, noticed that they had not been returned to their coop, and after a moment of hesitation, knocked on his door. He did not want the coyotes to pick off the birds in the night. When Ian didn't answer, the neighbor tried to usher the chickens to the coop around the side of the house, and in doing so, saw Ian through the window, slumped on his kitchen floor.

Ian had tried to quit for the last time, six months before moving to Salmon Arm. After three days of shitting his brains out in detox, the counsellor cajoled him into spending a month at a recovery house, where he was driven and left. The man who opened the door demanded his welfare check and phone without missing a beat. Ian, unwilling to give the man the satisfaction of his sobriety, backed up to the front door, pulled out his camera, and took the house manager's picture. In it, a man in Valentino shoes stood below a crucifix, eyebrows up, waiting for 610 dollars from a dopesick fag. Ian walked out.

It was an hour and a half walk to the King George Skytrain station, and by evening, he was back downtown. He found morphine from a guy at the Ivanhoe, and took his time getting home, stepping slowly over the crooked, mossy sidewalk squares. Nick, who had been working a twelve-hour shift at the hospital, was surprised to come home to Ian, smoking on their front porch, a slow smile on his face. Without asking, he sat next to Ian and pulled his arm over his shoulder.

"You're a piece of shit," Nick said, reaching for Ian's cigarette. Ian kissed him on his cheekbone.

When Ian overdosed in their bathroom, he had two friends over. They were listening to music around the kitchen table. One of them, the one who had sold him the drugs, stood up suddenly from his seat when he realized how long it had been since Ian had disappeared. He drove the door open with his shoulder, big fingers fumbling with the vial of naloxone before sticking Ian through his jeans, Ian who was sitting on the toilet seat, head low, bodyweight slumping forward. When Nick came home from work that night, they were still there, watching Ian, who had tried again to get high after the naloxone jolted him back into withdrawal. He sent them home, and sat across from Ian at the table, rubbing his forehead.

Ian promised him that he would stop. Nick, who had managed to stop partying when he started nursing school, insisted that it was possible. For six months, Ian kept it out of the house, but the next time he overdosed, he was in their living room, and it was pouring rain outside, and it felt more dangerous to leave than to stay in.

For a while, Nick would bring pamphlets home from the hospital every other week, literature from a new recovery house or program that someone told him had worked for someone. Ian read them out loud, making fun of the language, always something about new life, as if he was Jesus. Nick, offended at the lack of effort but charmed by Ian's irreverence, would grab the pamphlet back and stuff it in a kitchen drawer, never the garbage. Eventually Ian took a picture of the drawer that wouldn't close for all the rehab spilling out of it. He hung the picture of it on the wall directly above.

After four years with Nick, doubled over by guilt at the constant protective lies he told, Ian had walked out. He could not read another pamphlet, could not talk to another well-intentioned counsellor, could not let Nick see how ugly it made him feel, to know he wouldn't stop, even in the face of his boyfriend's darkest fears. With every intention of getting on a bus going north, he had stopped at the Ivanhoe. Six weeks later he walked back through Nick's gate, exhausted, gaunt and broke, and fell asleep on the front porch. When Nick got home from the hospital, he brought Ian inside and let him sleep for two days. When he woke up, Nick drove him to the bus station, and bought him a ticket to Salmon Arm.

There was nothing in Salmon Arm, except that it was far enough away that Ian couldn't walk back. He knew one person there, a guy he had worked for one summer in his early twenties. The man, utilitarian and sympathetic, bought Ian a burger and gave him a job in his lumberyard, telling him that as long as he was on time for work, he could stay. The next day, Ian sent Nick a postcard. It read, "Sorry I'm a dick all the time." On it, he drew a penis with a sad face.

Ian found a place to live near the lumberyard, and walked the half mile to work every morning with his camera, taking pictures of the empty waterslides, the bare plywood billboards facing the road. Within days, he had secured a supply of Dilaudid from his coworker, a mercy after two nights of asking around the small city center for whatever he could find, resorting to quartering his shots for fear of what they contained. For forty dollars a day, the Dilaudid was pharmacy-made and reliable, and Ian felt unbound for the first time in years.

Nick came to visit him once, some months after he had moved, and they had cooked and fucked for the whole weekend. Ian took Nick's picture, as he scraped chicken shit off his shoes, eggs in each hand, staring at the camera with narrowed eyes. On Sunday afternoon, Nick asked Ian if he was clean, and Ian asked Nick if it mattered, and by the end of it they were yelling about all the money Ian had spent, but Ian knew, as soon as Nick left, that they had been fighting about why he had stayed away, if nothing had changed.

What Ian could not say to Nick was that it had, in some complicated way, changed. That

all of the small deceptions, the compulsions to protect this man he loved from his reality, to convince him to trust that he would survive, and be there when Nick got home from work, had worn him down, and without them he was himself in a way that he hadn't felt for many years.

Ian got the chickens on a whim one Friday. He had been waiting in his coworker's car, the one with the Dilaudid script. The prescriptions had been occasionally unreliable that spring, and Ian had tagged along with his coworker while he did what he could to get Ian's pills for the weekend. As he waited, he looked through a gate across the street and saw that they were selling chicks. Ian, enchanted at the thought of this rugged kind of self-sufficiency, ran across the street. His coworker returned with something that would tide Ian over until Monday, when the pills came through. Ian nodded distractedly, grinning into the cardboard box of birds on his lap,

His photographs went up in the Rift Gallery three months before he died. On the wall was a picture of Nick in Ian's back yard, wearing a flannel shirt and underwear and holding his arm up in front of his eyes, grinning. There was a picture of the Ivanhoe, bricks wet from the rain, a guy Ian knew from the neighbourhood peeing on the side of the building. There was a picture of the lumberyard, Ian's coworker flipping off the camera, blood pouring out from under his crushed fingernail. And there was a self-portrait in his front yard, Ian from the neck down, in boots and cutoff jean shorts, hip thrust to one side, holding a chicken under one arm.

## *The Way Things Go*

Jonah Stokes



Resting in his grandfather's cornfield, Amos knew that the next day the green stalks surrounding him would be harvested and subsequently sold the following week. It was the time of year when the midwestern wind turned to a brisk cold and Amos' denim jacket failed to block the coolness of the air. Amos shivered. Why was it that he loved to lie down in the loose soil which did nothing but stain his grandmother's jacket she had gifted to him before her death? Amos knew that his grandfather, Orville, would not notice the dirt, nor would he notice the hair beginning to grow on Amos' chin.

Amos thought about how he would walk inside from his solitude to find Orville sitting in his chair, stained with piss and moldy oatmeal as a John Wayne western played on the 1998 Sony Floor model television, which took up the entire wall in front of his living room. It was so large that everything on the screen looked like a Picasso painting. Amos would then walk to the kitchen and shuffle through Orville's mass array of medication: Donepezil, Vitamin C, Vitamin D, B-12, and Vioxx. He would then crush up the pills and hide them in Orville's oatmeal only for Orville to say he was not hungry or that he didn't know who Amos was.

He knew that Orville would ask, "who the fuck are you?" Amos would not respond with anything but would simply place the bowl of oatmeal in Orville's lap in the hopes that he would eventually put it in his mouth.

Yet, late at night, when Amos would put his grandfather to bed, he would walk into the living room, turn off the TV, and see the half-eaten dish next to the unopened newspaper from that morning. Amos would sigh and scoop the dish into the garbage.

How was it that Orville viewed him? Amos recalled watching a movie with a man with the same illness as his grandfather. In the film, the director had different actors playing the same role, showing how the old man could not recall who it was that was speaking. He wondered if Orville saw him this way; one day with blonde hair, a paler complexion, varying height?

That's just the way things go, Amos would tell himself, as Orville snored in the next room.

Amos would then go to the bathroom, haphazardly brush his teeth, and try to let sleep engulf him. It rarely worked. He would look up to the popcorn ceilings, turn around in the quilt his grandmother made, and make eye contact with the various dolls that his grandmother asked in her will for them to keep shortly after Amos' 18th birthday. Because each day, he would have to reintroduce himself to Orville, the cornfield calling out to him for company once again.

This kind of thing didn't only occur at his home, however. Once the in-home nurse arrived in the morning before Amos went to school, Amos had to go to school only for Mark or Anthony or Marge or Gretta to mock him when he spoke up in class. He knew that they would call him a faggot and air jerk themselves off in his direction.

"You want this big dick, Anus!"

"Hey, Anus, why don't you come over here and suck me off! You know you want to."

"You couldn't even take this dick if you wanted to..."

Amos tried not to let it get to him. He knew this kind of thing was normal. He guessed it was just the way things were supposed to go. If it got too bad, Amos would just excuse himself from the hallway or the classroom, sit in the stall in the boy's bathroom, and sigh instead of letting himself cry. Sometimes, even, he would pray to a god that he didn't believe in.

He would imagine a day that his grandmother was still alive, or before Orville was sick.

He would imagine the days when every kid at school had prepubescent voices, where his post-pubescent high-pitched squeal was yet to exist amongst a pool of masculine voices. This was only wishful thinking though. Amos knew that. He also knew that it was impossible for him to escape this small town. He couldn't leave Orville to fend for himself. He was all he had.

So was Amos' mind wandering as he clumped loose dirt into his palm, the wind rustling the cornstalks as a contrail cut through the pink, empty sky. He thought of the vast, infinite number of cells in each clump of dirt, from manure, tiny particles of microbes, or lost hope. It was the collection of cells which interested Amos: every green husk; every inch of fiber in each kernel of corn; every living cell in himself with subsequent organelles. Sometimes Amos would imagine himself falling deeper into the soil, disappearing from his grandfather and the kids who would make fun of his high-pitched voice the next day.

*I should head inside*, Amos told himself. He sat up, wiping dirt from his jacket sleeve, and made his way inside wondering which western Orville would be watching this time.

"You know I can't give you more than five bucks for a cob." Sue stared at Amos with aged blue eyes.

"Well, alright." Amos tried to ease a smile onto his face. "Give me what you got, Sue. It don't matter much."

"Do what?" Sue said in the way that old Hoosiers do when their hearing aids don't quite make out what the younger generation has to say.

"I said give me what you got. It don't matter too much now does it?" Amos felt odd raising his voice. He could feel the stares of passersby at the farmer's market pierce in his direction. Because who yells at an old woman? Let alone the town's staple piece for Christian respectability?

"Well, Amos. I know you and Orville are going through a little somethin' right now, but no need to yell." Sue handed him a ten-dollar bill and took five corn cobs. She then stared at Orville, who sat in a rocking chair next to the stand, lost. "Well, hey there Orville didn't see you there. You don't look a day over 60! It looks to me like there might be a storm brewing. Let's just hope that the Lord keeps the rain for another day."

Orville stared in her direction, trying to figure out who was talking to him. Instead of speaking, a tiny bit of drool left his mouth. Amos ran to wipe off Orville's stained shirt. He used to be embarrassed by these moments when Orville's illness was overtly prevalent, but after years

of seeing Orville slowly deteriorate, Amos felt a different feeling. A mixture of terror and complacency.

"Don't you remember old Sue?" Sue said in the way that people speak to a person who cannot respond. Sue stared at Amos, not saying anything, and walked off. He could see a flicker of dread in her eyes. Perhaps she felt guilty for not paying full price. Perhaps she didn't know why she made the face in the first place. Regardless, the look on Sue's face made Amos stare down at his mud-stained boots.

The clouds in the sky were turning a deep black, culminating in a beautiful symphony of various shades of grey. A mixture of cool and warm wind brushed against Amos' face as a single drop created a dark stain on his boots.

Amos thought of packing up the corn but decided to wait for a couple more sales. Although the weather seemed to be bad, with nothing else to do, all the people of Heritage Lake still meandered around the farmer's market.

Amos was usually at his stand for six hours as Orville sat staring off dreadfully, rocking slowly in the rocking chair Amos had brought for him. The Saturday farmer's market was the pinnacle of the town's weekend entertainment, so Amos knew he would see a group from his school at some point, yet he tried to ignore this fear.

He did, however, get distracted by George, the boy who always sold beans two stands to his left. There was something about his blond hair and olive skin that reminded Amos of the moment in harvest when the corn husks would start to shed. He found that when the corn started to open from the greenery it could be surprisingly beautiful. It reminded him of when his grandmother first taught him about the family business, and the excitement he felt that he could finally contribute to the trade.

"Now it's hard work to harvest," she would always say, "but it's how you got to work to survive."

He would often see George staring at him too, but he knew that neither of them would ever go over to each other to speak. You just couldn't do that type of thing at the farmer's market—or anywhere.

At night, he would imagine running his fingers through George's hair and think about how he probably smelled of fertilizer and the way the snow smells in the early Spring. There was something specific about the smell of snow on dead corn stalks that made Amos feel connected to himself. It felt safe.

Amos' mind was stopped abruptly by a loud siren. In a unified consciousness, the people at the market all stopped walking, staring with mouths open to each other.

"It's a twister!" A man in a Kum & Go trucker hat yelled into the air as people began to scatter to a safe place. For some, this was to their car, so that they could drive home to seek shelter. Amos turned toward Orville, who began to manically rock back and forth in his rocking chair.

“Come on grandpa! We have to get home.” Amos urgently picked Orville up from his chair.

“Don’t touch me. Who the hell are you?” Orville said.

He ignored Orville’s response, instead wrapping Orville’s hand around his shoulders as he stood him up from his chair. The sirens seemed to get louder as the people around them began to scream. Slowly, Amos led Orville to the passenger side of their truck, leaving the corn behind as they began collecting droplets from the coming rain.

It began to set into Amos’ mind how the people around him were running, screaming to their loved ones about how they needed to hurry home. As he made his way around the front of the truck, Amos made eye contact with a father holding his son in his hands, running to the gravel parking lot.

The wind began to increasingly get stronger as an Easy Up tent shot through the air, flying over the truck and into a nearby field. Amos ducked down below the hood of the truck. In the distance, Amos could see the black clouds begin to accumulate, growing closer to the ground.

“Shit,” Amos whispered to himself, trying to find the nearest place that he could seek shelter. The market was in the middle of an open expanse of grass and loose gravel. There was nowhere to hide. Amos shot up from the ground, making eye contact with Orville, whose eyes were locked on the darkness of the sky.

Amos knew that in any second, the clouds were going to touch down into one unified force: a tornado. He ran to the back of the truck, where he stopped slightly, trying to figure out what to do.

Across the walkway of the farmer’s market, George was trying to grab a basket of beans from his stand, but dropped it on the ground, the wind causing his white T-shirt to wave like a flag in the wind. That same wind began to get increasingly more dramatic, knocking George off his feet and onto the ground. Amos grabbed onto the rim of the truck bed, watching that beautiful boy get shot to the ground.

Amos turned, and to his terror, saw a tornado touching down on the flat expanse near the farmer’s market. Amos felt an unexplainable feeling in his chest as he began to question his mortality. Was this the day? Was this that defining moment where Amos would be stolen from his life?

The baskets of corn at his stand began to be taken into the air, their husks getting torn apart by harsh wind.

For some inexplicable reason, feeling adrenaline beginning to pump through his body, Amos ran to George, helping him from the ground.

“Come on!” he said, grabbing George’s arm with his calloused hands. George looked at Amos as he was led from the ground, showing an expression of pure terror. “Under the truck!”

He led George to the back of the truck, seeing the silhouette of Orville’s sitting figure which was dark and unmoving. “Go!” Amos said as George crawled under. The tornado was

getting closer, and Amos saw the ground beneath its base being torn upwards. It was a special type of beauty to see the horrific characteristics of mother nature. The way the tornado seemed to be twisting on itself, grey against the black sky, moving in faster and faster velocity toward the truck, its thin base seeming to be the size of a needle, made Amos think of the days that his grandmother taught him how to farm. The horrific beauty with which Amos stared made him think of mortality, of his parents’ death shortly after his birth, of a sunset behind a cloudy sky, and of the way the moon could shine through partly cloudy night skies. In this moment, Amos could see a collection of all the images that he sought in his life. He could see the many times he would stare through the green husks of corn to the lonely, open abyss of the blue sky above him. He recalled the moments when he would walk through town, staring at the way the sun created colors on the bricks of the small buildings around him. Was this what people meant when they said their life flashes before their eyes in the face of death? He wondered if this was the moment that he had heard of so many times. Was this what his parents experienced? His grandmother? Will his grandfather be able to experience this same feeling, or would he be an empty cage of forgotten memories?

Amos crawled under the car, looking to George, who had a terrified expression on his face.

“We’re going to be okay,” Amos said, grabbing George’s hand. He didn’t believe what he said. Perhaps this was only a lie he was telling himself. George stared into Amos’ eyes and then down at their interlocked hands.

He stared back into Amos’s face, the sound of the sirens and the screeching winds seeming to disappear around them. It was as if George was saying, “If we are going to die, I want to experience what I have always desired.” It was as if Amos was inside of George’s mind, knowing exactly what it was they both needed to do in the face of death.

Amos leaned close to George, their noses beginning to touch. They were drenched from the rain, grass and mud flying in all directions around them, yet their lips touched. Amos could taste mud, saliva, and fresh grass. He got hints of bacon and grits and corn, collections of the joys his mouth had previously experienced.

He pulled away, locking eyes with George, both of them smiling.

*Even if this is the way I die. Even if this is the moment of truth. I will die knowing that this was what was destined to happen. This was what I was meant to experience.* Amos thought, taking a deep breath as the truck was stolen from above his head, Orville still inside.

“Sometimes I like to just lie down in the corn, feeling the world pass by around me,” George said. It was three months after the tornado, and three months after the death of Amos’ grandfather.

“Me too,” Amos said. The two of them were lying down in the dirt, the early spring snow

sad in the harvested, demolished stalks. Amos moved his hands to touch George's arm, and he turned to George smiling. George turned toward him, kissing him gently on his forehead.

"Your hair is a mess," George said, rubbing his hands through Amos' thick hair.

"Stop it!" He laughed, quickly standing up in the field.

"Or what?" George stood up, chasing after him through the thin layer of snow. The two of them chased each other, laughing as the sun began to set. Catching up to Amos, George tackled him to the ground, their thick Carhartt overalls taking the impact of the fall. George tickled Amos, and he pushed him off him, panting while staring at the abyss of space above them.

After a pause, Amos said, "you know, I've lost a lot the last couple of years. I don't have anyone anymore, but when I'm with you, lying here, I feel like I've finally found my home."

George looked at him with a serious expression. "I'm sorry about Orville. I know he was the last person you had."

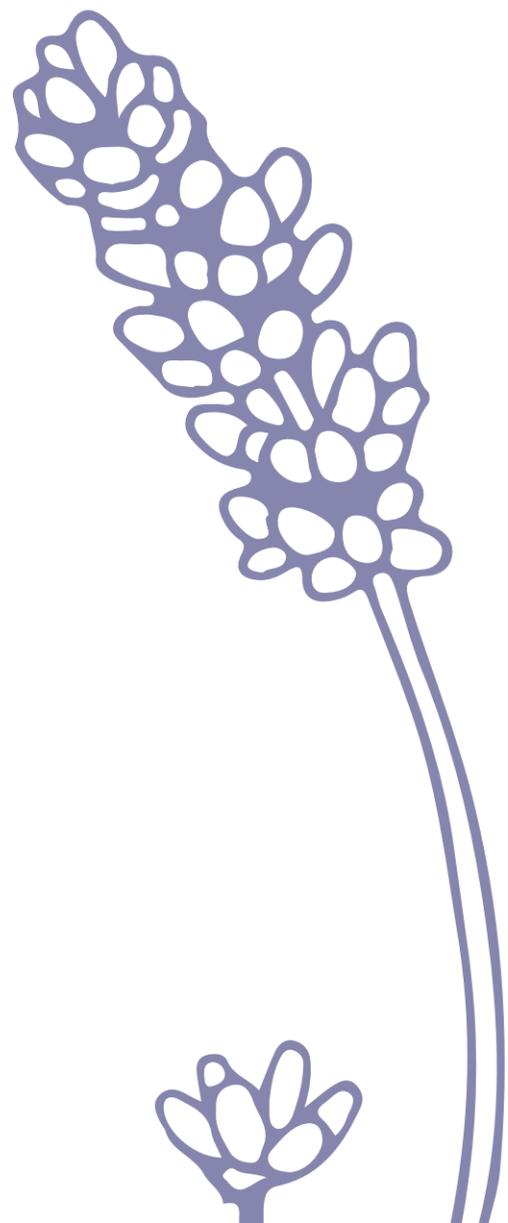
"It was sad, with the tornado taking him from me. But if that hadn't happened, I wouldn't have you. I'd be too scared to do anything. I lost something...someone, but I gained so much more. And he wasn't himself, I bet he felt freedom in those last moments," Amos said.

"I'm sure he did, Amos." George took Amos in his arms, the cool wind rushing through their cold faces.

"I'm going to get us some food," Amos said, leaving George resting on the ground. As he walked, he saw George's silhouette in the orange of the setting sun. As he walked, Amos stared at the barren fields where the corn rested months prior, waiting for the moment that he and George would plant the seeds for the new season.

## Conversation Hearts

Christine Smalley



Rory left the lights off in the apartment on purpose. She didn't want her presence known when May came home from work. The only illumination came from the stove light, which gave Rory enough glow to survey the Valentine's Day spread she had laid out for her girlfriend. The bouquet of lilacs sat in the center of the coffee table, already arranged in a vase. The chocolate covered strawberries were hand-dipped by Rory herself and displayed on a heart shaped platter. The stuffed frog sat propped against the vase of flowers, its tiny stuffed hands holding a heart that read "Hoppy Valentine's Day." She knew May would find it stupid, but she couldn't resist.

Rory grew restless as the hours ticked by, shifting positions on the couch, smoothing her dress, checking her phone for any messages. Perhaps May had thought to surprise her as well and currently sat at Rory's own apartment, awaiting the arrival of her girlfriend as she did. She shot May a text asking her what her plans were for the evening before readjusting her display on the table. Her phone dinged as she turned the stuffed frog to face the door.

"Went home early from work today because I was feeling sick. Just gonna stay in for the night. We can go to dinner this weekend," the text read, followed by a sad face emoji.

Rory stared at the screen as she took in the silence around her. Her eyes did a quick sweep of the empty apartment, coming to rest on the melting chocolate strawberries. The frog tipped over onto its side, unstable in the spot she had moved it to.

"Of course," she typed. She debated sending the message as is but knew May would pick up on her shortness. She added a yellow heart emoji and pressed send.

If there was one thing Rory knew about May, it was that she wouldn't cause a scene in public. This was the only reason she had done herself up tonight, had driven to the fancy Italian restaurant May had picked, and put on her best fake smile.

May was already inside when Rory arrived, the hostess leading her through the almost empty restaurant to a booth by the window.

"Yo, babe," May smiled as Rory sat down across from her, quickly sliding her phone into her purse.

The waitress approached quickly at Rory's arrival and asked for their drink order.

"We'll have a bottle of Rosé," May ordered, handing the spirits menu back to the waitress.

"I'll just take a water for now," Rory chimed in before she could walk away. May shot her a questioning look.

"So, how was school this week?" May asked as Rory unrolled her silverware and placed the napkin on her lap.

"It was fine. The same ol', same ol'." Rory propped her elbows on the table and folded her hands under her chin. "I got that internship."

"Sweet! That's great, Ror. When do you start?" May leaned in with feigned interest that

made Rory want to scream.

“Well, I already did. On Wednesday.” Rory tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I would have told you sooner, but you’ve been so busy.”

The waitress brought their drinks, setting a cup of water in front of Rory and pouring a glass of wine for May. She sat the bottle in a bucket of ice on the edge of the table and asked for their food order.

“I think I need a minute.” Rory didn’t have much of an appetite.

May took a long swig from her glass as Rory stuck a straw in her water. She gulped some down, letting the coldness give her the strength to go on.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” May sat her glass down abruptly, turning to rummage through her bag. She pulled out a small red rectangle and pushed it across the table. “For you.” She tapped the package with her hand and smirked, proud of her gift.

Rory picked up the box of conversation hearts and flipped it over. The “To and From” lines were blank.

“Thank you.”

“I know how much you like them.” May picked up her glass and returned her attention to the rosé.

Rory couldn’t remember a time she ever ate a conversation heart in front of May, much less mentioned she liked them. She opened the top and shook one out into her hand, regardless. A green one landed on her palm upside down. She flipped it over and read, “Be True.” The irony wasn’t lost on her.

“How are you feeling?” Rory asked, holding the heart tightly in her hand. May cocked her head to the side in question with her lips to her cup. “You were sick on Valentine’s,” Rory reminded her.

“Oh.” May swallowed her sip and gave a chuckle, “yeah, I’m feeling much better after staying home all night and sleeping it off. I think it was one of those twenty-four-hour bugs.”

The waitress returned for their orders. May ordered a pricey pasta dish that had an Italian name. When the waitress turned for Rory’s order, she was looking at her girlfriend.

“I don’t think I’ll have anything tonight.”

The waitress took their menus as May met Rory’s gaze.

“What’s wrong with you tonight, dude? We’re supposed to be on a romantic date. It’s not very romantic if you’re just watching me get tipsy and eat.” May waved her hand over the wine bottle abandoned in the ice bucket.

“You know, it’s funny, May.” Rory could feel the green heart starting to dissolve within the trappings of her sweaty palm. “You were so sick on Valentine’s, yet you weren’t home like you said.”

May was silent for a moment as she stared at Rory before her face settled into a hard line.

“What, are you stalking me now?” The wine glass went up, then back down. “That’s

unhealthy, Rory. I think you should tell your therapist about this.”

“Where were you?” Rory ignored May’s bait.

“Baby, we’ve talked about this. Don’t project your paranoia onto me. Maybe you should up the dosage on your meds again.”

The waitress carried over a basket of bread, setting it down like a barrier between them. May thanked her and busied herself with breaking apart bread and shoving it into her mouth. Rory was trying her hardest to fight back to tears. May always did this, always tried to turn Rory’s concerns back on her and make her feel like her feelings weren’t valid.

“Oh, come on,” May said through a mouthful of bread, “don’t start crying.” She wiped her hands on her napkin and swallowed. “I stayed at Sam’s because she was closer to the office and I didn’t feel well enough to drive all the way home. Happy?” May rolled her eyes and glanced at her reflection in the window, fixing her hair.

Rory closed her eyes. She knew Sam, and was friends with Sam. She had talked to Sam on Valentine’s, had told her about the flowers starting to wilt, the strawberries in the trash, and the frog that now sat on Rory’s bed. May hadn’t been with Sam. She knew this because Sam had told her so.

“I don’t believe you.” Rory kept her eyes closed. She didn’t want to see May’s accusatory glare.

“Here you go.” Rory’s eyes opened on the familiar face of the waitress. “Can I get you guys anything else?”

“No.” May’s single syllable was harsh and unwarranted towards the poor waitress that had walked up at the wrong time. She walked away without a word.

“You don’t believe me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Tell me the truth, May.”

May stared at her for what felt like ages. Rory’s heart beat rapidly in her chest, thumping in her ears. May picked up her fork and twirled some pasta onto it.

“What do you want me to say?” She put the pasta in her mouth and chewed. “That I wasn’t sick?” She looked to Rory for an answer, which she didn’t give. She sat the fork down. “Fine, Rory. I wasn’t sick, and I wasn’t at Sam’s.”

May crossed her arms against her chest, her eyes searching Rory’s. Rory sat as still as a statue and did not say a word. May let out a sigh of frustration.

“I was with Nora and we fucked.” She dropped her hands in exasperation. “What did you expect? You make it so hard to be with you, Rory. You’re so clingy and emotional. I mean, stopping by my house to see if I was home?” She shoved her plate away from her. “Great, now I’ve lost my appetite.”

Rory’s heart beat slowly went back to normal as they sat in silence, Rory’s a contemplative one and May’s in anger. She unfurled her fist and let the half-melted heart drop to the table, “Be True” side up.

“Was that what you wanted to hear?” May’s tone was patronizing, but Rory ignored it for once.

“Yes.” Rory allowed as she gathered her purse and coat. She stood up and turned to leave before snatching the box of conversation hearts off the table. She had earned them.

“Rory!” May demanded as she walked away. Rory shrugged her coat on and ignored her.

Back in the car, Rory let herself take in a deep breath and exhale it slowly. She took the box of hearts from where she had thrown it onto the passenger seat and shook one out. This one was yellow and came out word side up. It read, “You Rock.”

She popped it into her mouth and pulled out of the lot.

## Shaking Hands

Jo Kibble

Editor's Note: This story contains themes of anxiety, and derogatory slurs against the transgender community. Take care when reading.



Despite the enticing smells surrounding them as Christmas dinner was being prepared, anxiety had already settled into Fern's stomach. Their hands shook as they peeled the potatoes for the simmering pot of green beans on the stovetop, and they couldn't stop chewing the inside of their bottom lip. There was a permanent bump in their mouth where they were chewing, now, they were sure of it. They ran their tongue along the inside of their lip, just to make sure. Yup, there it was, a tiny pimple-sized bump right underneath the opening of their mouth.

*Dammit.*

They put the peeler down and took a few deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, ignoring their mom's question of what was wrong—partly because their mom had just deadnamed them, calling them "Shelby." After taking a sip of seasonal peppermint tea, they started to peel the potato again, and cursed as they accidentally dropped it into the trash bin that they'd been holding it over.

Wayne, Fern's father, walked over and whispered in his wife's ear.

Realizing her mistake, Fern's mom, Vickie, came over and put her hand on Fern's back.

"Hey, sweetie, I'm sorry," their mom said, sighing. "I'm...I'm still learning, y'know?"

Fern nodded as they continued peeling potato after potato.

"Mistakes happen, we're all human," Fern said, shrugging as they put the peeler aside.

"It's okay. You're acknowledging the mistake, apologizing for it. I appreciate that. I just hope everyone else will be able to follow suit, eventually."

Vickie eyed her child warily, then bit the bullet and asked, "Are...are you sure you want to do this?" Vickie asked, taking the freshly peeled potatoes from Fern.

"You know how the family is," Wayne piped up, pulling out some freshly baked rolls from the oven, only to slide them back in when he realized they weren't fully done yet. "You know how *I* was, when you first told me..."

Fern nodded, remembering. Coming out to their parents had been difficult, to be sure. Could they do it again, with the rest of the family? Getting their parents to come around had been hard enough; they hadn't really had any kind of context or understanding for what Fern was telling them. Neither would the rest of Fern's family.

The ball of anxiety in Fern's gut screamed *no* to Vickie's question. No, they weren't sure if they wanted to do this.

"Yeah, of course, what are you talking about?" Fern lied.

Vickie eyed her child doubtfully. "Fern..."

Fern fiddled with a loose string on the men's ugly Christmas sweater they were wearing—it looked like the jacket a Nutcracker would wear, complete with gold fringe on the shoulders; they liked how it broadened their shoulders—and sighed, tucking a stand of their mud brown curls behind their ear. "I'm just scared...I want to do this, I want to be true to who I am... but I'm really anxious."

"Well, Crae will be here, he'll have your back, surely," Vickie replied.

“Will he, though?” Fern asked, their voice going up an octave and their brow furrowing. “I mean, I know he and I are close, but this is just such a new thing, for a lot of people. Will our closeness as cousins be enough? There’s so much I have to explain, and I don’t know if Crae will understand it all, if anyone will...”

Vickie gave her child a hug and kissed the top of their head while Wayne finally pulled the rolls out of the oven, set them down to cool on the island countertop in the middle of the kitchen. “I know, sweetie...well, no, I don’t, actually. Not truly. But I understand that this is very anxiety-inducing for you. We believe in you, though. You’ve got this. We’ve seen how uncomfortable you’ve been at family gatherings; now seems like a good time to finally tell them.”

Wayne came over and joined in on the hug.

Fern’s chest was tightening now, despite the comforting hugs from their parents; their voice cracked as they continued, their voice muffled somewhat as they pressed their face into their dad’s chest. “And the pronouns...I mean, y’all are still getting used to not calling me Shelby, for crying out loud, and it’s been over a year since I first came out to y’all! How are Aunt Rhonda, Crae, Nana, Papa...how are any of them going to get used to gender neutral pronouns?” Fern swiped at their eyes with the sleeve of their sweater, trying to swallow the growing lump in their throat.

Vickie stroked Fern’s head, a comforting gesture she’d done ever since they were born.

“If anything bad happens, if things go south, we’ll be right there beside you.”

“You don’t have to do this...but we’ll be right there beside you, if you do, okay?” Wayne said.

Fern was once again chewing the inside of their mouth a few hours later as they watched the family arrive from the dining room window that looked out upon the driveway and front lawn. A giant inflatable snowman partially blocked their view, but they could still see their Aunt Rhonda, Uncle Bill, and cousin Crae climbing out of their lifted, red Ford truck. Aunt Rhonda looked like a human rainbow in her outfit, juggling present packages and Tupperware containers of food, smiling and clearly happy to come visit with the family. Uncle Bill was decked out in his customary golf polo, baseball cap, and shorts. With his bushy beard and unamused face, he almost reminded Fern of a constipated llama. Crae was the only one of them who looked even remotely festive, wearing a hunter green fleece pullover.

Fern felt a soft smile pull at their lips as they watched him walk up the driveway. He’d gotten so tall since they’d last seen him. The butterflies in their stomach quieted down slightly as they thought back to all of the fond, playful memories that they had with him. Maybe tonight wouldn’t be as bad as they were worried it was going to be.

*Ring* went the doorbell.

*Oh god, here we go*, Fern thought. They made themselves rearrange their face, focus on

their facial muscles and make sure every worry line, every tense muscle was relaxed, as they walked to the door. They forced their voice to sound as sweet as condensed milk and their mouth to form a grin as they flung it open.

“Hi Aunt Rhonda, Uncle Bill, and Crae! How are—”

“Hi Shelby!” Aunt Rhonda bulldozed her way past the threshold and past Fern, like she always did, into the house foyer, arms still full of Tupperware and presents. “Oh look at you, you’ve gotten so pretty!” Fern shut their mouth and nodded and forced themselves not to wince as they took the presents from Rhonda. The packages trembled in their hands, and they nearly dropped them before placing them behind the army of Santa figurines guarding the presents underneath the sparkling Christmas tree in the living room. After exchanging pleasantries and half-hearted hugs, the group made their way to the kitchen.

“Yo, Dad, you promise to not get into politics like you did two Christmases ago, right? Remember that?” Crae asked as he swiped a cookie from the dessert tray sitting on the kitchen island. Fern swatted at his hand, then grabbed one for themselves, too, winking at Crae.

Bill rolled his eyes and glared at his son, sighing. “Yes, son, I promise, no politics. As long as we don’t have to talk about those damn Left nutjobs and disgusting trannies, I’m good.”

Fern dropped their cookie, surprised by the slur. As far as what Crae was referring to, it was an uncomfortable confrontation two years ago between themselves and Uncle Bill at a Red Robin. Over untraditional burgers and fries for Christmas, Bill had yelled at them in public for suggesting that the Democratic nomination had been stolen from Bernie; Bill had apologized weeks later, via text message. Still, even with Bill being the conservative that he was, Fern hadn’t expected him to use that slur just then. Was coming out really such a good idea, now?

Vickie pursed her lips and was curt with her response, using a wooden spoon to point at him. “Bill, we love you, but we don’t use that language in this house. Cut it out.”

Bill shrugged and muttered something about “freedom of speech,” then changed the subject. “Anyway, your daughter looks particularly festive,” he remarked as he gave Wayne and Vickie hugs. Rhonda gave hugs as well, then quickly jumped in to help Vickie with final meal preparations. Fern could feel the panic coursing through their veins, a distinct urge to just run from the room—but they took a few subtle deep breaths and forced themselves to stay. They’d get through this...or at least, they hoped they would.

“Well hello, Shelby!”

Fern turned around and was startled to find their Nana and Papa standing at the kitchen door. It was Nana who’d spoken. When had they come in?

Fern recomposed themselves and, once again, sweetened their voice and grinned. They even threw in a giggle as they replied. “Hi Nana, hi Papa!” They enveloped them both in a full hug. The two were dressed up in their formal Christmas attire. Nana had worn that ruby red sweater that Fern liked so much, and a delicate gold brooch right above her right breast. Papa was decked out in suspenders and a white nice button down and grey sweater.

Both looked pleased to be there.

“Now, do you have any boyfriends to tell me about?” Nana asked.

Fern tried to make their sigh unnoticeable and plastered a grin onto their face once more. If they reached the end of the night without their cheek muscles frozen in a grin, it would be a miracle. “Nana, Papa, come on, you know I’m happily single.”

“Oh, posh, I’m sure there are tons of boys just falling all over themselves to go on a date with a girl like you,” Nana said. She smiled as Fern led her and Papa to their customary places on the living room sofa; they could sit and watch TV and mingle while dinner was finishing up.

“Do you all want anything? Maybe some coffee?” Fern asked their grandparents.

“No, dearie, we’re fine,” Papa replied.

“Just make sure to tell me about those boys who want to date a wonderful girlie like you when we’re at dinner, and we’re good,” Nana said, smiling.

Fern nodded, sighing as they walked back into the kitchen to make themselves more tea.

Later, at dinner, Fern sipped on their sixth cup of peppermint tea of the day, their hands still shaky. They’d been trying to soothe their anxious stomach all day with the stuff, but no luck. The family all sat in a circle around the oval-shaped dining table. Papa, Fern’s grandfather on their mom’s side, sat at the head of the table, followed by, going in a clockwise direction: Aunt Rhonda; Crae, Bill and Rhonda’s adopted son and Fern’s cousin; Uncle Bill; Wayne, Fern’s father, at the other end of the table; Vickie; Fern, and sweet, sweet Nana.

At least their dinner plate looked inviting. The plate was full with Christmas dinner goodies: cheesy, steaming broccoli casserole from Aunt Rhonda and Uncle Bill; Nana and Papa’s special sweet potato casserole with the marshmallows on top; someone had picked up cranberry sauce, honey baked ham, and turkey and made mashed potatoes and stuffing, although Fern wasn’t sure who that had been, and the green beans were from earlier. A chocolate cake was the table’s centerpiece, sitting pristinely underneath a glass dome, having been decorated by Fern and their mom that morning. The dining room itself had been cleaned from top to bottom, although you couldn’t really say the same for the rest of the house, but that was how the Smiths lived.

For now, Fern was just listening to the conversation, using the food as a means to keep from talking, waiting for an opening and ignoring their pounding heart. Especially after Uncle Bill’s comment earlier, they were more anxious about this than ever. Was it unsafe to come out, at this point? If there was anybody that Fern was concerned about not understanding or getting mad about their coming out, it was probably Uncle Bill and Nana and Papa. Bless their hearts, Nana and Papa were just old. They didn’t understand. Uncle Bill, on the other hand...well, his comment earlier said everything.

“So, Rhonda, have you all decided where to go for your anniversary?” Nana asked. She

gestured at them with her fork, then went back to her turkey and stuffing.

“No,” Rhonda answered. “We’ve got to figure out what to do with this little bug.” She reached over a seat and ruffled Crae’s head. Crae gave her a reproachful look, muttered “I’m 20, mom,” then went back to digging into his mashed potatoes.

“I want to go to New York,” Bill said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “I’ve never been, I want to see St. Patrick’s Cathedral, across from the Rockefeller Center. The rest of the city may be full of sinners, but that church is part of God’s holy land, all churches are.”

Fern and Crae exchanged glances at that remark.

“Y’know, Robert Downey Jr. is from New York, isn’t he?” Vickie asked as she speared some turkey with her fork.

“Yeah, he plays that, uh...what’s he called...Metal Man?” Papa asked.

“Iron Man,” Crae said, mouth full of potatoes.

“Crae, don’t eat with your mouth full!” Nana chided.

“Is–isn’t he kind of short, RDJ?” Fern asked. They didn’t normally have a stutter, but having one now didn’t surprise them.

“All the great ones are short,” Wayne replied. “Just look at Danny DeVito.”

“Just look at Shelby!” Nana said.

Fern forced themselves to rearrange their face once again, and try not to visibly wince. Beads of sweat were forming on their forehead, but whether that was from how hot their sweater was, or anxiety, they weren’t sure.

“These mashed potatoes are so creamy,” Crae said.

“I mashed them,” Vickie said.

“Who mashed them?” Nana asked.

“Hon, I think Rhonda mashed them,” Papa said.

“No I didn’t,” Rhonda said.

“Well then, who mashed them?” Nana asked.

“Hey, Shelby,” Aunt Rhonda said, “do you think you could find a girlfriend for Crae?”

Was now a good time? Fern wasn’t sure. They’d go ahead and try anyway.

“W–w–well, actually, Aunt Rhonda, that’s...that’s not how...”

“Is Danny DeVito from New York? You might see him if you go up there,” Papa interrupted.

“Yo, stop!” Crae said, looking at everyone, then at Fern. “I think Shelby was trying to say something, Papa.”

Everyone at the table turned to look at Fern, some with eyebrows raised.

“Go on, you’ve got this,” Wayne whispered.

Fern gulped.

“I’m...I’m not sure if I know Crae’s type, Aunt Rhonda. Sorry.”

Fern sighed, embarrassed as the cacophonous dinner conversation went back to what it

was before. At a certain point, Bill started reciting Bible verses, which he had to always do every single holiday, no matter if it fit the context of the conversation or not. He was citing something from the book of Mark when Fern looked over at their parents, ashamed, and shrugged. They'd try again later, once everyone's bellies were full.

"I thought you liked blondes, so that your hair colors would match," Bill said, chuckling. The family was now splitting the chocolate cake centerpiece, and they'd gotten back onto the topic of Crae finding a girlfriend. Fern's stomach was rolling; it was taking everything in them to not run to the bathroom and throw up the turkey, stuffing, green beans, rolls, and other goodies they'd just gobbled up. They couldn't even touch the mouthwatering chocolate cake everyone was chowing down on.

"No, I like brunettes," Crae replied. "Kinda like how Shelby looks, actually. I like her muddy hair and the androgynous look she's got going on."

Fern gasped. They couldn't take it anymore; it felt like a brick was on their chest, and they were hot and sweaty. They needed air.

Crae held his gaze on Fern for a second. "Shelby...are you okay? You don't look so good."

"I'll...be right back," Fern explained as they pushed away from the dining table, locking eyes with Crae for a split second longer than necessary. They then bolted from the dining room, and headed out the door, accidentally slamming it, grabbing a coat and their pack of Camel cigarettes and one of Dad's Heinekens from the 30-year-old fridge in the garage on the way out. They just needed some time to think.

Fern took a second to look back at their parents' warmly lit house, then started to head back into the woods behind their parents' property, their feet making one *crunch* after another as they braved the cold and light dusting of snow outside. If you went far enough back into the woods behind the property, you'd reach the Chickamauga Dam and Tennessee River. Fern had a favorite spot about halfway through that trek to the Dam. A small treehouse was there, one that they and their dad had built when Fern was a little kid. It wasn't anything fancy, just a wooden box with a few windows built into a tree with some beams nailed to the trunk as a makeshift ladder, but for Fern, that treehouse had been everything from a pirate's ship to a magic castle, growing up. They had played out here countless times with Crae when they were growing up; the two were only a few years apart in age. Back when they had first come out to their parents, and things were a little rough between them, Fern had also escaped here to just have some peace and quiet and to think. As Fern had grown older, the treehouse had been somewhat abandoned, and now its age was showing. Some of the beams were visibly old, some were rotten.

As Fern made their unsteady ascent, with the Heineken and a pack of Camels in their back jeans pockets, they had to be careful climbing up; they weren't sure if the beams nailed to the tree trunk would hold, but they thankfully did.

Once inside the treehouse, they were finally able to just lay down on the hardwood and breathe. The treehouse itself was empty; toys had been in here at one point but had been cleared away as Fern had grown up. One window that took up some of the upper half of the back wall was cut out of the treehouse, but the rest of the walls were bare. Quite frankly, Fern was surprised that the treehouse had lasted as long as it had, since some of the structure had clearly aged over time.

The entire night, since the family had gotten there, it felt as if Fern had just been holding their breath underwater. Now, they were coming up for air, and could finally breathe. Their parents might miss them, back at the party, but nobody else really would. Half the time, they faded into the background in any family gathering, anyway. Everyone else was always too loud, too present.

After they'd gotten through about half of their can of Heineken, they heard leaves crunching beneath them. They poked their head out the one window of the treehouse, and saw Crae standing there, bundled up in much more clothing than they were. He asked if he could come up, and they asked for the password.

Crae grinned. "You know we never had no password, just let me up already!"

Fern obliged, and offered him a sip of Heineken and a lit cigarette when he reached the treehouse.

They sat in comfortable silence for some time, listening to the sounds of the woods, the occasional skittering of a bird or a squirrel, sucking their cigarettes down to nubs and playing with the smoke when they exhaled. Crae could do an impressive smoke ring, while Fern showed him how to French inhale.

After goofing off like this for a little bit, Crae finally broke the tension.

"So uh...you've been trying to tell the family something all night, haven't you?"

Fern let their head hang and rubbed the back of their neck. "Yeah...yeah I have."

"Well, whatever it is, I support you."

Fern squeezed their eyes shut, took a deep breath, then took the plunge. They may not have been able to come out to their whole family, but they could at least come out to one person.

"Crae...I'm nonbinary."

Crae nodded, exhaling another puff from his cigarette. "Yeah, I figured something was going on."

Fern's heart stopped for a beat. He knew?

"Wait...you knew? You...you understand what I'm saying? What nonbinary means?"

“I mean, no, not specifically *that*,” Crae explained, tossing his finished cigarette butt into the woods, “I do need some explanation for what that means. Is it the same thing as being androgynous?”

Relief flooded Fern’s muscles as they felt themselves fully relax for the first time that night. A weight lifted off of their shoulders as they explained to Crae what being nonbinary meant, for them at least. No, it wasn’t the same thing as being androgynous, although some nonbinary people sought out to present that way. They talked about the delicious, intoxicating authenticity and freedom that they’d felt when they first had their hair cut short, and how they’d cried in a nearby Starbucks bathroom the first time they tried on a binder, because years of hatred towards their body, particularly their chest, were finally somewhat addressed. They relished the thought of people looking at them and not being able to tell if they were a boy or a girl. At the end of the day, though, Fern was still Fern. They were just growing into who they were, realizing their truth and honoring their experience and reality. They were the same person they always were, always had been.

“Alright, cool,” Crae said, nodding and rubbing his patchy beard. “But like...do you want me to call you something different? I’m so used to Shelby, and saying she all the time...that might take some time to change.”

“Uh...Fern, actually,” they said. Fern also clarified their pronouns.

“Ooh, cool, I like that, it’s very earthy,” Crae smiled. “Those pronouns might take some time to get used to, but I’ll work on it. I don’t want to disrespect you.”

“Thanks,” Fern said, smiling. If this was how coming out was supposed to go, they could handle this.

“But yeah, no, I didn’t know what exactly was going on, but I mean, c’mon Fern, one day you’re in dresses and wearing earrings, the next you’re wearing things I’d wear and doing your hair all different and you’re suddenly a lot flatter in the chest than I last remembered.”

Fern glared at him.

“What? All I’m saying is, people noticed. You think you can just suddenly start wearing men’s clothes 24/7 and people aren’t gonna notice? Shit, get outta here...”

The knot that had been in Fern’s stomach all day and night long was slowly starting to dissolve. Whether from the alcohol or the relief, they weren’t entirely sure, but they started giggling, which then made Crae start giggling, and soon the two were laughing it up.

“But yeah...no, you’re fine,” Crae finished. “I figured something was going on. And it’s okay, I support you. Does the family know?”

“No, not really...my parents do, I told them about a year or so ago...I was going to tell the rest of the family tonight...”

“...and I’m guessing you chickened out?”

“Yeah. I want to be true to myself, but...”

Crae sat and thought for a second. “Are you, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Being true to yourself,” Crae said. “I mean, you’ve been visibly anxious the entire night. I didn’t say anything, but I noticed. Your hands were shaking, you were stuttering, and you had sweat on your face. You barely touched the chocolate cake, and dessert’s always your favorite.”

Fern had to bark a laugh at that. They did have a massive sweet tooth.

“My point is...why are you forcing something that clearly isn’t meant to happen yet? If your gut’s telling you now’s not the right time, then it’s not the right time. And who knows, it may never be the right time, especially if you’re talking about my dad. I’m not sure if his Bible-thumping ways will ever be able to accept having a trans...shit, what’s the gender neutral term for niece or nephew?” Crae said.

“Nibbling,” Fern laughed. “It’s nibbling.”

“Nibbling...interesting. Makes me think of chicken.”

Fern playfully punched Crae’s shoulder, laughing. He always had the weirdest one-liners. Now that they thought of it, the word did make them think of a certain chicken-based fast food chain.

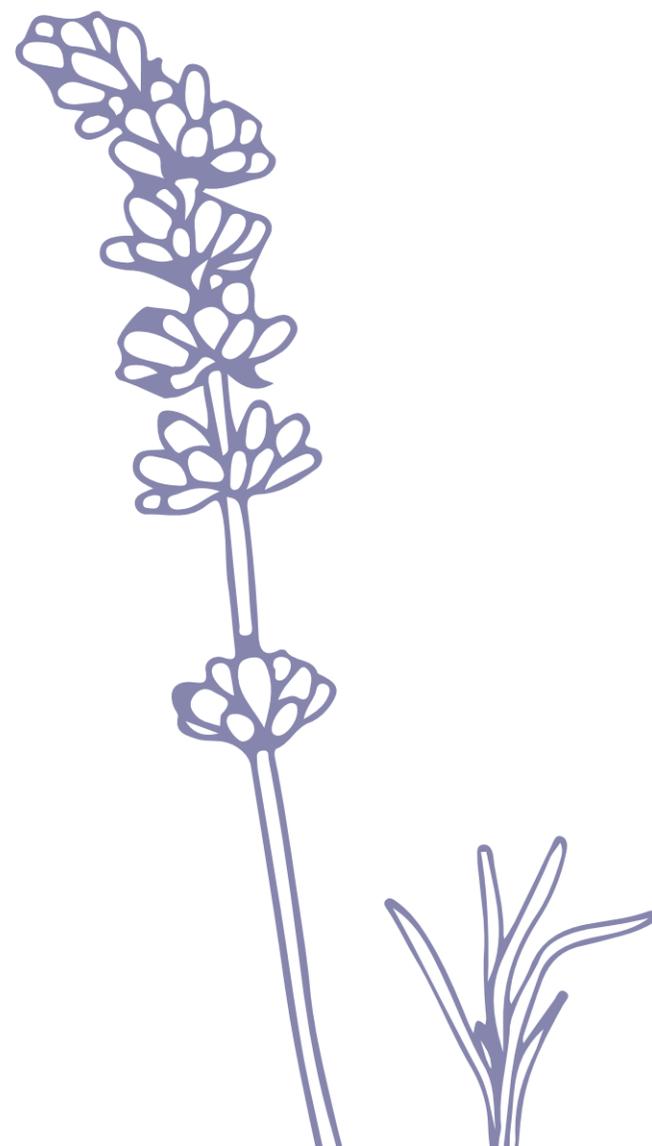
“But yeah...why not just do what you can right now?” Crae asked.

Fern nodded. They liked the sound of that. They’d do what they could right now, just like they were doing with their transition. Crae was right, they were putting way too much pressure on themselves. Maybe not everyone would know right now, but at least one person did, and he had their back.

The two climbed down the treehouse ladder and made their way back to the house. By the time they got back, the family had all convened in the living room to watch movies and open presents, as was the usual family post-Christmas dinner tradition. Fern grabbed themselves a slice of leftover cake on their way to the living room, hands shaking this time not from nerves, but from happiness.

## *Smoke and Mirrors*

Toby Barefoot



Damon looked over his shoulder at Alex, who stood in the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest. Though she was inches from Damon's office space, she demanded the entire room. It was hard for Damon not to give it to her.

She wore the same pajamas from this morning and hadn't kept her promise of leaving. Alex's eyes fixed to the newly installed shelf where a portrait of their wedding photo once hung.

Damon turned to face her, dressed in his usual working attire: a buttoned shirt with the top two undone, tucked messily into his jeans and a loose-fitting belt. Though the man never left home for work, his therapist told him dressing was the best signal change of the day.

As he stood before her, Damon could tell she hadn't slept. Her eyes were puffy and bagged, shots of pink waved in her cheeks, and her hair bunched in a curled nest. Seeing her in full forced Damon's chest to tighten. He couldn't conjure up a way to greet her or begin to address what happened last night.

Over a bowl of potato soup and balsamic bread is how he'd told her. He'd planned it out in advance, cleaned the house, made dinner, and waited. When she came home, he'd forgotten how to speak. His notes turned to scribbles as the words left his mouth. At the table every inch of empathy he'd expected from her turned into denial. The further Damon opened, the farther Alex became. She hazed him with questions that Damon had no answer to. When he said that he'd never wanted to hurt her, Alex called him a liar.

"Just re-decorating," Damon said as he lifted the mirror with both hands, placing it onto a pedestal that Alex now stood small to. Alex didn't address him but stood silent against the door's frame. She looked up to the browning of glass in each corner of its frame and noted the wear of its skin. Every sculpted detail was lost in the columns of its arch. Its bronze had been worn down into a dull and foggy coating. The only polished spot was a figure that stood in the mirror's way. The miniature man faced into the reflection and looked back to Alex with the same uninterested look. His facial features were small and thinly carved. It felt calm in the same way a porcelain doll felt comfortable.

She then focused on the figure's body now that it was higher up. The petite, but chiseled male statue, leaned against the arch of the mirror. He wore only a thin drape over his hip, and little covered his back or legs. The figure was Roman or Greek in nature, lewdly elegant and defined by bronze. The arch that shaped the mirror resembled a stone arbor, covered top to bottom in tiny decorative vines and flowers. On both sides of the arch's foot sat two demonic looking creatures, each paired with batlike wings and canine fangs.

Damon furrowed his brow and stared at Alex through the mirror's spotty pane. He gave a slight twist of his lips.

"What?" Damon averted his eyes back to the wall and away from the mirror where Alex now returned his looks. She took a step into the office.

"It's vulgar," Alex said.

"It's an antique."

There was a moment of silence before Alex spoke again.

“There are things you tell a woman before you marry her.”

“Alex.”

“I hate to do laundry,” Alex said, moving further into the office. “I have a sister, I don’t travel.” She stopped in front of Damon’s desk with her arms still hugging her chest. She leaned towards him with an avoidant gaze. “I like men.”

“I can’t control this.”

“So, you just decided to keep it from me?”

“It isn’t like that,” Damon said as he tried to keep steady. He watched Alex as she moved around the desk, her face turning and twisting with red.

They married in April of last year, with four years of dating prior. Damon’s submissive personality fit into Alex’s fiery optimism. He was attracted to her smile, her determination in life, and strength to love him. She read his work, laughed at his jokes, and never once asked him to be anything more than what he was. She worked a time demanding job in exchange for a clean house and a loving husband.

“Did you even love me?” Alex’s voice pattered as she began to cry. The space between his body and the drywall closed in. He could handle the yelling and the anger that came from Alex, but her tears were unbearable. They crushed his bones and forced his body to curl and coil into submission. Damon didn’t have the energy to answer her. He wanted nothing more than to tell Alex that he had loved her once. That he had once thought of her as his soulmate.

He needed to tell her that the way he loved had changed. She needed to understand that through all the confusion and remorse, he’d found little clarity in himself. Alex needed to know that this was not the end for her, but a beginning for him.

Alex waited for Damon to respond, but when he said nothing, she scoffed and shook her head. The hand she’d rolled into a fist now wiped away her tears. Damon hesitated to reach out to Alex, but as his hand moved, she pulled away. Before he could get anything out, she left the office. Her heavy footing echoed a harsh trail as she descended the stairs. He knew she would not return.

Over the course of their day, Damon stayed in his office while Alex packed in the living room. Even with the door sealed shut he could hear her throwing things into boxes. Damon held his head in his palm as he struggled to focus. Between the commotion downstairs, and the tension that tied them together, his thoughts never stayed on the page. Damon got into a pattern of writing out lines, deleting them, then writing them again. The motion of the letters traveling back and forth across the screen lulled his brain. If they didn’t sound right, he could erase it and try again. If he wanted them back, they were a button away.

He pulled the dangling string of a nearby lamp as the light through his window began to fade. Caught in the yellow glow of his lamp, he removed his eyes from the screen. The dark corners that now flooded his room felt blurry and foreign. Damon yawned and pulled his arms

over his head. The tension in his body crept up from his feet to his back and flowed into his shoulders. Stress had a funny way of wearing Damon’s bones thin, and soon he’d be nothing but paper.

He rolled his shoulders and tried to crack his neck in a slow and painful turn from left to right. As he tried to find the right snap to release his tense vertebrae, something cold and airy brushed over his head. Alex must have turned the air on. Before they were married it had been a signal of dinner, but now it was Alex’s way of punishing him.

A colder touch rose to his head and fell below his ears. Pressure traced strips down the softer tissue of his neck and stopped at both shoulders. Damon would have pulled away from the initial contact if it hadn’t been so endearing. The sensual movement reminded him of Alex, she had always rubbed his shoulders when he worked into the night. The touch was comforting, even, as it pushed and pulled against his skin. Thick palms formed over his shoulders and rubbed into his neck; what had felt like air now resembled stone.

Damon jumped out from the chair, throwing his hands up over his head and swatting at whatever had touched him. As he turned, he saw only the mirror. Damon stared at his reflection, wide eyed and shrouded in dark, illuminated by the glow of his lamp while the rest of the room disappeared.

Alex only asked him about the noise when they reunited in the kitchen. She had already finished her dinner and was now accompanied by wine at the dinner table. Damon considered grabbing a glass as well, but as he reached for the bottle Alex scooped it away.

She pushed her lips out and looked down into the glass. Her cheeks sucked in and puffed out before speaking.

“My dad is coming tomorrow to help pack boxes,” she said after taking a sip of her drink, then another. “I’m going to stay with him.”

Damon replied with a hum under his breath. He moved away from the table and over to the fridge. As it opened, the sticky smell of leftovers and forgotten drinks filled his nose. He glanced at the potato soup but reached for a container of old noodles. While Damon rifled through the fridge looking for sauce, Alex spoke up again.

“This is going to ruin me,” Alex said with a swirling motion of her drink. “What am I supposed to tell people, Damon?”

“It’s going to ruin you?” Damon asked as he pulled the food from the fridge. “This affects me too, you know.”

“You can hide it— I have to tell people my husband left me for a man.”

Damon shut the fridge door harder than he intended to. He could tell by the shaking of the magnets and sticky notes that he’d grown uneasy.

“I’ve already told you I’m struggling with this.”

“You’re 26, you’ve had time to struggle.”

“You don’t get to decide what I struggle with,” Damon kept his back to her. “You don’t

know what this feels like.”

“And you won’t even tell me.”

“How can I when you act like this?”

Alex took a sip from her drink and laughed.

“What? Shocked? Defensive? How else am I supposed to act, Damon?”

“You could support me,” Damon said as he fumbled with the microwave. “You could treat me like a person.”

“You cried the first time we had sex, remember that?”

Damon’s heart jerked against his throat. He felt the tension from before return to his shoulders and cloud his head. Damon couldn’t take it out on her in this state, even if it felt right. She wasn’t crying or pleading with him, she was cruel, and snake like in her taunting.

“Alex, stop.”

“I should have known,” she said as she went for another sip, but the glass was empty. She pulled the bottle back up from her thighs and pulled the cork to pour another. “You always looked at my brother like—”

“Stop it!” Damon said as the container in his hands slammed down onto the table. The wine glass rattled as his outburst sent Alex out of her seat. The bottle that had been resting between her legs was now shattered on the floor. The splatter of red below the table stained the floor and concealed the dark bottle’s broken glass.

Damon frantically apologized to the air as Alex leered at the broken shards. He gave her his hand and warned her to stay still. Alex pulled away from his gesture and wobbled her heels against the floor. While she struggled to stay standing, Damon quickly moved to clean up the mess.

After removing both Alex and the glass from the kitchen, Damon stationed himself back upstairs. Though he was normally the one to sleep on the couch, Alex was in no mood to go up the stairs. Every attempt Damon took to assist her in walking, she pulled away or swatted his hands. At her own pace, she propped herself onto the couch and remained there for the rest of the night.

Once Damon was alone again and confronted with the alluring silence of the house, he was able to rest. The bed didn’t feel as small as it had before. It smelled of Alex’s perfume and held the shape of her body on one side of the mattress. Every mark that had once been his was now dulled by her. This was her bed, not his.

Just as his eyes drifted down, he heard a faint step approach from the hallway outside the bedroom. The door had been left open for Alex to reclaim the room if she wanted to. She didn’t enter or call out to him, the sound just stopped. Damon lifted his head from the pillow and leaned out to peek into the hallway. While there were no lights to show a discernible figure, something stood in the hall. He saw the outline of a broad shoulder that obstructed a painting behind it. The shadow carved into the hallway and down into a large, human-shaped hand.

Damon laid still, fearing that whatever dream he was having had manifested into the room. Sleepless nights often gave him terrors, but he could move freely under the sheets. As he tried to wake himself up, the shoulder and arm moved into the room, followed by a dark silhouette. It was tall, no larger than him. Every detail of its body that might have seemed human had the distinct shape of a sculpture.

It approached Damon’s side with a slow stride. Its walk was confident, but its steps were silent. As it came closer, Damon’s eyes adjusted to the dark room. Its features were thin and lightly placed. The carve of its arms and chest bulged in a smooth structure. Its face was boxed with a sturdy chin and what looked like dented lips. Damon felt his body tremble as his eyes finally met the statue’s. Its sheening face looked longingly over his, and its lack of pupils gave him little ease. The statue’s lips pulled into a smile, one that was soft for stone. Though its gesture was kind in nature, Damon was in a panic.

The figure put its hand down towards Damon’s head and grazed strands of hair from his face. Its fingers were cold and lifeless like steel but smelled unlike any metal. Damon pulled away from the hand, which upset the figure. Its smile turned downwards, and its blank eyes turned with the crunch of its brow.

In the moment, overwhelmed and confused, his eyes swelled up. Tears ran down his face and absorbed into his shirt. Damon, for the first time since he was a child, began to weep. He huffed as his breath shook in his chest and a heaviness invaded his lungs.

“It’s alright,” it said. “I am here.”

He shut his eyes, hoping the hallucination would disappear. Instead, Damon felt a familiar, airy touch roll over his arm. It pulled and pushed at his skin in gentle strides that twisted his stomach.

The same pair of hands that had held his shoulders now caressed his arms. The imprint of another engulfed his back and cocooned at his sides. The embrace, in all its oddity, soothed him. The pounding of his chest solaced into an easy rhythm. It was imitated through his back by a slow, methodical beating of a heart.

Damon rose his fingers up to the force that enfolded him. He met with a smooth shape, one that resembled a forearm. Damon felt no hair or bumps, but a guide of curves that he assumed was muscle. In thanks, he returned the touch, moving his fingers up and down the featureless arm. Its sulking voice met his ear as a second cold breeze pulled over his head.

“You are safe.”

The morning came and Damon felt dense under the sheets he’d wrapped himself in. He untangled from the bed and looked for any sign of his visitor from the night before. There were no indentions in the floor, no odd smells or shapes carved into the walls. Whoever or whatever had come to comfort him in the night was no longer here.

Down in the living room Alex was still dressed in yesterday’s clothes and stacking boxes by the door. She didn’t notice Damon’s presence until he spoke.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she said, short and stark.

Damon held his breath then let out a short sigh.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he said. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

She didn’t answer him and pushed another box towards the door.

“Do you want me to help you?”

“No.”

Alex had six boxes piled up in the living room, ready to be taken outside. Alex turned towards a box that sat near the staircase. She moved past Damon and crouched down to look through it.

“What did you do with the wedding photo?” she asked, picking up a binder from the box and shoving it under her arm. “You didn’t throw it away, did you?”

“Of course not,” he said. “It’s still in my office.”

“I want it,” she said with a strain in her voice. Damon was sure she’d been crying, but he brought no attention to it.

Damon returned to his office and retrieved the framed photo from the closet. He dug through family photos and school pictures, catching glimpses of his younger self. He stopped and admired a few of the older photos when he was a child. Nothing seemed to change physically other than his height and weight. He grew hair like a man, spoke deeply like a man, but felt like nothing more than a boy.

He found another image of him and Alex when they first started dating. She hadn’t let her hair grow out yet and still wore cropped shirts. As lively as she was, the photo depicted something else in her. She was smiling, with her arm tightly wrapped around Damon’s hip and her head nuzzled into his neck. Alex looked happy and content with the shy man next to her. Damon wished he could seep back into the photo and spend time with the Alex he once knew. He wished he could warn her for everything that was to come.

It wasn’t long after finding the photo that he found their wedding picture. The way her cheeks cupped her eyes made the smile seem genuine, though her body was farther away from him. Damon smiled in the picture too, but he knew from Alex’s disconnected stance that the gap between them had already been made.

“Damon.”

He stopped, feeling his weight drop in time with his gut. He turned towards the desk where the voice had come from. The room was empty, but the heavy feeling stayed in Damon’s chest as he looked around the office. His eyes caught the mirror that sat atop the shelf. Its archway looked untouched, and the mirror’s glass still muddied the frame. Damon didn’t notice until he’d walked closer to the object that the miniature man was gone.

He set the photo down onto the desk and grabbed the mirror from the shelf. There was no explanation for a missing part of the mirror other than that he’d lost his mind. He ran his fingers

over the empty spot under the arch and scanned the mirror for broken pieces. The circular opening where the statue stood had no marks or sign of damage. As he looked closer over the details of the mirror, he noticed something move from behind the glass.

On the other side pane, a reflection of the statue appeared. It leaned in the same fashion, but this time facing towards him. A faint smile rose over its face as it looked up to Damon from past the mirror. He shook his head and muttered under his breath about just being tired or tricks of the light.

“Come,” the voice said. Its lips moved slow with the words as its hand lifted to press against the mirror. Though the man was familiar he only felt more estranged watching it move and speak.

“What do you want from me?” Damon asked.

“I want you to be happy,” the figure replied.

Damon let out a disoriented laugh. “Why?”

“You picked me,” the figure said. “Broken and old, you picked me.”

“I don’t understand,” Damon said. He huffed through his nose and tried to keep his voice from cracking. “I’m losing it.”

The figure shook its head.

“You deserve to be happy.”

“I’m not special, I don’t have anything you want, nothing you need.” Damon laughed again, this time with tears stuck in his throat. “I’m flawed, confused—I don’t know what I want.”

“It does not change what you need,” the figure said. “What you deserve.”

“You can’t just make me happy,” Damon shook his head, not taking his eyes away from the figure. “I don’t even know what you are.”

“We are the same,” it said. “Forced to see ourselves through one-way mirrors. Never knowing how others will see us until they’ve seen themselves.”

Damon held the mirror in his arms and felt his tears return. The metal of the mirror began to warm as he pulled it closer. He kept the mirror against his chest and felt his heart beating through to the other side. As he clung to the mirror, he felt a warm daze wash over him. The room around him grew cloudy and comfortably clear. What had burdened his chest before, lifted in a sigh, and evaporated into a cloud of spotty smoke. He didn’t think of Alex or the photo. The only thing that occupied his mind was the embrace of another.

“Damon?” Alex called from the hallway. As she approached the room, the smoke that had formed the air now settled into a clear haze. The office was empty aside from Damon’s desk, the photograph, and the mirror. She approached with a sluggish pull of her legs and stopped at the desk where the mirror sat. Alex looked over the vines and devilish guards that held the arch’s legs. The twisted vines that faded in and out of the stone reached out to bronze flowers. Its shine now gleamed in the light of the room and mirrored her muddled face. No spots or stains decayed

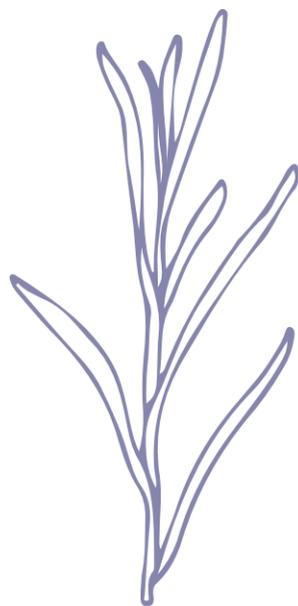
the mirror's glass, and no dust or cracks tainted the sculpt of the arbor. Both figures were defined by the bronze that sculpted them. Dressed in thin drapes, they mirrored one another. Though different in size and shape, they shared the same path.

As Alex left the room, photo in hand, the mirror sat alone in the office space. The two bronze figures stood on either side of the mirror's edge with outstretched arms, just barely grazing one another.

## *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Else*

Josh Brown

Editor's Note: This story contains a brief description of alcoholism and partner abuse. Take care when reading.



Whoever blessed this world with garlic bread should be a saint. The short devil known as Devin, my best friend, sits at the kitchen counter eating Hersey's Kisses while bantering with me about my cooking. I just tell her to stuff it and I threaten to confiscate her candy. She sticks out her tongue, like a child, then she settles her chin on the counter and pouts. She stays that way for a couple minutes before raising her head to speak.

"I can't believe it. Tonight, my baby is getting married. I'm so proud I could cry," she says, tracing a line on her cheek where a tear would fall if she were not being sarcastic.

"I'm not getting married, shorty! I'm only proposing!" I responded. "I just hope he says yes," I add on at the end, in almost a whisper.

"Why wouldn't he?" Devin retorts. "You're like the best boyfriend. Honestly, your relationship is so sweet it's almost sickening." She pops another chocolate into her mouth.

"Almost." I chuckle at her, but her words, no matter how nice, are still not enough to settle my nerves.

My life after today will take one of two paths. Either my sweet boyfriend will agree to marry me, and we can live happily ever after, or he will say no and crush my heart into a million, tiny pieces. My heart feels like it will give out any moment now.

Devin smacks me on the back of the head. I rub my head for a moment before smacking her on the top of her head in return. This starts a battle between us as she tries to smack me again, and when that does not work, she attempts to kick me in the balls, her preferred method of winning fights. She eventually stops and drops her stance, returning to her seat.

"I could hear the gears grinding in your meathead from over here. You need to relax. He already loves you. You don't need to panic so much," Devin says. I huff a laugh at her.

"That's ironic coming from you, the Queen of Overthinking."

"I prefer the term 'Empress.' Now, stop overthinking, peasant," Devin says. We share a laugh. Somehow, her words this time are more reassuring than those from before, probably because these words are more genuine than anything she's said. I look up at the clock and notice that it's fifteen till six.

"Shit! You need to leave," I say.

"Rude," Devin responds without moving a muscle.

"I mean it, Satan! Micah will be here soon. I don't want you hanging around when he gets here!" I start grabbing her things. Devin tries to shoo me off, continuing to eat her candy. I grab the entire dish, which is still half full, and completely pour it into her purse. She looks me straight in the eyes.

"Damn. You weren't joking when you said you wanted me gone," Devin says. I nod at her, hand over her shoes, then dangle her purse in front of the door as if I were trying to trick a dog into going out. She slips on her flip flops and follows her purse out the door. Devin catches the door before I can close it.

"Ryan, make me a promise. Win or lose, let me know what he says. Got it?" Devin says.

I open the door slightly, and look her in the eyes.

“Of course. I promise,” I say. She smiles at me as she turns and waddles down the hallway like a penguin. I laugh at her before I shut the door and hurry to set the table. I set the table and pull the garlic bread from the oven just as there is a knock on the door.

My heart is pounding, and I feel faint, but I walk to the door, take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and open the door.

“Hey, cutie,” Micah says. “Hope I’m not late for date night.”

“Have you ever been?” The answer, of course, was no. I invite him in. As he takes off his old tennis shoes, the smell of dinner must have hit him.

“Is that garlic bread?” he exclaims. I stifle a laugh and confirm that there is, indeed, garlic bread on the menu tonight. Micah smiles at me with a genuine smile, no teeth, all dimples. I feel like I might melt under his smile. He stands and approaches me. My heart is pounding again as he draws closer, places a hand against my cheek, and kisses me.

“Thanks for dinner, babe,” he says after breaking the kiss. I smile back at him as I push in for another kiss. I break the second kiss and answer him.

“No problem, babe.” Micah then says something like “let’s eat,” but I am in too much of a daze to catch the exact words, my second kiss was more reaction than conscious thought. I notice he’s wearing his favorite pair of blue jeans, which are lightly faded, and an orange hoodie that, despite the atrocious color, looks fantastic on him. He takes a seat at the table as I get the garlic bread and transfer some to a plate. Micah looks on, but I am unsure if he is admiring my outfit, a pair of shorts and a shirt with no sleeves, or the garlic bread. Scratch that—knowing him as I do, he is absolutely looking at the garlic bread more than me. That thought forces me to laugh a bit. Micah, perhaps noticing how he was acting, blushes a bit as I make it to the table and set down the garlic bread. I return to the kitchen for the pasta and discover that there are two pieces of garlic bread missing. I give Micah a knowing look, but he looks off into the distance. I laugh again, set down the pasta, and take my seat.

The dinner begins with a toast to the meal and the inventor of garlic bread which we both laugh at. I take a sip of my sweet tea as Micah sips his Coke. Neither of us drink alcohol, but that has never taken away any of the fun we have together. Micah begins talking about his day at work, and while he talks, I think back to our first date nearly a year ago.

Micah and I met on a blind date that Devin set up. She knew Micah through a coworker and knew me from high school. The restaurant that we met at was nothing fancy; however, we both dressed up like it was. He wore a grey suit, white dress shirt, and a blue tie with fancy looking dress shoes. To this day, I can never remember my own outfit, one that had taken me two hours to pick out, because I can only remember staring at that perfect looking man in front of me.

He sat and we talked for a minute before a waiter came by, asking what we would like to

drink. I always got the most nervous about an evening at that moment because most guys expected me to drink wine or beer with them.

I told the waiter I would take water. I remember that Micah looked surprised at first, but then he smiled again. He also asked for water, and the waiter left.

I learned, months later, that Micah used to drink with his friends and his most recent ex, but stopped after he was dumped. Micah’s ex-boyfriend had dumped him after Micah made a comment about spending too much on alcohol. Although it sounds cheesy to say, the experience had left a bad taste in his mouth.

We continued the evening with food, water, and conversation. I ordered some fettuccini alfredo with garlic bread. Micah ordered ham and a baked potato with a side of garlic bread. His meal looked weird with the garlic bread addition, but he told me how much he liked the garlic bread here. I agreed with him wholeheartedly, and we talked for nearly three hours about his job at a warehouse, his coworkers, my job as a receptionist, my coworkers, our families, and friends, all before we left. After the dinner, we walked around for a bit, ending up at a park. It was still early in the night, roughly nine thirty. We sat on the swings and enjoyed the swaying motion and more conversation for another two hours, talking about our families, his multiple siblings, and my singular sibling, before we parted for the night, begrudgingly.

I hoped I would see him again soon, and as luck would have it, he invited me for breakfast the next morning. Our dates continued for about four months.

We were walking out of a movie theater when he turned to me, and with as much charm, and courage as he could muster, asked me to be his boyfriend. I nearly dropped my popcorn. I thought I had heard him wrong, so I asked him to repeat what he said. He got so nervous he turned bright red. He asked me again, and I said yes. We had our first kiss, and the rest is history. Especially that night when I blew up Devin’s phone telling her everything that had happened and giving her a play-by-play.

“You know what I mean?” Micah asks me. Micah’s words jar me out of my reminiscing. I laugh nervously.

“S-Sorry...I got lost in thought.” Micah huffs a little, then laughs.

“About what?” he asks.

“About our first date.” Micah looks at me and smiles. I can see him blushing again as he lowers his head.

“I was so nervous on our first date. I wore a freaking suit!” Micah laughs. I laugh with him.

“Even so, you looked hot in that suit,” I say.

“I was. I thought I was sweating the entire time,” Micah responds.

“Babe, no. I meant that you looked good.” I chuckle.

Micah takes a second and then facepalms himself.

“I’m such an idiot,” he says. I laugh, this time even harder. We both burst in laughter. I will admit, sometimes he is a little slow on the uptake, but he is such a genuine guy. In an entire year of knowing him, he has not lied to me. If I ask a question, he answers truthfully. I have only ever asked him to reveal one thing, though.

I asked Micah why he never drinks. He told me that his ex-boyfriend was abusive. His ex would get drunk and hit him. He dealt with it for a while, but eventually couldn’t take it anymore. Micah confronted his ex about all the alcohol he was drinking and how much it cost. His ex was furious and beat him. When he stopped, he apologized, but Micah was over it and didn’t accept his ex’s apology. That was when he got dumped. His boyfriend called him hateful things, accusing him of being too soft and trying to convince Micah that it was his fault. After hearing all that, I was scared. I was scared that I was dating someone so broken. The information was difficult to process, and I even considered leaving Micah.

I didn’t talk to Micah for an entire day after that, but then I realized something. I wasn’t scared about Micah getting hurt, I was scared that I would be the one to hurt him. I fell into a pit of despair, my thoughts circling around me. I didn’t talk to Micah for another four days. I just talked to Devin, who, contrary to her character, was sympathetic and brought me food a couple times.

Micah finally messaged me after five days. I responded immediately.

He came over, and we talked. I told him everything. I cried while I told him. He just listened. When I finished, I looked up at him with tears running down my face. I apologized. Micah sat there for a second, then stood up. He walked to the door, opened it, and left. I cried even harder as the door shut behind him. I laid in bed and cried.

Less than twenty minutes passed before there was a knock on the door. I refused to answer. The door opened on its own and Micah came in with a duffle bag and two grocery bags. He sat down everything in his hands, laid on the bed with me, and hugged me.

“You don’t have to apologize to me. I know my past is scary. If you hadn’t been scared after hearing it, I would’ve been concerned about you.” At that moment, he paused and kissed my cheek before he continued. “I had to go get a couple things, but I brought some movies to watch, some food from Subway because I know you like it, and some extra clothes from my place. I’m going to stay here till you feel better. I want you to know that I care about you, and that I’m not upset with you.” He kissed my cheek again and hugged me tighter. I began to cry again.

That feels like a long time ago compared to where we are now. I learned, after the fact,

that Devin had been helping Micah keep tabs on me. She has a habit of letting out top secret information without my permission, but I wasn’t too angry with her. In fact, it may be because of her that we survived that incident.

“Sorry, babe. What were you talking about?” I ask. Micah sighs, but starts his story over again. The story went something like this: One of his coworkers at the office, Carol, has been hooking up with both guys that deliver water to the office. Whenever they come to the office, she always asks them if they would look at something in the printer room with some excuse about their “mechanical experience.” She and the guy will disappear for nearly an hour, and then reemerge like nothing ever happened. The problem is that both guys are fighting over who gets to make deliveries to the office. They have almost gotten into a fist fight twice now. Neither one can give the other a good reason why he should be the one to make these deliveries, which creates arguments.

I marvel for a moment at Carol’s ability to keep them separate for as long as she has, but I can see how this is an issue.

“I just think she should tell them. You know what I mean?” Micah says again.

“Absolutely! She needs to choose one of them before they actually get physical with their arguments.” Micah nods. I never like seeing Micah upset, but I would be lying if I said that I did not find him attractive when he gets passionate. His eyes light up and he gets more energetic. I love seeing this side of him.

Micah and I finish eating. We clean the dishes together and put away the leftovers. Sadly, there is no leftover garlic bread. Once finished, we go to lay on the couch, Micah sitting behind me, holding me tightly. I mentally check off the first part of the evening, my anxiety increasing as I do. The next part is just a small chat, so I should have a chance to calm down a bit, but then Micah asks me a question.

“Was Devin here earlier?” he asks. I freeze. If Devin talked to Micah, he surely knows about my plans for the evening. After all, Devin is notorious for being unable to keep her mouth shut. She is unable to keep a secret to save her life! My heart is pounding as I panic. I take a mental breath before I answer him.

“Yeah. She came by for a bit to chat. How did you know?” I ask.

“I thought so. I thought I saw her car pulling out of the parking lot while I was pulling in. I wish she would’ve stuck around so that we could’ve caught up a bit,” he says.

I let out the breath I had been holding, preparing myself for the next part of the evening.

“Hey, babe. Would you like to dance with me?” I ask. A silence fills the room. I can feel Micah’s heartbeat quickening.

“You want to dance? I thought you didn’t like dancing.” Micah knows better than that. He knows I despise dancing! I have almost no rhythm and stumble over my own feet, but I know

he loves it. Whenever I put on music while I clean, I catch him dancing.

“I just want to dance with you tonight, but if you don’t want to, that’s alright, too,” I say.

“Of course, I do!” Micah exclaims. Micah practically throws me off the couch as he rushes to turn on the stereo. I wish I could laugh about the way he got so excited about dancing with me, but my nervous energy feels suffocating. I tell him to put on something slow and to take it easy on me.

In less than ten seconds, “Turning Page” by Sleeping at Last is playing. Micah and I join hands as we sway together. Micah is about three inches taller than me, so my face is in his shoulder. I drink in the moment. If everything falls apart, I want to remember this moment. I want to remember holding Micah close to me as we sway to the music. I want to remember the low hum of Micah singing along to the song. I want to remember the smell of his after-shave and cologne. I want to remember the feel of his hoodie against my face. I want to remember everything. I begin to cry.

The song ends. Micah and I separate a bit. He looks me in the eyes as I wipe away my tears and gaze into his. My heart is pounding out of control, but it is also telling me that I need to ask him right now.

“Micah...” I start.

“Ryan...” he responds. I panic, thrust my hand into my pocket, and in the least romantic way, blurt out what I want to ask him as I pull out the ring.

“Will you marry me?” we say together. I freeze. In front of my eyes, Micah is holding a ring, and here I am, also holding a ring.

“Did you just propose to me?” I ask.

“Yeah. I was trying to do it before you did it,” Micah says. At that moment, I cracked. I started laughing. Micah stares at me for a moment before he starts laughing, too. In a minute, Micah and I are leaning against each other as we cry from laughing so hard.

After a couple minutes, I catch my breath enough to ask Micah how he knew I was planning to propose.

“Because of Devin.”

“She told you?” I shout.

“Not really. I asked her about a week ago why you were acting secretive. She said that you were planning something, but downright refused to tell me what it was that you were planning. The only way I figured it out was because I saw a receipt for a ring on the counter the next day and put two and two together.” I stare at him for a second before I facepalm myself for being so stupid as to leave the receipt laying around in plain sight.

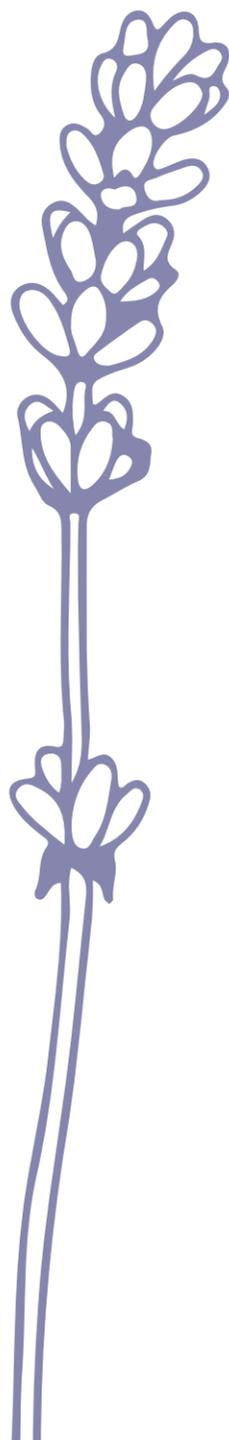
“So, what is your answer?” Micah asks. I look at him in all his handsome glory and kiss him.

“Yes.” Micah and I give each other the rings and then return to the couch.

*Payment*

Jonah Stokes

Editor's Note: This story depicts gun violence and contains mentions of drug use. Take care when reading.



George felt the need to dip lower into his hips. The strobe lights along with the pumping EDM music coursed through his movements, sweat covering his shirtless torso. His thoughts seemed to become a void; an empty space of darkness, save the twists and turns of his body. It was four hours into his shift, and George could feel his joints beginning to tire.

He didn't used to feel this. In his younger days as a dancer, he could simply dance all night, mix all kinds of alcohol, and still have the motive to go home with a trick after his shift ended. Six years in the business, though, has made his muscles start to collapse under his sweaty skin. He was nearing 28, and, in gay years, he might as well be an old man.

*Just run your fingers through your hair,* George thought, hoping to distract the men sitting at the bar from how he couldn't bend his legs as low, or move his arms in a sexy way that he knew the men would enjoy. He knew that if he distracted them with his dirty-blond curls, they wouldn't mind.

George could feel one of the men at the bar slip a bill into his underwear.

"That better be a ten for how long you've been watching me," George said over a loud beat drop.

"From the looks of it you have enough," the man said. George gazed at the man as he spun his body around in a circle. His greyish white beard looked to be iridescent in the black light shining from underneath the bar. George rolled his eyes.

"I never have enough," George said.

"Well, if that's the case what's stopping you from coming home with me," the man said. George could feel the man staring at his butt in the tight red underwear that his boss, Raphael, had given him for the night. It was men like this that made George want to hop off the bar, go home, and scream into the chipped walls of his tiny apartment on the Southside of Indianapolis.

"Why the hell would I do that?" George asked.

"Because I wouldn't disappoint," he said.

They always said this. George knew that if he were to go home with this man twice his age, he would undoubtedly be disappointed.

"You couldn't please me if you tried." George said, seeing the man gulf down another drink.

As the clock above the dance floor's red numbers struck 2:00 am, George stepped down from the bar. The bartender gave him a towel from below the shelves of hard liquor. The towel had a faint scent of tequila, but George's first thought was to wipe the sweat from his face and chest. George grabbed a bottle of Tito's from the shelf above him and poured himself two shots. He took them one after another as a man at the end of the bar screamed in his direction. George could hold his liquor. That he knew.

"I would treat you real good, baby boy." George could hear the voice of the bearded man from behind him.

George turned and smiled. "I'm sure you would try your best." It made him

uncomfortable when men would call him “boy.” To him, George was not a boy, but a fully functioning man. He was no longer that helpless boy resting in fields in rural Indiana. He had experienced too much to be called something that he no longer was.

“Just think about you coming home with me. I’d treat you to a tall glass of merlot, allow you to take in the view of downtown Indy, and then give you a nice dessert for being so good,” the man said. “You have to wear that cute pair of underwear for me though.”

George had been through this before. It seemed that every night there were three men who told him the same thing. It wasn’t that they weren’t telling the truth; they always fulfilled their promises. He would take the merlot or the gin and tonic or the whiskey sour, take in the view from a 20-story apartment, and be led to the bedroom like a dog. Yet, at the end of the night, he would walk home, feeling his cool sweat in the cold air from work and various levels of “dessert,” and arrive at his apartment to fall alone into an empty bed as the sun started to rise.

“Oh, how chivalrous of you,” George said.

“That’s how us older men are,” the man said. “I’m John.”

George gazed at John’s outstretched hand, seeing the etches of veins under the man’s black armchair. He thought about how the veins in his arm were beginning to look like the mans. Was this his future?

“I bet you’d treat me real nice, John.”

A skinny boy, probably freshly 21 years old, with a leather harness fell onto the bar.

“Give me another shot!” He said to the bartender.

“How about you treat that twink real nice,” George said, starting to walk along the inside of the bar away from John. He laughed to himself as he threw the tequila-stained towel to the shirtless bartender.

“Give me a clean one next time,” George said. The bartender rolled his eyes.

John followed. “I don’t want a boy who can’t handle his liquor.”

“And who said I can?” George asked.

“I’ve been watching you all night, taking shot after shot,” John said, “and you still move like a porn star.”

George felt a tinge of vomit rise in his throat. *And you move like you have a colonoscopy bag attached to you*, George thought.

“Well, I always appreciate a fan,” George said through a smile.

“How could someone not be?” John smiled, showing teeth that were a little too yellow for George to want to look at.

George shook his head and continued to walk away from John, grabbing his hoodie from underneath the end of the bar. He passed through the dance floor filled with drunk and coked out men. He could hear one of the younger men say how much he was rolling.

*These fucking twinks and their molly*, George thought. Feeling an urge in his chest for some nicotine, George walked to the direction of the Exit door to the back alley behind the club.

He looked behind him to see if John was still following him, but could only see a symphony of peccs and arms and abs.

It was a windy night. Winter was kissing its way into the air, and George could feel goosebumps immediately form as he stepped out the door. The wet concrete of the alley was lit only by the nearby street, the music booming from inside.

George pulled out a lighter and the pack of Marlboro Reds from his hoodie pocket and placed an unlit cigarette between his lips. As he was lighting it, he heard the door behind him open.

“You can’t get rid of me that quickly,” John said. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

“Well, if it isn’t it the chivalrous daddy I was just thinking about,” George said, staring at an old stain on John’s shirt.

*Disgusting*. George zipped up his jacket. Why did he say these things still?

“Oh, so you’ve been thinking about me?” John said.

George wanted to say that John was the most disgusting person he had ever seen. The yellowness of his teeth; his nose hairs seeming to join in matrimony with his strairy mustache; the way his Axe body spray immediately permeated through the alley when he walked out the door; his pants, which were too small to cover his beer belly. George wanted him to leave. At one point in John’s life, George considered, John could have been beautiful, just like George was. Yet, through years of secrecy or rejection or self-hatred, George could see the emotional despair that John felt in the way he looked. This was how it always was with the older men who still went to clubs. Perhaps they partied too much in their prime, then one day woke up to see that their beauty had faded into a brisk nothing. George knew that one day, perhaps, he would have this same fate. Because since when did a go-go dancer ever end up with a white picket fence?

“And what if I was thinking about you?” George said. He knew how this would end.

“Well, if you were, I’d want you to think a little less when you’re away from me,” John said, blowing a cloud of smoke into George’s face, “and a little more when you’re in my arms.”

George took a drag from his cigarette and faced the street to see a man puking behind a nearby dumpster. George thought of the way the silhouette of the puking man reminded him of another place; the yellows of a streetlamp shining like a bright Madonna. It made him think of his childhood. George thought of his mother teaching him how to can green beans. He thought of the way that the sun used to rise as he sipped a morning coffee with his father as the rooster set out its morning coo.

*If only I could have stayed*, George thought, thinking of that moment when he came home from school and all his clothes were in the yard. If only George and that boy (what was his name again?) hadn’t been caught in the cornfield at the boy’s grandfather’s house. If only he would never have met the boy in the first place.

If only his parents would have loved him.

George heard John let out a deep sigh from behind him.

“I could pay you for your time.”

George frowned, turning back to John.

He forced a smile, “I get off in two hours, if your joints can last that long, baby,” George said, feeling the deep void in his chest begin to rise.

“You’d be surprised what these old bones can do,” John said, throwing his cigarette as he went back inside.

After John left, George looked again to the reflection of the streetlamp on the damp concrete. Was that his fate? He wondered how long it would be until he became exactly like John: lonely and old.

It was then that a loud bang came from inside the club. Shot after shot after shot after shot. *Shooter*, George thought. He heard the screams of all the people inside as his immediate reaction was to run as fast as he could down the alley and into the street. As he ran, he noticed more people leaving through the back exit behind him, screaming for help.

“There’s been a shooting at Rectify Nightclub,” he heard a deep female voice scream into her phone.

As he entered the street, the cacophony of people walking through the streets glared at him and everyone else leaving the club. He was running in tight red underwear, and an oversized hoodie. What did he look like? He wondered if the people could see the fear in his eyes.

He didn’t stop.

This was not the first time that George became one with his mortality. If he had been in that bar, dancing the way that he danced every night, he would likely have been the first one to be shot. Did John’s persistence save his life? Was it fate that he was in the alley the moment that the first shots got fired? He couldn’t stop thinking as he ran faster and faster, slowly feeling his old bones begin to give way.

After a few more blocks of running, seeing the faces of confused pedestrians stare at his fearful, desolated body, he stopped, again staring at the rays of streetlamps becoming engulfed by the tears in his eyes.

He stood next to a busy downtown street, cars speeding by him. George heard sirens in the distance, most likely going to the bar that he was just at. Yet, this far from the bar, George was secluded, free from the fear of his life.

George closed his eyes. *Dance*, he thought as he began moving his arms above his head, his arms and tired legs moving his body in a way that served him. In the darkness of his closed eyes, there was nobody staring, no men trying to take him home to use him for their selfish pleasure. In his mind’s eye, all he saw was a barren field, a safety net of the natural world. In it he saw his childhood, his parents, the first boy he ever kissed, the way he was deprived of that familial safety that every child needs. In the movement of his body, he was no longer an

aging man, but a man who was in a moment of youth.

He danced, danced as if the world was serving him. George was one with the world, and the world, it seemed, moved in unison to his moving figure.

## *My Favorite Spot*

Britney Chappell



April 18th, we woke up to the warm sun beaming in through the window, warming up our chilly room. I rolled over to wrap up against my girlfriend like a backpack. She was always so warm. I could feel her squeeze my arms around her tighter.

“Happy anniversary,” I whispered to her. I barely got a response because she was still mostly asleep. Our dog, Kash, heard the rustling and jumped on the bed to greet us, kissing our faces with his slobbery tongue.

“Okay, okay I am up,” Jesse said, pushing the dog off her. “Good morning sunshine,” I said to her.

“Good morning gorgeous, happy anniversary,” she said in a sleepy voice.

Jesse and I have been together for three years today, so we decided to spend the day doing all of our favorite things together. Sleeping in till 10:30 am, then brunch at our local coffee shop named “Cup-of-Joe,” where we always shared a stack of pancakes, eggs and bacon. I drink my vanilla iced coffee and Jesse sticks to water. We decided to save our favorite thing for last, going hiking in “our spot.” I can’t for the life of me remember the official name of it, but we always call it our hidden spot.

The first time we went to our hidden spot it was two weeks after we officially starting dating.

“Okay I have this spot that I found a couple of months ago when I came hiking alone. I was feeling a bit adventurous and veered off the path a bit,” Jesse explained to me as we started making our way to the path.

We started walking on the designated path at first but quickly ended up veering off to explore into the woods.

“Do you know where we are going or are you just guessing and hoping that you find the same spot again?” I asked.

“Just trust me,” Jesse responded.

We ended up in this opening in the woods that overlooked a hidden lake. It was a deep blue and sat very still, not bothered by any wildlife. It was so quiet and peaceful.

“This is it baby! What do you think?”

“It feels almost mystical, like a unicorn is about to walk out of the forest and start drinking from the lake, but it is beautiful.”

We decided to hang up our Eno in the trees then climbed in, cuddled up and stared up at the trees, listening to all the wildlife that rustled around us. While we laid there and looked up at the trees, we talked about what we wanted our futures to look like.

“I see myself in a big city like New York or LA or something like that. I want to be a journalist for the *New York Times* or any other big magazine, I am not too picky. I’ll live in a nice condo, but not own a car, I mean who needs one in the city anyway? I’ll

probably be wearing nice business outfits like pantsuits a lot, and kids...well we will see. What do you think?" I paused and waiting for Jesse's response to my long-winded explanation of what I see in my future.

"I think it sounds just like you," Jesse said with a smile.

"Okay, so what about you? I want to know what you see for yourself."

"I want to live in a city, maybe not as big as New York or LA, but I wouldn't be opposed. I would like to have a little bit of land to build a house on, and definitely cars and a boat. I definitely want as many dogs as I can handle, and I would be down for some children if the timing was right. I would work for a marketing agency somewhere and make a decent living and then come home every night to my wife. What do you think about that?" Jesse said, looking at me, hoping I would agree.

"I think there is definitely some good middle ground there that I can work with, and I mean I'm also down for the boat," I replied.

Jesse didn't say anything for a minute, then put her hand on my face, looked at me and said, "I love you." I was a bit taken back because we had been dating for about two weeks at this point, but I felt the same way.

"I love you too," I replied to her.

"Okay, but don't feel like you have to say it back just because I said it. It is okay if you don't want to say it yet. I just couldn't keep it in any longer," Jesse said.

"I promise you I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. I love you Jesse."

We continued to hangout in our Eno and talk for a little bit longer, then we decided to pack up and head back to the car.

"This is now our spot, I am officially declaring it," Jesse said as we both climbed into the car.

"Couldn't think of a better place to call our spot baby."

I had been in only one other serious relationship prior to this one. I dated around of course, but relationships were just not my thing. Growing up in a conservative Christian family, and going to a private Christian high school, doesn't leave you much of an option to explore your sexuality, or individuality at that. Questioning it would even be looked down upon. I struggled in high school, because I knew I was different. I knew that there was this part of me that was looked at as wicked and damned. I had a hard time coping with that, so I avoided dating all-together.

My senior year of high school I started dating a boy that was a few years older than me. The relationship was fine, I enjoyed spending time with him and getting to feel like I was normal. We dated for about a year. During the time of us dating he told me he was never going to be in love with me or tell me he loved me because "he just didn't do things like that." I didn't

really know how to deal with that, so I stayed with him and just continued to act like everything was normal. I was in a heterosexual relationship and that's all that mattered. After graduating high school and moving to Chattanooga to start my college career, my boyfriend and I decided to part ways. This was the best thing that could have happened to me. I finally was able to blossom. I didn't feel restricted, or judged to be who I wanted to be, or at least to try and figure out who that person was. In high school I never officially put a label on my sexuality, because labelling it made it feel very real, but after a year of being in college I was confident in saying I was a bisexual woman.

Jesse's sexuality experience was similar to mine. She didn't come out (she identifies as a lesbian) until she got out of her small town. In high school she dated a few boys, but described them as "more like best friends who were obsessed with me" rather than her boyfriend. Coming from a small town where everyone believed one thing and looked down on you if you didn't agree, she did not feel comfortable being openly gay. She didn't want to be the talk of the town, getting looks everywhere she went. Once moving to Chattanooga, Jesse was able to finally dress, act and date whoever she wanted to. She was finally able to be herself. Dating was never anything too serious, and it never lasted longer than a couple of months. Girlfriends would come and go, but never anyone that really stuck.

"I used to think I was never going to be able to fall in love," Jesse said to me one night when we were getting ready for bed. "That was until I met you of course. I know it sounds conceited, but everyone would always fall harder for me then I did for them and I would have to be the bad guy." She continued on, "Something is just...different...better about you."

Jesse and I met through the popular dating app Tinder. We matched in October, chatted a little bit on the app, but then quickly moved to Snapchat. We Snapchatted pretty consistently for a few months before actually hanging out for the first time. In those three months we made several plans to hangout, but I would almost always find a reason not to go. I don't know if it was from nerves or that I thought she might be crazy since we met on a dating app, but finally, on February 14th—yes, Valentine's Day—we decided to go on our first date. I showed up to her apartment a little after dinner time. When I walked up, she was waiting outside for me.

"Hey! It's good to finally see your face in person," Jesse said.

"You too, I was beginning to think I was never going to get to," I replied.

We then shared a slightly awkward side hug and walked inside. When I walked in, I was instantly greeted by a 120 pound goldendoodle that belonged to her roommate.

"That's Sam, he's our guard dog, as you can see his is very vicious," Jesse said to me as Sam was attacking me with slobbery kisses.

“Please make yourself at home,” Jesse said as she found her spot on the couch. I sat down next to her, leaving a couple of inches between our legs.

“I stopped by and picked up some chocolate covered strawberries on my way home from work today, but my roommate also made some, so we have a lot, do you want some?” Jesse asked me.

“Yeah, I would love some thank you,” I replied.

We spent the rest of the night talking non-stop while all the Marvel movies played in the background. Any bit of awkwardness slipped away within the first fifteen minutes. I didn’t realize how long I had been there until I looked down at my phone and the time read 2:07 am.

“Oh my gosh! I had no idea it was so late,” I said in a bit of panic.

“You are more than welcome to spend the night if you don’t want to drive home tonight,” Jesse offered.

“I have class at 8 am in the morning...so I have to go home unfortunately.” I said back reluctantly.

We both stood up from the couch shared a full hug for about 30 seconds then she walked me out to my car.

“When can I see you again?” Jesse asked.

“Soon,” I replied, then kissed her on the cheek and got into the car.

I drove home that night and couldn’t stop smiling the whole 15-minute car ride. I knew then something was special about her.

“Happy three years my love,” Jesse said to me as we pulled up to the gravel parking lot at the beginning of the trail.

“Happy three years to you too, my baby,” I replied.

She pulled my head to her and kissed me on the forehead. Her lips were soft and warm against my skin.

“I couldn’t imagine my life without you in it,” Jesse said as she put her hand on my cheek and kissed me.

I couldn’t help but to start smiling like an idiot grinning from cheek to cheek.

“Three years later and you still make me blush,” I said.

We got out of the car, got our stuff together, and headed on the path. We started on the path knowing good and well we had no intentions on staying on it. We almost immediately went off and headed to our spot. It was the beginning of spring and the sun was shining through the treetops. The sun felt warm against our faces, but the breeze kept it from being too hot. The smell of grass filled the air accompanied with the sounds of birds chirping in the trees. We found our spot with ease. When we walked up to the opening there was a blanket set up with candles that were lit, rose petals spread all across the blanket, and a bottle of champagne

set out with two glasses.

“What is this?” I said, very confused.

“Baby come here,” she said as she took my hand and guided me to the blanket.

“Listen, I have never loved anyone the way that I love you. I could not imagine anyone better fit for me than you. You have taught me so much about love and compassion and loyalty and just how to be myself over these past three years. I never want to go another day without you being a part of it. So, with that being said—Isabel, will you marry me?” Jesse said with happy tears in her eyes as she got down on one knee.

“Of course,” I replied with tears rolling down my cheek.

She slid the ring on my finger, grabbed my face and kissed me. Jesse then reached down, grabbed the champagne, and popped it open.

“I love you more than anything baby,” she said while pouring me a glass.

“I love you more than anything baby, and I can’t wait to be your wife,” I replied.

## Author Bios

### Jonah Stokes (He/Him)

I am a graduating Senior at UTC majoring in English: Creative Writing and History. I enjoy writing Fiction, Poetry, and Creative Nonfiction and find that the best forms of writing come from experience. The pieces that I have submitted to this anthology are a representation of my own experience as a gay man, and I believe that the diversified Queer stories in this anthology will create more dialogue surrounding Queer love, hope, experiences, and livelihood in all of its forms.

### Jo Kibble (They/Them)

I'm a 2021 graduate from UTC with a BA in English: Creative Writing and a minor in Religious Studies. I plan to work in the publishing industry, and hope to use my career as a platform to uplift important stories and voices; this anthology is one way in which I can do just that, and I'm grateful for the chance to co-edit it alongside Jonah. I am nonbinary, and like many, I struggle with mental health, specifically anxiety. "Shaking Hands" is a partially true story of my own experiences, and is my attempt to focus on the intersection of mental health and Queer identity in a way that is hopeful, healthy, and positive.

### Britney Chappell (She/Her)

I am a graduating Senior at UTC with a major in Communication and a minor in Creative Writing. I enjoy writing from my own personal experiences, so I tend to stick to Creative Nonfiction when it comes to writing. My pieces for the anthology are close to my heart, because they are based on my life and relationship. I think it's important to show an accurate representation of a lesbian relationship, because so often lesbians are oversexualized in the media. My stories follow two women on their journey to a happy and healthy relationship.

### Bry Jones (She/Her)

I am a rising senior at UTC majoring in Language and Literature with a minor in promotion. My ultimate goal is to work in the publishing industry, but I also enjoy creative writing. I drew my piece from my experience as a queer woman and from my childhood in a Southern religious household. As someone who wants to have a hand in producing the next generation's literature, there is always the thought that there needs to be more diverse stories. What this anthology means to me is that there could be other LGBTQ+ youth reading it and it could help or comfort them and that makes a world of difference, even if it's just one person.

### Olivia Ross (She/Her)

Olivia Ross is a graduating senior from UTC.

### Alicia Gladman (She/Her)

I am a senior-ish at UTC majoring in Creative Writing with a Music minor. I moved to Tennessee after living in Vancouver for much of my life, where I worked and lived in a dynamic community that has for many years been forced to contend with the devastating effects of a toxic drug stream. I am interested in exploring the intersections of identity, self-determination, and substance use, and depicting resilience in a world that is more interested in morality than survival.

### Christine Smalley (She/Her)

I am a senior at UTC with a major in Creative Writing and a minor in Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies. I enjoy writing fiction, mainly fantasy, but I'm branching more into socio-realist modes as I learn to write from my own experience. The piece I have submitted to this anthology is a candid exploration of my experiences as I come to terms with my own identity. I believe it's important to spread the word of Queer experiences of all forms and this anthology will provide a place to have voices heard.

### Toby Barefoot (He/Him)

I am a Senior at UTC majoring in English: Creative Writing and minoring in Communications. I enjoy writing Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Horror. I am also a multimedia artist with a passion for storytelling. The piece I have submitted is a combination of my own struggle with self and sexuality along with a paranormal twist.

### Josh Brown (He/Him)

I am looking forward to being a junior at UTC in the fall, majoring in Psychology and minoring in English: Creative Writing. I enjoy writing stories with duality, as that is that way I was raised, and incorporating duality into my stories is what I strive for. I enjoy characters that have more than one side to them, including a deep, rich past. My submission began as my depiction of the classic relationship that, to an outsider, appears to be too sweet to be stable, but through revision and expansion, the story has evolved into a look at the relationship and the foundations of it. I hope that those that read my story will find a relationship like that someday, one where their partner loves them unconditionally.

