



Under Construction Editorial Board

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Yellow tape stretched over an inconspicuous doorway.

Police milled about before it with pale faces and hushed tones.

Word of it traveled from student to student. Their voices were quiet and scared, and for a while the only thing people talked about was how fifteen people vanished from campus one day. Eventually, the community college closed for alleged water problems, but that was a lie. The longer the college was closed, the less people thought about it, and eventually everyone went their separate ways. The missing people were forgotten about, just as many cold case victims are.

Before the college closed, there was a room near the library that students always avoided because it stank. The room stank so badly that towels were shoved underneath the door during the nights and a custodian would douse it in a healthy spritz of Febreze. The problem with the room wasn't that it stunk, although the stench of old blood, warm slimy meat, and strange, sweet molasses was certainly bad. The problem was the heat. The heat wasn't like an oven, no, it was a sickly humid summer day. The air was sticky and the desks had just a touch of condensation, and any students attending classes there would become so slick with sweat their hair would start to drip with water.

People started disappearing. First it was one person, then two, and finally an entire nine o'clock class. The room started to smell so rank that it could be smelled with the door closed all the way across the hallway. Sometimes if one were to listen close

enough, the heater inside the room sounded rhythmic, like deep sighs. It seemed darker than it should have been, and the floors gave just a bit underneath shoes.

The rumors, hushed and afraid as they were, all said the same thing.

"It's *alive*."

Song to the Heavens

By Gabrielle Orth

Cathedrals aren't supposed to look like this. Hell comes from above, not below. Hell is in the pooling puddles of blood and wine, and it stains the rose glass crimson and dark brown. Where is the ceiling, now? The drops from hell hit my face. The scene around me is dripping with violence, and the sound of song cannot be heard above the rumble and droning of the world beyond. I sing louder and stretch my hands towards the stained, broken rose glass and let the drops fall from above into my eyes and mouth. God will protect us, we pray. God will hear our prayers, we cry. And cry, we do.

Tears are like blood, like the blood in our veins and the blood pooling around fallen bodies. I have never seen this much blood before, but end times are said to be hell on earth, and heavens above, I believe this to be hell. This is a cathedral, at least, it was. Me and my clergy came here as soon as the bombs began to drop. We wanted to sing for our nation, to cry out to God for salvation. The song we sing swells from a low note to a lasting wail, and the high note can just be heard over the sounds beyond. We are all crying openly now, and the clear lines turn rusty-colored down our cheeks. The ground below me and my clergy are wet with tears and blood.

I see bursting bombs reflected in the puddles, but instead I turn my gaze to the heavens. The sky explodes and the blast is so bright that my eyes burn. I can't see it when the chapel is decimated around us, but I can hear it. The pleading song the clergy and I sang was cut short and the sounds of war could once again be heard. The taste of blood, ash, and concrete filled my mouth. The song is gone now, and I taste iron and concrete in my mouth. God will hear us, I pray. God will protect us.

I only hope that some of us are still alive. I know I am alive, because my bones creak

Stella's Art the sign said in bold bright letters. It was Stella's graduation, and Stella herself was there, smiling and thanking people for coming as her family members and friends filed themselves into the garage where free food and drinks were available. Stella was feeling a pang of nostalgia, though. She walked by the *Stella's Art* sign and stared at her childhood drawings, her teenage drawings, and her adult drawings. As a child her lines were shaky and undefined. The people were too wide, too tall, hair too stringy, and eyes like dinner plates. She remembered doodling at recess on scraps of paper just to have them blow away in the wind. At teacher-parent conferences teachers had strained smiles as they said *Stella's bright and creative! She's just not very... attentive.* She had flashes of memories where she drew in the margins of her notebook instead of paying attention in class. As a teenager her art became more defined as her perception of the world deepened. Her scraggly people turned into rough depictions of landscapes. Stella realized that

pop from the canvas by layering paint. Her paintings came alive with her honed techniques and her love for detail.

Stella stopped there and looked back at her old art and then at her newest art, only a few months old. As a child she would lose focus on her art after only a few minutes, but now her art took her hours, days sometimes. Stella remembered how her teachers used to complain about her attentiveness and had a small chuckle about the irony of her art, which was once a "distraction" was now her focus.

She was going to be an art student this coming fall, and she was confident that one day, her paintings would be in hundreds of people's homes across the country. Stella turned from the art exhibit and smiled as her friends crowded her.

The Johnsons

By Roy Humlicek-Spindler

"Fine day, I think, yeah?" heard Ronnie as he left Bozho's bakery. The man continued, smiling. "Bozho sending his best?"

Ronnie leaned on his axe, then bit into the loaf that he had just bought. "It's great," he said, slightly sadly.

"I might get one myself," said the other man as he counted out dull coins in his hand. "Well, see you later," he said, and walked into the store, humming.

Ronnie sighed and watched the door swing closed. He wondered if that man survived. It was unlikely.

His fingers felt rough upon the heavy axe as he walked down the street. He took several more bites of the bread. It was the best bread he'd ever had. The cobbles under his feet turned to rough ground as he left town and headed home. The woods and the gentle stream gave way as Ronnie made his way there. After some peaceful walking, the trees cleared into grassland, and he was able to see the cottage where he and his wife lived atop the hill it sat on. Ronnie stopped by his animal pen and stared without looking at the animals. His mind was far away from where he was. He was not looking forward to telling his wife about what he had done, or rather what he had not done. In another two bites, Ronnie finished his bread, and with his now4()-63(h)4(e)

"Bella, those are people! I don't care when they are from. We're one of them."

"No. No we aren't. Are you being serious right now? Speak English, for God's sake!"

"I—"

"Face it, Ronnie. You aren't going to make a difference against four thousand Huns."

"But—"

Bella interrupted again. "You're breaking my heart, Ronnie. You'd throw all we have away for some peasants?"

Ronnie spoke in English now, a desperate appeal. "Okay, we don't have to fight. But we have to lead them to safety. We'll leave right after that." He held out his arms, possibly hoping she'd embrace him and tell him she was wrong.

"No, Ronnie," she pushed his arms aside and pushed past him into the bedroom, grabbed the gun and protein bars and put them in a fabric sack. Then she came back into the main room. "Not we. If you want to stay, you do that yourself."

Ronnie was silent.

"You come with me now, or you miss out. We've only got one Kearney, so you'd better think long and hard about this." She started to pick out a new destination on the touch screen.

Ronnie wal0.00000912 76Cten-USIA0RZ @1

Ronnie took a deep breath. "You know, you could probably come back in a few years and see me if... if I survive. Just punch in a few years from now, and you can find me."

Bella knew the odds of her being reunited with her husband were low. Even if he survived, the Kearney was not precise enough to locate this particular village again. She didn't want to cause any needless pain, so she didn't voice her doubts.

"I'll try," she said. Ronnie nodded.

"Don't you get it?" Bella said suddenly. "I'm not ready to die. I don't see how you are. This is like a vacation. Why are you taking it so seriously?"

The tall grasses that would soon be ablaze swayed around them.

"I'm not ready to die. But neither are those people," said Ronnie.

"Ronnie! Wake up!" she was almost in tears. "Those people are already dead! They died *long* before you were born. Even if by some miracle you save them all, they'll still die! It won't matter!"

"Not to them."

Bella turned away. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That I'm not as strong as you are," she said sarcastically.

"Don't do that," he said softly. "Not when I'll never see you again."

planned on, but she had to take what she could get. Maybe that also explained why she was relinquishing her freedom willingly to a man destined to leave her one way or another. The man that stood across from her wasn't a cruel man, but she couldn't say he was kind either. He was tall and fair-skinned with contrasting dark hair and eyes. Many women fell at his feet with nothing more than a look. It often unsettled her when they did so because he never turned them away. But that reality collapsed when he was chosen to be drafted. He claimed he didn't believe in the war he was forced to fight in. Nevertheless, he had been gone for some time that she could not remember, but she was almost relieved that she was finally alone. But here they now stood, face-to-face, or rather mask-to-mask, and repeated the words of the minister.

The minister spoke for a long while. His accent was one that she would remember because she had never heard a comparison to the uniqueness of it. But he spoke so long that she felt herself zoning in and out of reality. Until something caught her attention. A flying speck of light in the distance shone out from all the fog that surrounded them like a blanket. It wasn't much, but it was moving and that's why she became so engrossed in watching it. What could it have been? Where could it be going? She wanted to know more about it. But she couldn't, so instead, she watched it follow its consistent path to its unknown location. The minister, nor her soon-to-be wedded partner, noticed her lack of interest in what was happening before them. Neither had she noticed

ahead. So, when the minister called on her for an answer, she said, "I do." And she knew where the trail of fire would end.



Does it cover the costs of submerging my flesh
in a body of water so it emerges again
capable of love and
capable of reading the
language of touch?

And if nothing else,
does my plan cover pains unknown to me,
aches that ennui has poured in my blood and
how my lungs writhe and heave when
I remember chances I missed and
how my hair sheds when it lays on
a pillow not a chest and
how my throat still feels full since
he said *I don't love you*
while I prayed to him drunk
for another chance
or a final kiss.
Does my plan cover any of that?
Does my plan cover anything,
anything at all?

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Cup of Coffee

By Magdi Hazaa

I

The pieces stare at me
from the laminate floor.

Tiny islands of sunny teal
grade into the sharp grays
of a colder weather.

He'll never forgive me for this.

I try thinking of anything else,
of memory,
of hindsight,
of the inertia of water
in warming ravines,
of stories only worth telling in the dark.

I clean,
sweeping from the middle.

I separate this sea of ceramic
masquerading for glass.

An accidental miracle
in which

I'm the clumsy savior of nobody,
the prophet of debris.

April's morning signs
refractions of light
against the splinters

only one another
could understand,
all these stories,
and *a//*this ease
could be
one
glass
away
from breaking.

through the phone, infused with unwelcome
sympathy, she is not coming back.
She is never coming back.
So, travel off the beaten path,
away from the tapping of the
black and white checkered woodpeckers,
through the tangled branches that
pull and scratch at your skin, sloughing
off the layers of guilt, shame, and life-consuming
heartache. Step over the faded green foliose lichens that
hug the fallen pine trees, beyond the musty rotting
logs bursting with creamy black-dimpled mushrooms,
until the boundary between life and death is no longer discernible,
and the only sound that can be heard, radiating silently
through the trees, struggling under the weight
of the heavy gray sky, is the question permanently tattooed across
the center of your mind,

Why?

When a safe place is found, near a ray of sunlight,
reveal the dandelion,
and let the seeds disperse into the chaos at
the mercy of the capricious breeze until each
parachute of fluff has come to rest on a bed of dried maple
leaves or coarse black dirt, and
let each one go
the weight will lessen just enough to pull your boots out of the
sticky black mud

By Pa Vang

The stars told me

about your existence.

The galaxy-filled night sky

I told the stars

About who I am.

I let the galaxy-filled night sky

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Soft summer breeze

whispers your name

Tickling grasses

lull us closer again.

My thumping heart told me you'll come,

and come to stay.

To relay my name to you.

Tickling grasses

lull us closer again.

Listening to your thumping heart,

Telling you I'll come to stay.

Little Devi

By Pa Vang

Winter Wonderland

I'm walking.
I'm walking on the street.
Cars zooming next to me.

A jacket.
A very big jacket.
I'm wearing a big blue jacket.
Snow falling beside me.

Fingers tight around my backpack straps
Gloveless fingers freezing red.
Breathing out fogging up my glasses
The cold seeping into my soul.

Slowly,
Slowly,
I'm walking on the street,
Wearing a big blue jacket,
Breathing out fogging up my glasses,
Staring at the snow white sky,
The cold seeping into my soul,
As if an eternity has passed by.

I finally feel free,
I finally feel alive.
It's a winter wonderland.

Wind Blows East

By Pa Vang

The wind blows east
But my dream yearns west.
No matter what,
My heart cannot rest.

Looking up at the sky
It's so very blue.
I wonder if
You could've been here with me too.

People are leaving

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By Roy Humlicek-Spindler

Money's being waved in his face,
On which something is written
He tries to read it as it moves

Please! I want—

You never hear what he wants
A trapdoor opens at his feet

You gulp
Good thing you are a fast reader
You might just get out of this

The line shifts forwards
Some fall through the trapdoor,
Some are only ridiculed before being let go

The front of the line meets you
Relief melts your heart.

How could anyone misunderstand?
The instructions are simple
They must be idiots

The trapdoor and floor make a gap
You see frightened eyes below
But that's their problem

The cat even lets you take a dollar
So you'll remember better
You wave to the others in line

They have nothing to fear,
So long as they can read
And are eager to submit

You were expecting to tremble in terror,
After the panicked squeaking
But only the correct people fell, the mice, you joke

Followthecatthecatknowsbestfollowthecatthecatknowsbest drones a lazy loudspeaker

By Roy Humlicek-Spindler

Army of scarecrows marching
Their stakes prevent movement
But your eyes see them getting closer

They *can* injure, you've seen them
But though you don't notice,
There are no charcoal feathers on you

Army of scarecrows laughing
As you clutch your head.
Infernal sounds, the lot.

If you had a torch,
Those scarecrows would die.
For the crime of excessive laughter

You've been told they'll hurt you
If they come near
But if scarecrows could move, why would you be their target?

Who are you to say what's between their straws?
Or 'if they only had a brain'
You say so much you forget the straw you harvested, then planted in the soil

Those you call monsters would like
Nothing more than to

Shield you from what you *should* fear

Surrounded by scarecrows now

You're given no choice

Shouldn't you be dead already? These are scarecrows after all.

One tells you his story

People always tell kids to cherish their childhood, for it will disappear before they know it. Even with this warning, I still was taken off-guard once it finally hit me in the face. No, it wasn't when my friends moved on to other groups or the shift from elementary to middle school. It was the goodbye to my second home that had been owned by two people who cared for me as their own grandchild, even if they were only daycare providers. While my parents were my only relatives in Minnesota, my family expanded to include a jolly woman named Joyce, and her gruff husband, Richard. These two people were there for me, their doors always open. But now, I had to learn to come to terms with saying goodbye to that place.

My mom rang the yellowing and cracked doorbell as the wind whistled briskly around us. While we waited for the door to open up, I was brought back to the mornings my mom would take my half-asleep-self up those stairs to wait just like this.

Before long, we were greeted by a cheery welcome. "Oh, hi! I was just curling my hair," she said, letting us in before wrapping me up with a big hug. I could hear her distinct Minnesota country accent "It's so good to see you! It's been so long." She smiled, directing us to the couch. I smiled back, realizing it's been too long since we've last seen each other. The days just seemed to run away from me.

I quietly waited for her and my mom to finish catching up. She looked at me.

"And look how much you have grown! What grade are you in?" she asked.

"8th," I quietly replied, giving a big smile.

"Wow! You are growing up so dam fast," she began to ramble as usual. "Let me get Richard. He's out in the garden."

As I waited for Joyce to tip-toe her way back into the room, I glanced around. I can still recall it, like my memory keeps my childhood alive, even if only for a moment. I remember I cried when they replaced their old, overstuffed fabric couch with a sleeker, modern one. The TV VCR sat below the TV where the other daycare kids and I fought over who would slide the tape in. Their home phone recalled memories of me eavesdropping with the other daycare children on her mundane conversations. My mischief made it all the more exciting. Every picture on the wall, every sticker on the door sat bittersweet in my stomach. This short visit was as if I returned home one last time. My slight hoarding issue aside—

She flipped to the next picture, one with my best friend and me sitting on the porch in their backyard. "And there you two are. Do you still see her?"

My mom answered, "She just saw her last week."

"Aw, it's great that you two are

We spent the afternoon with them. Though I sat silently, I listened to the conversations about the little things in everyone's daily lives. The moving process. What they had for breakfast. Their plans for this week. Retirement life seemed fun. But as the clock hit four, I noticed we were getting ready for the Minnesotan goodbye. I quickly took in the surroundings, knowing I had a few minutes before leaving this place for good. With one last goodbye, she sent us off with a warm hug and a bag full of food. Her jolly face only changed slightly throughout all these years; her chubby cheeks kept the lines of old age away. Joyce and Richard are the grandparents that I never had; perhaps they were even more than grandparents to me. I don't know if they will ever know how deep their affection runs in my veins, but their care will stick with me for the rest of my life, just like the memories the photographs we passed around had captured.

Remember Me

By Nicholas Guttormson

out of is crumbling. I step into the garage through the missing wall. Three rolls of carpet padding are still stacked against the corner. I crawl on top of them like I did so many times as a child. Back then, carpet was stacked to the ceiling, and I would

rhubarb patch now grows wild near the back porch, and I snap off a piece and gnaw on the edge as I walk up to the back door. Rhubarb is made into sugary fruit pies for a reason. My face puckers from the sour stalk, and I throw the rest away. I miss the rhubarb sauces, crisps, and pies that used to be made inside.

I try the door, but it's locked. Peering in the window, I see the old familiar kitchen where my family would gather to cook, eat, and celebrate. The steep, narrow stairs to the basement descend from the kitchen. When I was six, I fell down those stairs before a family Christmas dinner. I was told it wasn't the first time, but it was the first time I remember. My blanket didn't care that I was going downstairs; it tripped me up just the same. Grandma was in the basement kitchen finishing the mashed potatoes for dinner. She rushed over, leaving the unmashed potatoes butter-less and lonely.

"I fell!" I cried.

After seeing that nothing was broken and everything was moving, she said, "You look all right to me."

Her joints cracked and popped as she sat next to me. "What's that sound?" I asked, quickly forgetting, as only six-year-olds can, that I was supposed to be crying.

Her laugh was booming and genuine. It was a beautiful laugh that filled any room and made you smile and laugh along, even if you didn't know what was funny. "It's the sound of getting old," she said. "Do you wanna help me make potatoes?" I did. We went to the basement kitchen, and she boosted me up on the counter where I could mash the potatoes while she added the butter and cream. I mashed until my arms were sore, sneaking tastes along the way. Grandma lifted me down from the counter, sending me off with a big warm hug and a mouthful of potatoes. I ran back

upstairs, careful to hold my blanket high in the air and away from my feet. The rest of my family started to stream in, ready for another holiday at Grandma's house.

No one streams in this house anymore. I try the door again, hoping to get inside and explore the familiar spaces, but it doesn't budge. I sit on the porch step, hiding my face under my jacket from the cold, wet wind. In the darkness of my jacket, I can see the whole house as I remember it. I see myself sitting on the living room floor learning to knit. Grandma knits behind me in her favorite chair: a simple, wooden, Amish rocker. My grandfather sleeps in his favorite chair: a dark, leather lazy boy by the fire. If you turned off the TV he would wake up and say, "I was watching that." He would turn the TV back on and fall right back asleep.

I can see the panic in the house when my brother had his accident. My aunt paced in front of the kitchen window, and Grandma rushed into action to get him to the hospital. But I have to remind myself I was only two months old at the time. I've been told that story so many times it feels like a memory.

Grandma would also tell me the story of falling down the basement stairs just to get some potatoes before dinner. Are these my memories or just stories I've been told? Part of me wishes a wall had collapsed here like the garage, so I could sneak in and remember. I want to walk through the house and fact check memories with reality.

Time has a3(e)4(re)d20.00009120000092(m)5(00484004840051>30003>30057110052>3004F300

come. Hoping that Koda wouldn't notice the strangers heading towards us, I pulled her to the other side of the road and braced myself. She continued to massage the ground with her nose.

When I first met Koda at the Animal Humane Society, she was quiet and timid. I played with her in one of the visitation rooms while she stared at me with a look that screamed, *are we done yet?* Her quiet demeanor, dark longing puppy dog eyes, and silky soft fur seemed like a good match for my daughters and me.

Although the card on her kennel, labeled "Dog Reactive!!" in red pen, suggested that she might have a behavior problem, there were many other dogs at the Humane Society, and she was not reacting with any of them. I took her for a walk down the trail behind the building, and she plodded along without so much as a glance at the chaotic canines fluttering with energy around us. I quickly adopted her and brought her home.

After a trip to the vet, I learned that Koda had contracted kennel cough, a common canine respiratory condition that can also suppress the natural characteristics of a dog's personality. When her symptoms cleared, the meaning of "dog reactive" became undeniably apparent.

In the presence of any other dog, the hair on Koda's back stands up, her focus becomes fixed, and she pulls, snarls, and jerks wildly - a reaction that occasionally allows her to slip out of her collar and frees her from my control. This reaction is also precipitated by joggers, bikers, small children running towards us, and the occasional passer-by who just plain looks intimidating.

For fear of a lawsuit, I sought help at several training facilities, including the Humane Society where I adopted Koda, but her problems were too great for the typical dog socialization class. They knew better than to let us in.

Despite the grim outlook, I chose to follow the advice of an online dog training article. By drowning her with treats and praising her whenever we crossed paths with another dog on our daily hikes through Brookdale Park, I hoped she would make positive associations with the encounters. However, I frequently found myself apologizing for her behavior and discouraging people from petting her. My only other strategy was to shorten the leash, brace myself, and hold on, but an off-leash dog was not something I could protect us against. We were at the mercy of the oncoming dog.

I hoped that we could pass the unavoidable duo without incident, but the man saw us and decided to walk towards us. He was in full view now, an older man, probably in his 60s or 70s, followed by a stout, stubby-legged terrier with white and brown patches.

"Really?" He reached out to pet Koda, "You must be young at heart like Buddy here." Buddy gave his tail a little wag at the sound of his name. As his nose neared Koda's backend, she snarled, but he just waddled casually away. Koda's hair was still on end as she caught a quick sniff of his butt.

looked up at him and nosed his pants. The man seemed unsure of how to act, but he reached in his pocket again.

"You want some more of those, don't you?"

He gave another treat to Buddy, who accepted it with a grunt, then he handed one to Koda. She had picked up on the pattern at this point and kept her nose on high

The next day, we took our usual hike through Brookdale Park and encountered another man walking. He didn't have a dog, but he greeted us politely, and Koda took the liberty of sniffing his pants pockets to see what he might be hiding.

"Are you looking for biscuits silly dog?" I asked.

She wagged her tail in response, but a definite change had taken place. Every person we encountered now was a potential source of meaty dog bones. Of course, they didn't typically have any, but I kept a stash in my pocket to keep her guessing. She stopped chasing joggers, she stopped chasing bikers, she let children pet her. I don't know if we'll ever see the old man again, and maybe, if we do, he will try to avoid us, but that man that I tried so hard to avoid was able to improve my dog's behavior problem in 10 minutes. Sometimes, she even allows other dogs to get close to her, but there is still plenty of room for improvement.

Under Construction,

Michael Kleber-Diggs gets us as close as he can with just words. He paints a picture that we all can see and feel for. I know how much you love this nation. I know how much you want it to be great that it can be easy for you to dismiss the flaws as minor. After all, you have all the freedoms are forefathers dreamed of. There is a poem in the book, "America is

unnecessary deaths of Black American's killed by police. I told myself that I was against what was happening in our country, but I never truly paid attention. I would read the article following the death of a young Black man, get angry, and then move on. I would like to think it was because of my age, that I was young and naïve. Sadly, the truth of the matter is that I was so withdrawn from these issues that they were easy to ignore. But I was in my twenties when Floyd died. I had been in college for more than two years and had heard in-person stories from classmates who had

You just think that it can be prevented by simply listening to the police officer and their orders. And why would you not when you have only had good experiences with police officers. When you get pulled over you have friendly conversations. You do not get stopped in stores or followed home. You are a white man protected by your white privilege.

I have watched you struggle for over a decade to understand my anxiety and depression with no success. To be honest, with the way you were raised and your personality I am not sure if you ever will, yet you still try. I know it is simply because I am your daughter but there are parents out there that would not even bother to try. You have always supported my desire to be a social worker, my passion that my calling is to help people. As I have struggled in school you have been right there pushing me forward. You want me to succeed not just because we are family but because you think I can make a difference. You would send me to bed telling me to "not let the bed bugs bite." We would argue over who loved each other more. Knowing all this how could I ever think you are a bad person. I passionately believe that you are a good man who, despite struggling in life, has had some privilege that allows you to simply worry about issues that only effect you and your family.

At the end of the day, you are still my father. Always will be. And though we have our differences I will always do my best to support you as you have done for me. If there is one thing that you have taught me in my twenty some years of life, it is that family sticks together. Even when you disagree, when they annoy you, and even when they embarrass you. You stick together.

With love,
Your daughter

A Toxic Workplace

By Lane Kadlec

working anywhere else, and even started to imagine my future at the company. All I could think about all winter long was going back to work.

Fast forward to the first week in March 2021, just two weeks before the gardening

even tell you how many more times something like this happened to one of my coworkers or myself.

Working under these circumstances was incredibly stressful and exhausting. I was angry too, what happened to the job and boss I loved and looked up to so incredibly much? It didn't take long before I carried all of that stress, exhaustion, and anger home with me. I had so much stress bottled up that I felt like a plant that got too big for its pot. Its roots began to wrap around one another and without intervention they suffocate themselves. I began picking arguments with my boyfriend, even when there was nothing to argue about. I was angry all the time and without realizing it, I started to take it out on him.

After work all I did was eat and sleep, I hardly talked to any family or friends. I did not have the energy to cook myself more than a simple, or microwavable meal, and the house slowly got more and more cluttered. I mean, after a ten-hour day of getting belittled and feeling like I could not do a single thing right, I was beyond exhausted. I dreaded going into work every single morning, I started getting anxiety attacks, and more often than not I cried the whole way there.

I finally found the courage to quit my job in the middle of June 2021. After I quit everything seemed to fall into place, I was more social and my relationships improved, I was able to get out of bed every day without a fight, and I was an overall happier person. It was then that I realized how detrimental having a corruptive boss was to my health, happiness, and relationships. This experience taught me many things but mainly to put yourself first, it is scary and overwhelming, but things will start to fall in place.

A Broken Sink

By Jacee Vang

Growing up, my family frequented a place named Willow Park every summer up until I reached middle school. It had a large field fit for all kinds of sports and a hill tall enough to challenge the trees surrounding it. Our favorite aspect of the park as kids though, were the interconnected playgrounds, one large and one small, that satisfied both the younger and older children.

When I was 7 years old, it was on one of those summer days that my cousins and I

we needed something sweet after dinner, and called us endearing nicknames like *buddy* or *sweetheart*. It was a bonus that I was close to his son, Alec, therefore adding to my favoritism for the entire family.

I turned to catch Alec's eye and watch for his reaction to my response—waited for a boast of

the lack of support she was receiving and the lack of protest from everyone else in the room. But, most of all, I was angry at myself for doing the same: nothing. I looked up only once more to see my uncle, brows furrowed in a fit of anger I couldn't understand; my aunt, head bent so far forward that her hair formed a curtain around her figure and her eyes meeting her feet. She repeated quiet, defeated apologies in between every comment from Uncle Kye. My eyes found their way to the broken sink again. *A hundred dollars. Two hours.* For many years after that day, the thought prevented me from using their sink peacefully.

It was never kept a secret that Uncle Kye had a temper. It was just that I had never been at the end of it nor witnessed with my own ears and eyes the full capacities of what his anger could be like. I only heard exaggerated stories of high school days or complaints from the other adults behind closed doors. I always dismissed it. After all, I couldn't imagine Uncle Kye—who once picked me up in a snowstorm after I'd been locked out of my house—being as angry as the adults had said he often was.

The sink incident reminded me of the summer after I turned 11, when my family took a trip up north for our annual July 4th camping trip. It was a trip like any other. Most days were filled with swimming at the lake and nights of waving around sparklers that burst into yellows and whites. The actual night of July 4th had filled the sky with loud sparks of color that we tried to catch in our hands as they fell back to earth.

I don't know what caused the fight on our last night at camp. When I think about it now, maybe the tension had just been boiling over the past couple of days, or perhaps that day, in particular, had just hit a nerve for my uncle and aunt. Whatever the reason, my uncle and aunt started to argue. I think they tried to keep it small, or at least that's what I hoped. What began as a minor disagreement though, turned nastier by the second, and suddenly, it was as if the pair had started to hold a competition of who could yell the loudest and Uncle Kye was winning by a long shot.

Under Construction,

Once, during my terror, I looked at Alec. The young boy sat in the chair next to mine with his elbows on his knees, head hung low with only his hands to catch his forehead. He looked like the fight was his own doing. It scared me more. It was unnerving to see someone barely the same age as I was look like he had the entire world hanging off his shoulders. I remember tentatively reaching out to him. I wanted to hold his hand or grab his shoulder, just do *something* that told him he didn't have to look like that. It confused me. Why was he the one who looked like hell when it was his parents that were arguing? When my fingers tapped against the hands holding his head hostage, I saw his eyes slowly peek out from between his fingers before being released entirely from its grip to meet my eyes. I tried to ask with the silence we shared if he was okay.

Alec sighed defeatedly and a puff of air followed suit, the air chilly even though it was midsummer. He looked embarrassed as he whispered for only me to hear, "I don't know why they're acting like this right now."

The words Alec felt too embarrassed to say sounded like a parent defeated by their child's unruly behavior, and I had to wonder who the parent truly was in Alec's house and who the child was. It made my heart ache to the point of discomfort. And because I was 11 and could comprehend it, but not numb enough to want to understand any of the feelings I felt just yet, my hand, which reached out for him earlier, slowly tucked itself under my thigh for warmth instead. I could not meet Alec's eyes for the rest of the night, nor when we left the next day.

I thought back again, to when I was 13 and I sat outside Alec's front porch steps. A few of us cousins had a sleepover the night before, and the day had begun with an intense game of Wii Tennis that we were taking a break from with ice cream given by Uncle Kye as a treat.

"Your dad's always so nice. He gives us ice cream every time we come over!" Lily,

a cousin three years younger than me, had voiced, pleased with her double scoop of vanilla ice cream. I paid no attention to her words as I watched ice cream drip down onto her shorts, lecturing her for the mess she was creating. Truthfully, I hadn't listened to what her words meant, nor the bitter irony of it, not with my ice cream also beginning to drip down my hands. I also hadn't expected it to give way to any other conversation, but as I attempted to lick away the melted ice cream, Alec hummed in response to Lily's comment

"He's only like that to you guys," Alec's words were an offhand comment, but it made me stop in my actions.

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That day the sink broke, when I was 14, we had to go home early. I tried not to question the reason why we were leaving so soon and instead made my way toward Alec's room to say my goodbyes for the day. When I walked in, the young boy who had started to grow past my height in the last few months was splayed across a foldable chair in the middle of his room, playing video games. I tried to say a quick goodbye since he looked preoccupied with clicking a few more times on his controller. Alec rushed to assure me that he just needed a minute more, for me to wait a moment longer. I barely had to wait that minute more before he shot up into the air with a shout at his friend for letting him die. Alec then turned to meet me with those familiar eye crinkles, a warm smile on display as he crossed his room to hug me, as he always did when we parted ways. I couldn't help the smile that took over me as well, more of relief than anything, I had realized. The scenes of dinner had played in my head over and over again which made it hard for me to understand that the person who hugged me was different from the man I heard earlier. I felt reassured to know that Alec was still just the soft-spoken, dorky tween who vowed

When I thought about Alec's wish, I wondered if Uncle Kye's dark side had ever

When I greeted Alec that day, I made sure to meet his eyes. He hadn't understood

The Mile Challenge

By Kate Kariniemi

I ran with all I had left down the last 100-meter stretch. As I crossed the finish line, I gasped out in heaving breaths “wah was my time,” and practically collapsed onto the turf as my exhausted body, from my legs and lungs to my arms and facial muscles,

casually in those in-between years, and I made different goals, such as completing a 10-kilometer race which I did one summer. While that was fun, I found myself often reminiscing on the fast, long, lung-and leg-killing, mile. I decided to pursue the mile again, and I signed up for track. I had practice for about a week, and then Covid hit, and spring sports were cancelled. I didn't want to give up, especially with the reminder I had on my door. In bold, black, thick sharpie I'd written on a poster, "Run a sub 6:30 Mile." In my mind, I was three years older, and therefore three years stronger and faster than when I had run a 6:42 mile. This goal seemed like a minimum requirement before I started training for a real challenge. If someone had told me then that I'd have to train, replan, struggle, try not to give up, and learn about myself for over a year in order to accomplish this goal, I wouldn't have believed them.

Shortly after putting this goal into writing, I went to the track with my family to run 1600 meters. I wasn't absolutely positive I'd meet the milestone I had set, but I figured if I didn't, I'd at least be close. A part of me hoped I'd smash my goal and have to set a new, much harder one, maybe in the five-minute range; I had been base training for a while, and I certainly felt ready to push myself. Maybe that's why I was so surprised by what happened next. I ran an awful, disappointing time of 7:50. I was devastated in that moment, and I'll admit that I cried on the way home. My mom tried to console me, saying that I had grown in the last few years, and was no longer a wispy structure of skin and bone, but a fuller, taller person. My sister said she still thought I was fast. I understood what they were saying, but I was still disappointed and angry at myself. Looking back, I see a girl that hadn't yet learned patience or compassion for herself. Despite all this, one good thing came out of that run: it was a wake-up call. I began training more than I had previously and t of that

should

to once again attempt a sub six thirty mile. It was a perfect, early summer evening. My uncle challenged me to a race, though we both knew he was more of a pacer. We went to the track, and I felt a little nervous. I had been working towards this goal for years at this point, and I felt that if I was going to accomplish my goal in the near

through the second lap, and I never slowed back down. The end of the second lap was turning into a challenge, but it was supposed to be. I reminded myself of all the hard runs I had done and how little distance I had left and ran faster. By now the muscles generally start to fatigue and your entire body starts yelling "stop" in any way that it can. Personally, my vision gets less bright, which is probably related to the area behind my eyes that starts to feel pressured. My form wants to fall apart, and my legs feel like lead. I mean, even areas you don't think would be affected, like ears or arms, start to feel tingly. In a way, at this point the physical part is done, and the mental game has begun.

Just beginning the third lap is where you see how determined you really are. I don't actually grit my teeth, but that's what my mind does. I was trying to do anything but think negatively, and my mom yelled, "dig in now!" I had just passed her on lap three and that bit of encouragement pushed me to leave everything on the track. After the hurt of lap three, lap four is a relief in a way only a miler can really understand. I guess it's because while you now have to go harder than you have during the entire race, it's also the last lap. The nerves and jitters are gone. The muscles aren't fresh anymore, and people's cheers aren't heard. It's you, and you. I don't remember what I thought about, but I know that somehow I kept going. Suddenly there were 100 meters left. I was full out sprinting, raising the knees and swinging the arms. 50 meters, telling myself to hurry up, 10 meters, going through the finish line! I kept moving long enough to end up on the turf and lay there while every part of me tried to process and recover from what had just occurred. I make this sound like an awful experience, but I was flooded with pure elation. It was like I was one big smiley face, even if from the outside I looked like a mess. All I knew was that six minutes and fifteen seconds after starting, I finished 1600 meters, smashing my goal of a time under six minutes and thirty seconds.

Six minutes and fifteen seconds won't win gold. There's no fame, no recognition. However, I earned something more valuable than that. In the days after my

breakthrough run I journaled my thoughts. I realized that trying to meet some invisible standard for no clear reason isn't nearly as good of a motivator as simply trying to achieve the strongest, healthiest version of myself. Hopefully by reading this you felt inspired to run. However, if you didn't, that's fine too. More importantly, I hope you commit to something big and have a why that's solid. While it's true that the more you commit, the more you risk, it's also when you grow the most. My running journey could have ended at many points, but it didn't. Instead, I pushed a little harder.

My pity is quickly replaced by irritation. "No! It's not," I blurt, as bitterness claws its way up my throat. "No," I try again, swallowing the venom down for a more deserving recipient. I am well and truly annoyed now, so I remind myself of my earlier pity.

"It's not like that. I pulled my hair back today, which pulled the curls straighter."

I declare this with stubborn confidence I do not ordinarily have. "My curls are typically ringlets, and my hair's usually poofier too. I like it that way." Surprised by my own defensiveness, I break eye contact and look away.

There's a mirror in the cabinet, so I watch a reflection of myself shift in my seat. Embarrassment and annoyance color my features. My grandparents are quiet. The hand-built grandfather clock ticks; the dining table creaks. I stare at the teacups in the China cabinet and toy with a curl that's fallen onto my face. I stare at their perfect shininess, and I'm reminded of the many times that I'd hated my hair's lack of shine. For a long time, hated my own hair in general. I hated the volume, and the frizziness annoyed me to no end. I hated the awkward bend of my ringlets after they've been slept on. I hated the heaviness of such thick hair; it gave me regular headaches. I hated it so much and for so long. However, in this moment of quiet, of clock-ticking and table-creaking, I realize something: I *hated* my hair, but I do not *hate* it now. I don't know when this change occurred, but my defensiveness proves it to be true. I do not hate it now.

I finally look up at her. "Yeah," I murmur.

I should leave it at that, but I don't. I am stubborn *and* defensive tonight, so I continue, "Actually, I like it this way. The style is fun. It makes me happy."

My grandparents have never wished for anything but my happiness, so they are quiet once again. I'm on a roll.

"You have such similar hair to me, Grandma. Was it ever curly like mine?" I'm pressing ahead now, a new determinedness and curiosity burning within me.

"When I lived in India, it was curly," she tells me, "but when we came here, it seemed to straighten out naturally."

As soon as she says this, I doubt her words. I doubt her curls disappeared as swiftly as the Indian landscape beneath the plane she rode. I don't tell her this, because I'm not interested in starting another disagreement. I nod with fake understanding and our table returns to silence.

Like a coward, I look away, back to the cabinet in front of me. Near my face in the mirror, a pale bowl is sitting upright on display. I observe the paleness of the bowl next to my face and am abruptly reminded of Fair and Lovely face cream. It's an Indian cream whose only purpose is to make skin look dramatically fairer. It can be applied all over the face and body. I'm still staring at the pale China when I begin contemplating tanning lotion. Americans are also bombarded with advertisements. Instead of being encouraged to look fairer, white Americans are told that "sun-kissed", olive-toned skin is best.

It's suddenly clear to me at that moment everyone loses in this strange, warped beauty game. I lose; my hair is too similar to that of my Indian ancestors. My white

mother loses; her skin is too pale for American beauty standards. My grandparents lose; they are both ebony-skinned and have coarse black hair. My grandparents *especially* lose; they are called the n-slur while trying to change a tire on the side of the road as a group of teenagers shoot by in a mud-covered pickup truck.

At this moment at the dining table, where the passage of time is marked only by an ancient grandfather clock's ticking, my grandmother stares at my hair. She isn't happy with it, but she doesn't say anything else about the topic. It's over for the night, and I feel I've won some battle with her self-hatred. Her adoration towards me trumps her annoyance towards our shared hair. At last, I don't look down this time as she watches me.

"I like my hair this way," I assure her again, "and I think yours is beautiful too." I mean it. I realize that during this quiet, awkward conversation, I've completely overcome the last of my self-consciousness towards my hair.

Now, I begin to wish the same for my family. I hope that someday, my grandfather can find hair products for his coarse hair with ease. I hope that someday, my mother doesn't feel pressured to use tanning lotion every summer. I hope that someday, my grandmother can see hair that looks like hers in American beauty magazines. More than anything else, I hope that they'll call it "beautiful."