

It's time for our
second-favorite
F-words.



Alice Says
Go Fuck Yourself

Issue 4.

FAN FICTION.

ALICE SAYS
GO
FUCK
YOURSELF



Issue 4
Fan Fiction!

August 2023

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself is a quarterly digital magazine of art & literature,
published by Agape Editions.

Editors: Fox Henry Frazier & Cee Martinez | Designer: Fox Henry Frazier

A Note From the Editors

It's been a hell of a summer. Hurricanes are hitting California, okay? So that's now a thing. Natural disasters are whacking every corner of this burning planet, the economy is jiggling like a Jenga tower, and people indicted for RICO crimes can still run for President. America is Gotham.

But who doesn't love Gotham? We have comic books dedicated to catching depraved villains. We have movies dedicated to the chaos and thrill of completely unhinged super battles pulverizing entire city blocks. And we enjoy them in proper theaters, with popcorn and air conditioning, as the good Goddess Herself intended.

Editor Cee spent the early 2000s immersed in the world of writing Fan Fiction. An AOL chatroom dedicated to NHL fanfic sat open on her browser. She posted her fresh fics to LiveJournal. Yes, she was an OG witness to *that* Zuckerberg LJ meltdown, which opened *The Social Network*—a film that she contends is just gussied-up Winklevoss Twin fanfic. (Editor Fox helpfully adds: “Starring Armie Hammer! The Winklevii ArE cAnNiBaLs!”)

Editor Cee learned that fanfic involves serious discipline: outlining stories, debating characters' decisions and motivations, revising, and constantly fine-tuning—to write consistently entertaining stories for a wide, and often surprisingly exacting, readership.

Fan Art might be considered ‘lowbrow’ by many; but if Eugene Delacroix could spend hours on portraits of himself cosplaying Hamlet, and have them sitting in some of the finest museums in the world? Then you can give some respect to a modern-day Fan Art depiction of Hello Kitty as a Domme Queen. This issue is feeling, thinking proof that art is fun and for everyone, and that we should do it every day.

As for other ways to deal with Summer 2023: sometimes, you just need to have a homemade piña colada and lie down on your front lawn in a kiddie pool filled with water from a garden hose. Join us, dear readers: the water's fine.

Love,
Fox & Cee

CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

Title Page	
Editors' Note	
Table of Contents	
NOTE	

Spotlight Art:

<i>From The Alice Collages, by Alessandra Bava</i>	2
--	---

POETRY 7

<i>Mickey, Trump / Andreas Kremer</i>	8
Brian U. Garrison	9
Joey Gould	12
<i>Billie Eilish / Josh Miller</i>	13
Maranda Greenwood	14
Francesca Leader	21
Michael Montlack	22
<i>Buttercup / Andreas Kremer</i>	25
Jeanna Ni Riordan	26
Tapan Sharma	27
Christian Ward	30
<i>Digital Pikachu / Andreas Kremer</i>	31

FICTION

Megan Diedericks	35
<i>Skateboard Pikachu / Andreas Kremer</i>	54
Maria D.R.	55
<i>Spiderman Fighting COVID-19 / David Grigorian</i>	79
Alais Escobar Henri	80
Jacklyn Henry	123
Kendra Jackson	140
Jessica Mannion	144
<i>Hulk Cat / Sergio Martinez</i>	159
Jad Neville	160
Sarah Reck	165

NONFICTION

<i>Hello Bad Kitty / Sergio Martinez</i>	190
Jillian Law	191
Andrew Nickerson	197
Brenda S. Tolian	201

TRANSLATION

<i>Poke-boba / Andreas Kremer</i>	204
Ian Haight and T'ae-yong Hō	205

FLASH	208
<i>Papa Smurf / Andreas Kremer</i>	209
Michael Gosack	210
James C. Holland	212
Gregg Maxwell Parker	215
Jorge Saralegui	219
<i>Bender / Andreas Kremer</i>	222

INTERVIEW	223
with Sherrene Roxane Wells	

CONTRIBUTORS	231
---------------------	------------

NOTE

Neither the Editors of this magazine nor any of the Contributors, collectively or individually, have created any of these characters or universes, nor do the Editors or Contributors own any of them. Everything contained herein is a work of satire or parody.

Neither the Editors nor the Contributors, collectively or individually, are making any sort of money or profit of any kind from this issue. It is a celebratory collection of writing and art, freely shared among community members, for fun, and with love.



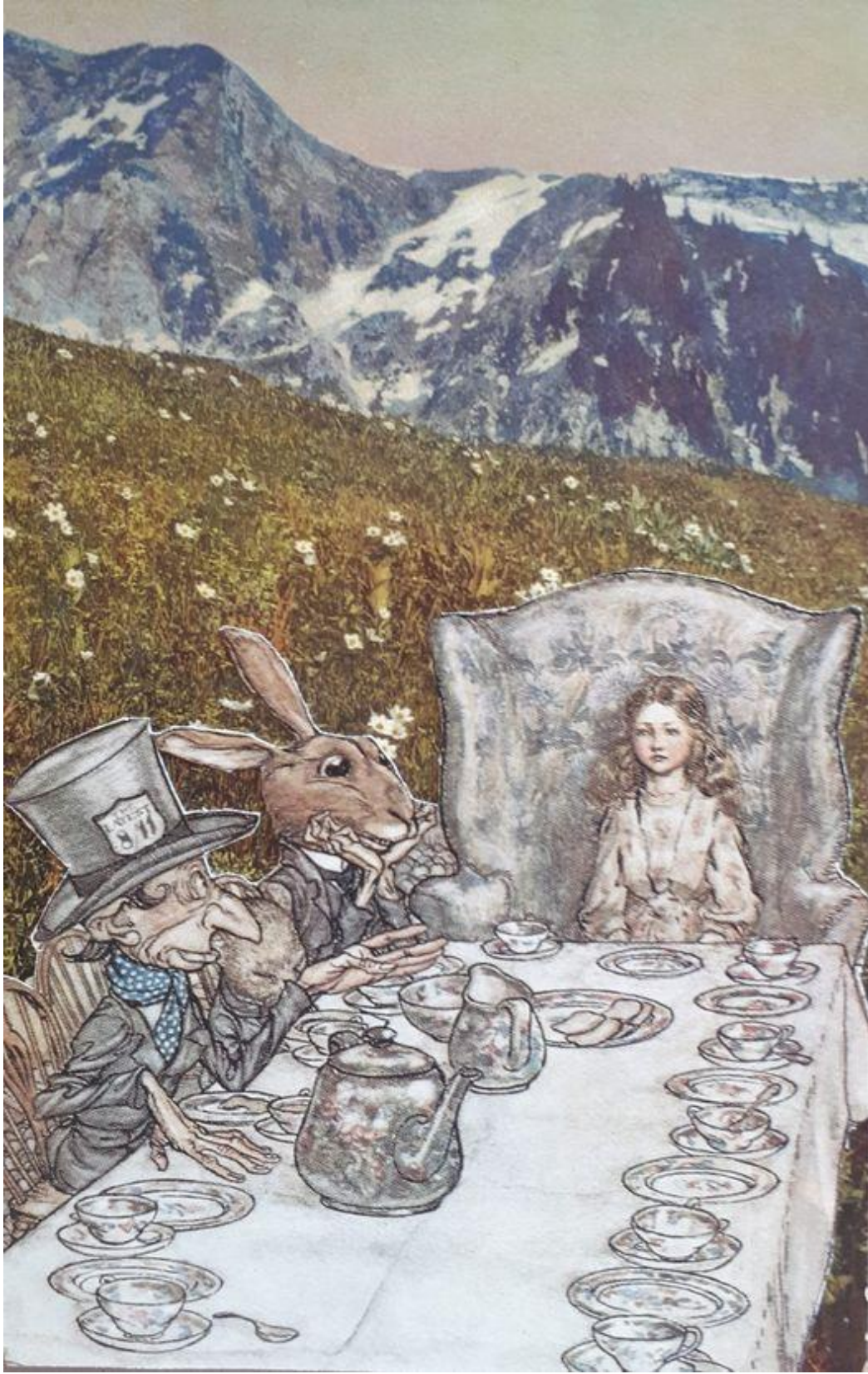
From *The Alice Collages* / Alessandra Bava



From *The Alice Collages* / Alessandra Bava



From *The Alice Collages* / Alessandra Bava



From *The Alice Collages* / Alessandra Bava

POETRY



Mickey & Trump / Andreas Kremer

Roll

A broken crown rolls down the hill
Jill shouts DOWN WITH THE PATRIARCHY
but comes tumbling to follow anyway.

It's not that she wants to kill him,
or any other of the pompous jerks,
she just wants to have her own say
on what time of day they head out

to fetch their water. She had some
ideas about efficiency too—did they both
really need to go fetch water from the well?

They only had the one bucket, and
two people carrying it was harder than one,
but whenever she started to share her thoughts
it was as if the crown blocked Jack's ears

from hearing anything she said.
With cracks in the crown, now,
he had no excuse not to listen.

Lewis Carroll

Unbirthdays deserve a tea party
with crackers and cheese (like Havarti).
But, beware of a queen
who would crash your scene
with a temper that flares Bonaparte-ly.

Edward Lear

There are people who think it quite posh
to write nonsense and flim-flam and bosh
about beards and weird hats,
and sea-faring cats.
What a curious world—my gosh!

Beast of the X-Men, After A Few

The world's side-eye pierces me. Long & thin,
reality to most people is not a cable but thin

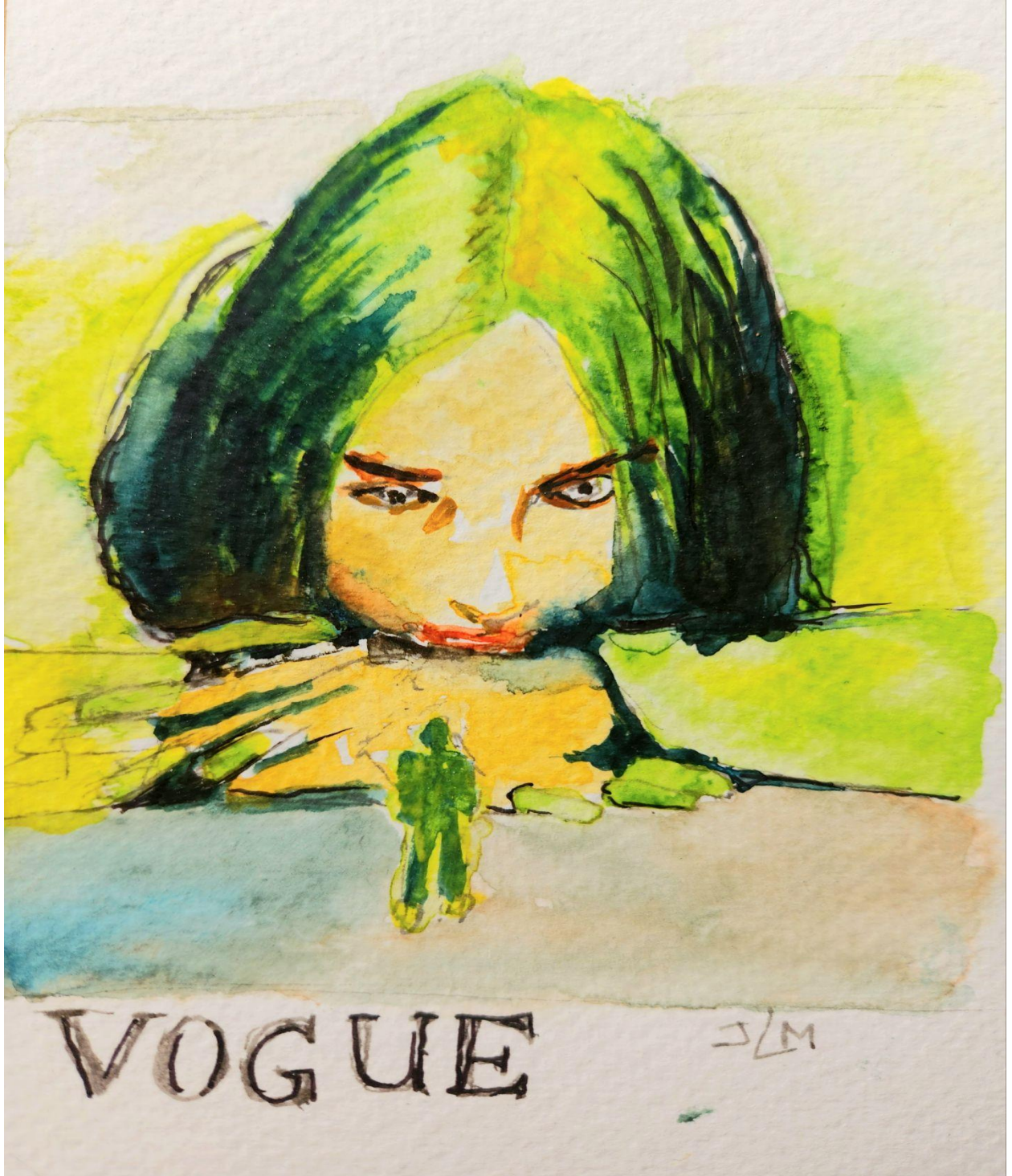
plumb-string. They othered first. They're the blue
sea. I'm a beautiful fish. No, it was then,

before I drank that ampule. It was reaching
for the hot coal. I'm Moses with his sideways tongue.

I want to tell humans there's no antidote
for them either. There's only learning,

learning until you learn too hard to look
at who you used to be. Yesterme,

the knucklehead I want expelled from
the factory before we come to war.



Billie Eilish / Josh Miller

The Mojave Rescue

The Crush Fantasy. You like someone, you love someone
you concoct it, don't act like you don't.

Which one is your go-to fantasy?

Is it,

The Move Away:

One last chance for your person to exit their car,
out of breath running the route of regret.

They side-step-block you from putting the last box
into the open trunk on moving day. They beg you in the street to stay, admit
that it took a stupid length of time for them to realize blah, blah, blah, blah.

You swoon, the universe has been merciful. Some people
are extreme and do the death bed confession. To that I say,
it's a fantasy, you finally get what you want and you paint yourself
death bound? Get a grip. Fantasize better.

There are so many, fantasies I mean;

The Thelma and Louise,

The Pretend To Be My Date,

The Fender Bender,

The Wedding Objection.

My personal favorite is The Rescue.

It's how I know I've stumbled over the love ledge
and am about to become reckless and forgetful
and late for everything. The Rescue goes like this.

EXT. SUNSET STRIP — 2AM

CAMERA THROUGH a thick cloud of Strawberry vape smoke. Revealing an unusually
empty cityscape. I have left the Whisky A Go Go and the strip is dead. The flashing

ATM and cash-only pizza place are the only things saving me from neon and nightfall that made me drunk with delusions about what kind of town this is, what kind of night it could be, what kind of void staying busy can fill.

A SERIES OF SHOTS:

I approach the ATM machine, the object of my obsession unexpectedly appears and stuns me to stop.

She's got a hustler walk, her nails are the same emerald as her bank card. She feeds the glowing mouth of the machine. She tucks a stack of bills

into her bag and headlights flood the alley around the corner. Why are ATMs always situated in the mugging zone?

Two hooded men lurch from the car, restrain her, she struggles I pull one off but he plucks me from the ground with one arm like

A toddler mid tantrum. They are pulling us towards the car, I watch the white rag in his hand slip over her nose and mouth.

We are finally holding eye contact when a rag comes over my face, I bite his hand but he makes no sound just squeezes tighter.

She goes out, I go out. FADE TO BLACK

INT. STAINLESS STEEL ROOM — NO IDEA WHAT THE FUCK TIME IT IS

A man with an unidentifiable accent, lights a cigarette with a silver zippo, tosses it on a metal tray holding the chloroform rags and other tools. His phone ringing causes him to hurry out, the lock clinks, I see her across the room zip tied, rickety chairs hold us. She was looking at me when I woke up. Hopefully this won't be the last time that happens. I rock in my chair, gravity takes me, I backrest-bust-free, inch worm across the floor, back slide up the steel counter, behind my back fumble for the zippo, potato sack hop across the room. With my back to her, I strike the zippo and

OW. (She whispers.)

She melted her ties to free her hands and toasted her wrist. She takes the zippo, our hands touch. My wrists catch the burn too, my hands separate. I turn to face her. She is already melting her feet free, she looks up.

Do you think we can make it out?

She pauses, and shakes her head, she doesn't want the answer.

My feet are free. I Make my way back to the tray. Pliers, a file two teal liquid vials. A mirror. A variety of thin steel picks. I resoak the rags and hand them to her. I motion to her to be quiet and stay behind me. Two of these picks will do. I slide them into the lock and feel it catch. With one turn, snap and the door clicks loudly. *I haven't picked a lock in about 5 years.* I look back at her, her eyebrow arches for a moment, smile hardly detectable on her lips but her eyes, look as though I've just impressed Angelina Jolie which I imagine is hard. I pull the handle, peek out, empty hall, sun shining in from one end and trash can. I hand her the sharp picks, our only weapon beside the rags. She won't take both, she insists I take one, aggressively closing my hand around it. I point for her to hide behind the can, she slides across the hall, crouched behind it, *this is the best door I've ever held open.*

INT. KIDNAP COMPLEX HALLWAY — DAY

Within moments of entering the hall another guard opens a door that locks behind him.

He spots me and scrambles for his gun, I plant my foot on the wall Cobra Kai him in the cheek,

he goes down hard, the gun goes off, my shoulder goes warm and his eyes roll as he deep breathes

the soaked rag I have nearly shoved down his throat.

I rip his Kevlar vest from him and turn to see, she looks less impressed

and more afraid now. I put the vest on her,

take the other pick and hand her the gun.

MARANDA
Cover me. Okay.

We can hear a commotion coming from our escape path.
I spot a vent in the ceiling and a door that is a closet

Why are broom closets always situated in the middle
of complexes that surely are not swept or mopped by hand?

I tell her to put her hands together and boost me.
I rise from the ground, she is stronger than she looks.

I pull the latch, the vent hangs free but I motion to the closet.
We close the door just in time. They see the vent hanging open,

they think we are in the vents, fire shots into the ceiling until they

set off the sprinkler system they run the wrong way,
knuckles dragging down the hall. The closet forces us

too close together for people
who aren't romantic.

MARANDA
You look a lot like Billie Eilish.

BILLIE
I am Billie Eilish.

She looks at me and smiles like I missed a joke.

MARANDA
I love your new song.

I pull her into the hallway. We escape through
the side door into a lot full of sports cars and desert vehicles.

We are in the Mojave just off a highway.
The dusty faded Billboard says so. We check door handles
until one pops open, red Mustang. No keys, I pull a toolbox
off a truck. Screwdriver hotwire, power to power, brow to brown
no steering lock and we're off. It's loud for a getaway car.
She grins now, she doesn't withhold any longer.

BILLIE
Who the fuck are you?

MARANDA
Maranda.

I pause and shake her hand. She smiles and shakes her head.

MARANDA
Do you want to get a drink with me?

BILLIE
Yes, but after that and the police.

She points to my bloody shoulder. It's just a graze. I tear out of the lot
and onto the highway, she turns the radio on and stares at me,
Bad Guy plays. I smirk. The rescue is complete.

Now, change the person, the conversation in the
broom closet, the song on the radio and apply.

I'd kill anyone for Billie. She's the only celebrity that's

made this fantasy. It's elaborate and elite,

if you make it here you don't get replaced, just rescued.
I always hold a spot for you even when someone else

gets the wrist burns, the lock turn, the picks, the kick,
closet talk, the parking lot, hot wire, spark the fire,

the invite, the song's right
and—gone. We're in love.

Yesterday, I heard her Australian accent from 15 yards away
at a party. She brushed her jet-black hair from her face,

she was talking about the extinction of the Thylacine
after it had been hunted to death but that we could

resurrect it, in ten years we could watch its delicate
trot and sci-fi mouth hinge open. I've not seen

someone casually talk stem cells and genetic editing
while pouring a bourbon, and they weren't listening

but they toasted anyway when she raised her cup.
I stood behind her at the song request-booth,

she scribbled in pink pen
a song by Kylie Minogue.

I told my mom when I was 10
that I was going to marry an Australian

with dark hair and light eyes.
She bumped into me on the way by

apologized, and just like that,
I closed my eyes and watched
her approach the blinking ATM.

Boy Bands, Explained

some girls

Love

the

Idea

of something with a

Dick

that won't

Kill

them.

Damsels

As a kid, I confused them.
Who had the dwarves? The apple?
And weren't they all a bit helpless
against one witch or another?

No—not Alice or Pippi.

Not Gretel.

It wasn't the Victorian dress,
crooked pigtails or breadcrumb trail . . .
but the way Alice stormed Wonderland,
crashing that insolent party, daring
to question the bloodthirsty queen.

How Pippi saved the world and
Gretel saved Hansel and herself.

Never bothering to wait for the boys.

Even princes.

What To Do About Lucy . . .

She lounges atop my piano, talking.
And talking. I can barely look up.
Afraid she'll decipher something
in my eyes. She's a smart girl.
I'm afraid she may be too smart.
And figure me out. I keep playing
my music. No one cares for it.
They don't seem to hate it either.
It's where I speak. My language.
It's where I'm brave. Not brave
like Peppermint Patty. I admire
her casual bluntness about things.
I'm more pianissimo. A soundtrack
to Lucy's latest drama. I let her stay,
hoping her brother will come by.
He's sensitive. Philosophical too.
I'd love to hear him pontificate—
if Lucy would give him the chance.
Once the gang hid his blanket
in my piano. Peppermint's idea.
She convinced me to go along.
I almost wept when he panicked.
And admit: I inhaled its scent
before giving it back. It smelled
like trees and tears and pumpkin.
I wrote a song about it. One day
I will play it for him. I will. I will

play it for the gang. And even Lucy will have to stop talking and hear what I've been trying not to say.



Buttercup / Andreas Kremer

Imagine If Jane's Men Could Text!

Wickham would be your classic fuckboy;
Dick pics, emojis & late-night sexts;
False charm & risqué innuendos

Darcy's texts would be classy & proper,
But overly formal & rather pompous.
His romantic overtures would be woeful
& clumsy, & initially, at least, his true
feelings would be lost in translation

Knightley's, by contrast, would be fun &
Flirty, full of banter & witty repartee.
Brandon would be a consistent texter,
Quick to reply & always thoughtful

But Wentworth would be the expert texter,
Every message would be something to
Treasure — deep & sincere; full of feeling;
Lengthy & detailed; brave & meaningful

Totally swoonworthy — every line would win
You over & restore lost hope & every last word
Would capture your heart & *pierce your soul*

Oh, to have been Anne Elliot!!!

Club Soda

—Oh, baby. Obey me. Oh, baby. Obey me.

—I want you to comfort me.

I want you to come for me.

—Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Assess to asses. Butts to butts.

...

Ladies and Gentlemen,

hotties, degenerates.

Leave your brains at the door,

lay your bodies on the dance floor.

Sit back relax,

take a laxative and laughing gas for the

shits and giggles.

Ethanol, sip a little;

mix it up with a not-so-chill pill.

And cut a rug with that do-si-dosage.

Find a girl, find a guy, do that one two step.

Lip lock, tonsil hockey, one two strep.

You can be whatever you like.

Prude during the day; full moon at night.

Bitch at my day rate; simp in a night club.

Dance 'til I can't see straight,

but AM, I'm LASIK. Breakfast: salty.

PM I'm pH8: basic.

Mending hearts by day,

Breaking and entering and stealing

them under cover of night.

I'm a dime.
Make no mistake: if you think
that I'm your manic pixie female,
heads up . . . you may be chasing cautionary tail.
I'm real, I'm fiction, I'm your constant contradiction.
I know you want your MTV
A P-nis, you want your empty V-nus.
Heart on your sleeve, hard on in your pant sleeve.
These other boys try to slide in and DM me,
Get in and line, wait your turn, boy, DMV.
I don't have the time of day to give you the time of day,
So if I give it to you, you better pay me attention.
We could be as tight as two peas in a pod, two balls
in a speedo and then some.
You know you want it but you're "high shy":
Coquettish with a coke fetish.
Make your cheeks reddish but I don't know

which ones to squeeze.

. . .

I'm on my period.
We can pause. Or full stop. Colon? Too soon.

. . .

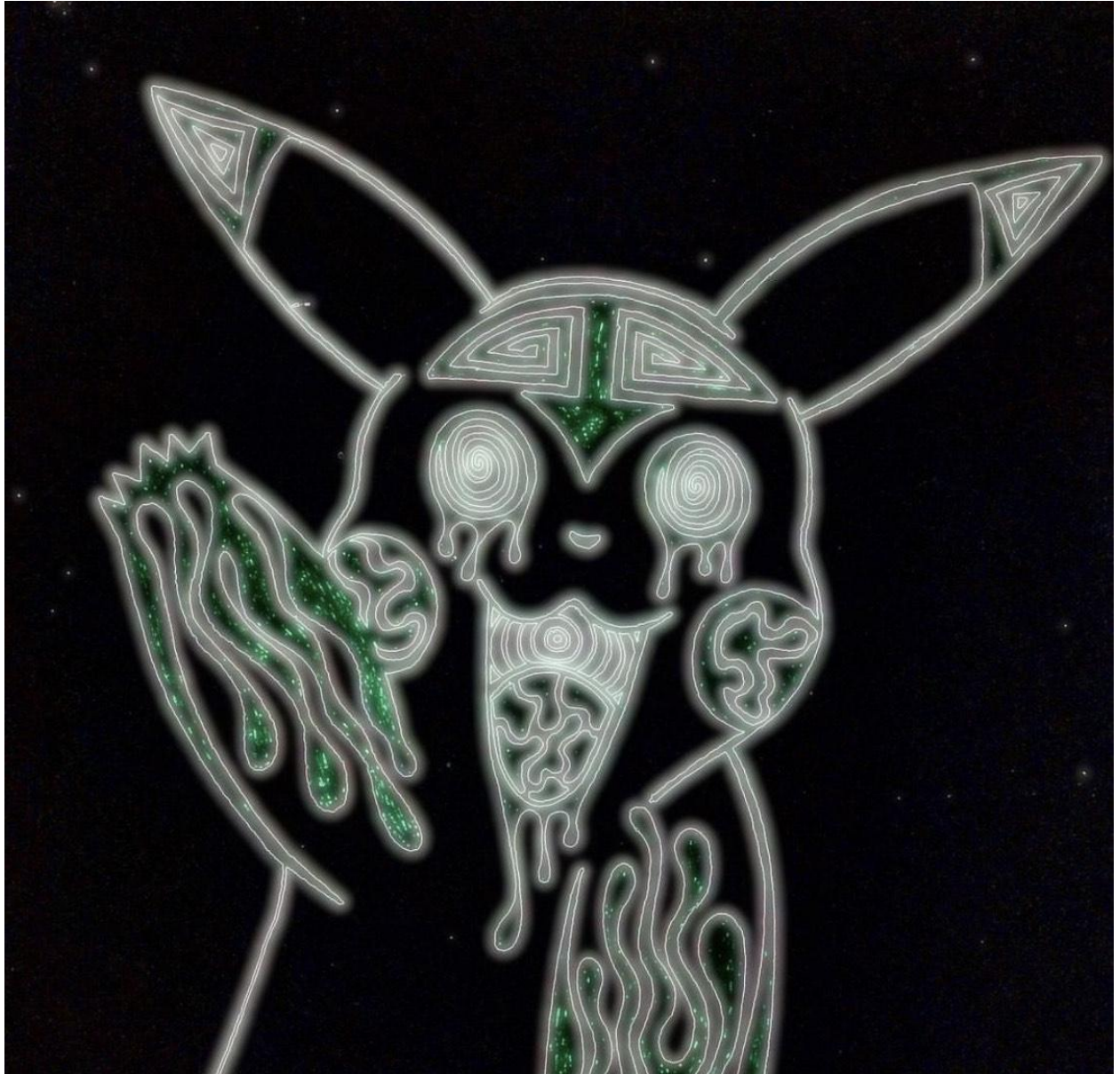
As soon as my legs go isosceles,
I swear to God that I see Jesus.
Get you feeling all Moses parting
the red sea,
Make my lady parts talk, pass the Bechdel test like a
burning bush, no STD.
An(atomic) bombshell, ready to explode.

Get reckless. Like a DUI with no ID, no
need to explode roadside; IED.
Why don't you come inside, no IUD
"Yes, and" like I'm a UCB chick; Try me
both ways: USB-C stick.
Dream home. Tell you I want it in the
back: gazebo.
Whisper sweet nothings in your
ear: placebo.
Mm this brings me joy; Kondo, Marie knows.
You're top notch in my bedpost.
Now go.

The Ugly Duchess

After the painting of the same name by Quentin Matsys

Hidden behind a moat of braided rope,
I spit pips of disdain at the critics
labelling me Gollum's mother, E.T.
in fancy dress, the rib Adam put back,
and Moe Szyslak's deformed cousin.
Most wretch at my gargoyle looks,
wouldn't know I have wealth greater
than the vault hidden in my chest.
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
made me a star, a feat da Vinci
couldn't achieve with his prototype
Grotesque Head. Insult me if you must,
but I'll make you chew clocks,
tango with piranhas, and make love
to giant mannequins of cactuses.
The rose I pose with isn't a rose,
but the flayed skin of an enemy
dyed and crêped into a flower. Be warned.
Underneath my escoffion are a pair
of horns curved into a U. Look how
they bend like a divining rod at the first
sign of weakness, or any hint of romance
car-crashing into a concrete wall of defiance.



Digital Pikachu / Andreas Kremer

FICTION

A Study in Crimson

Fandom: Sherlock Holmes

Hannah Watson's Journal

16 NOVEMBER. — Days draw to a close without ever having any meaning, but today has

given us a case laced with fresh mystique – it leaves me pondering how Sherlock will solve this one. Her secrets might just still reveal themselves as blanketed lies.

Detective Lestrade waltzed through her door around 06:25 A.M. – his face spoke of distress and there was a hint of reluctance to ask for her help, yet again.

“A dead body in an alleyway?” Sherlock didn’t look up from her phone.

“Yes...” Lestrade looked to me for answers, I merely shrugged.

“How’d you know?”

“You rarely visit, Inspector, unless you need me to do your job. And, there’s this,” she turned her phone toward us.

The article (though, does a post on a blog count as an article?) read –

Mauled in an Alley –

Where is a Witness When You Need One?

By Irene Adler

Earlier this morning, Christian Kelderman (29) was found torn to shreds...

Lestrade’s face glowed a fiery red. His flaring nostrils warranted a slight smile from Sherlock – I shook my head, signalling her to not prod.

“Dear Irene says the police have no leads...”

Lestrade followed Sherlock to her desk, the sun glinting through the blinds pulled her figure into a silhouette. Since I befriended the famous, or I should say infamous, Sherlock Holmes, I have only piled on more questions than solid answers.

I believe there has to be a method behind her madness – a reason why only she can solve the unsolvable. I have not been successful in exposing her true colours beneath the light.

Until I do – I will continue to jot down every detail as clear as they form in my mind.

Sherlock Holmes's Journal

16 NOVEMBER. — Lestrade sent me the location-pin of where Kelderman's body lay – right outside his place of work. I felt Watson's eyes lingering from the sofa, she still suspects that I am a fraud – we'll see how much longer that lasts.

Lestrade said the ambulance was called by a Nessa Acker, the call was picked up at 05:45 A.M. and ended in the same minute.

“So, he was attacked right before sunrise?” I asked, though I knew.

“Looks that way. Why? Is that important?”

“Probably not.”

I saw distant flashes in my mind, a movie of my own making playing back. A man, deciding to cut through the alley in an attempt to reach his home sooner. Does he share a space with anyone? He hears a noise, where does it come from? Does he have enough time to think, to act? It's on top of him. He is bleeding. He is dying – does he know why? As I stood over his body – perfectly described as mauled – I knew it to be certain he had no way of surviving no matter what he did.

I leaned closer, the most prominent lacerations were on his neck. His clothes were almost no more than rags tossed over his frame. His hand clutched a tussle of hair – I need to wait for Lestrade's forensic team to know if there is a match. Even in drying

blood, it looks to be auburn in color. Nessa Acker was seated inside, and her hair's brown.

Hannah Watson's Journal

OUTSIDE "FRANK'S FAST-FOOD". — Sherlock studied through the silence; sometimes I think the world is silent only for her. The yellow-tape threatened to pull me into her mind as it gently whipped in the breeze.

Sherlock didn't even flinch when she crouched down, leaning into Christian Kelderman's breathless face. Her dedication demands my admiration. I could see the wheels turning and whirring inside her mechanical brain, but I had no way of knowing what she was thinking.

Her head suddenly jerked to the side, toward the backdoor that stood agape. It was exactly how the law, despite their protesting, left it for us.

She headed inside, no permission given or asked. I clumsily followed.

The hair in the man's hand remained at the back of my head, and I knew why Sherlock studied it for so long when I saw Nessa Acker's slicked back ponytail. I thought the case might solve itself, but it's never that easy.

Sherlock chose the side of the booth closest to the window; I had no choice but to sit directly across from our first suspect. Her eyes were swollen red and her distant staring burned into my soul, but I've learned visible emotion is an amazing mask.

I cleared my throat to pull her attention, "I am Hannah Watson, and this is my associate—"

Sherlock interrupted, "Shirley Stoker. We run a True Crime-blog and were wondering if we could ask you some questions?"

Sherlock's fingers were intertwined when the confusion behind my eyes turned back to the girl, I offered her a smile.

Nessa sniffled, "No... I was told not to talk to tabloids."

"That didn't seem to bother you earlier." I wanted to say it myself, hence I made no effort to stop Sherlock from saying it.

She stuttered before delivering a full, coherent sentence, "What are you talking about?"

Sherlock slid her phone across the table, the 'article' was pulled up. The girl leaned closer, studying the circular picture of the author.

"I didn't... I didn't speak to her."

Sherlock remained silent as she pulled her phone back, and placed it in the pocket inside her jacket.

"There is a direct quote from you in that... piece."

"I wouldn't, I didn't..." tears were welling in Nessa's eyes.

"You did not know she was a journalist," Sherlock observed.

Nessa nodded, "Am I in trouble?"

"Why would you ask us?" I wondered.

"I recognize you," she was looking at Sherlock. "I'm a big fan, by the way."

"Maybe so, but there's no need to murder someone in order to meet me."

I held my breath. The girl's eyes grew wide like two bulbous planets inside her skull. Sherlock smiled, eyes drifting to the table. "Just kidding. Is there anybody else here we

can talk to?”

She shook her head, “Just me. I open in the mornings.”

“Is there anybody you could think of that would want to hurt Christian?”

“No... like I told the police, I didn’t know him well but he seemed like a great guy.”

“Does he have a partner that you know of?” Sherlock had the tone that stated she already knew the answer, and all that she needed was a name.

“Mona... I think. She came around sometimes. Whenever I saw her, they were always arguing.”

Sherlock tapped my notebook, and wiggled her brows.

“Wait... do you think Mona did this? She seems like such a good person...”

While leaving, Sherlock leaned down. “I wish people would be honest when it comes to the deceased. Not everyone can be a smile-lights-up-the-room person,” she whispered.

I hate to admit it, but I wholeheartedly agree.

When Sherlock shut the passenger door of the car, she looked at me. Her phone was already to her ear; she needed Kelderman’s address from Lestrade.

I wondered what she was really thinking when she said, “Do I look like a documentary-crew to these people?”

Sherlock Holmes’s Journal

I asked the doctor’s professional opinion, and her profound assessment was an animal attack – luckily for me, she has basic common sense. It is very unlikely for a wild animal, such as a rabid wolf, to roam in a populated area. On the off-chance it was possible, the dog would have to be trained and released on purpose – or more likely, have a humanistic sense of intelligence and have lost it to the beast that dwells within.

I asked Watson to implore deeper into her mind, and tug on her writer's imagination. She slumped her shoulders in defeat, and eyed the road ahead. I believe she was too afraid of sounding absurd in front of me, and refused to say it out loud.

"How long did you know Nessa wasn't the killer?" she asked instead of answering. A simple question, with a simple answer (though Watson has assured me what seems simple to me, is very much the opposite for the 'Average Joe'.) – I knew as soon as I walked into the diner, but there is no fun in giving away everything all at once.

Nessa Acker had felt guilty – but not for killing a man, rather for not finding him sooner.

She was distraught, and when presented with the possibility of her "illegally" releasing information regarding an ongoing investigation (little fib on my part) – she crumbled.

On to the more obvious: her fingernails were of medium length, and they had dirt beneath them. Had she killed the man, her nails would be void of any filth, meaning she did not even attempt to touch the body when she saw him lying there; she does not have the stomach to have been the reason for his death. Her uniform is fitted to her body, and the lack of uphold in the greasy establishment lets me know the owner can only afford one uniform per worker –

Christian Kelderman's blood was not reduced to a mere puddle, hence, had she done it, the waitress would not be in uniform, nevertheless a clean one.

Plus, my fans ought to know how to get away with murder and not trigger my presence, if they were true fans.

Watson did not particularly find that joke funny – said I should not write that part down, but I say if I have to perform such a tedious task for her work, I ought to do it how I please.

P.S. The most obvious, dead (pardon my pun) giveaway, reason that Nessa Acker was not the killer, would be her wonderfully chosen seat, near the diner's glass partition wall – bathing in the sunlight.

Hannah Watson's Journal

“Someone who has a full name tattooed, that is not theirs, probably lives with the owner of said name.” – This is Sherlock's statement about knowing to find the deceased's partner at his home.

I asked, “What kind of a person gets their own name tattooed?”

“One who is tired of answering invasive questions and small-talk.”

“Do you have any tattoos, Sherlock?”

She snickered, and knocked on the seasick-green plastered door of the apartment, number 221. I suppose masochists tend to have tattoos and avoid answering questions. I made a note of the time on a napkin I snatched from Frank's Fast-Food, and stuffed it into my pocket as Mona Tellarman opened the door – 09:23 A.M.

Mona's eyes were lined with the door chain; they drifted down and up, up and down.

“Can I help you?”

Sherlock leaned over, shielding my face with her own. Her curls hit me in the nose, and I stumbled backwards. “Mona Tellerman? We need to talk about Christian Kelderman,” her tone indicated a forced smile.

“You two cops?”

“Private Investigators.”

“Who used to be cops?”

“Me, no. Doctor Watson, technically.”

I interjected, “Are you Mona? We have some bad news.”

The grief struck in her eyes. I still couldn't see her full expression, but it was clear she knew what was coming next.

Sherlock Holmes's Journal

Watson is better at establishing an emotional bond with our witnesses, and I am better at establishing the truth beneath their emotions. Watson's role is as important as mine; it gives them a false sense of security and that is when they begin to slip up in my presence . . .

Hopefully Watson will not read over this page.

Upon first glance, and first scent, the room was drenched in damp- and darkness. Mona Tellarman had a cigarette between her lips, and according to the three ashtrays piled to the brim – it was clearly not the first of the day. Did hunger make her crave smoke in her lungs? Did restlessness?

I turned toward the window, waiting for Watson to finish her counselling session.

Hannah Watson's Journal

Sherlock was facing the drab curtains that were drawn to a thick, tight close over the windows. Mona's cigarette-smoke ensured that the room was nearly engulfed in a mist. The woman seemed to fall in a distant daze as I spared almost all details, and only told her that Christian was dead.

She sighed, bringing the shaky, nearly burned out, cigarette back up to her lips. Her face fell into a relaxed expression – was she relieved? Sherlock wasn't listening, and I gathered it's because all the clues were stored and filed the moment she set foot onto the dirty, carpeted floors.

“Can you think of anyone who would want to hurt Christian?”

“Want him dead, you mean,” Sherlock emphasised.

The woman shook her head, and beneath the faint glow of a lamp so miniature, it was practically just a lightbulb – I saw what her poor attempt at a mask was trying to hide.

“Did Christian do that?”

I focused my gaze on what was definitely a bruise. Mona pushed the last ember into one of her ashtrays, and placed a shy hand over her left eye.

“N-no... Yes, but he didn’t mean to.”

“They never do, do they?” Sherlock had turned on her heel.

“Sherlock,” I shook my head.

She seemed to know what I was telling her, which was “Stop talking.”

Sherlock pressed her hands together behind her back, and took a step forward – closer to the curtains. I turned back to the woman; her makeup was running now.

“I know it looks bad, believe me. I know what it looks like but I . . . I didn’t kill him. I wouldn’t, I couldn’t . . .”

“Couldn’t you?”

Sherlock yanked the curtains apart with such force that I thought they might be torn right off the rail. Sunlight beamed into the room, a bright flash of white, hot, light seething our irises. The woman and I both jerked our heads away in reflex.

“The sun is very bright this early in the morning, that’s why I keep them closed,” Mona felt the need to explain, and I wished Sherlock shared the same sentiment.

“Hm, I guess you’re not the killer. Was he cheating on you?”

“Sherlock!”

“His ring finger was tanned, but he wore no ring. Meaning he took it off to appear available, but a tattoo is not as easy to remove. They no longer share a surname, that is if they ever did. All the pictures in this apartment have been placed facedown, meaning she can barely stand to look at him-”

I cut her off, “Okay, we get it.”

“I don’t think you do.”

Sherlock crouched down in front of the woman and, for the first time since I’ve worked with her, apologised but it almost felt as though the word was not directed toward the woman.

“Look, Mona, I’m sorry,” I wondered if the word formed a lump in her throat – she continued, “but I know he was cheating on you. All I need is a name, or any detail you could give me – no matter how small.”

Mona swallowed her own lump, she was fidgeting with her wedding ring.

“I followed him once, to this nightclub . . .”

Sherlock Holmes’s Journal

06:15 P.M. — Back home. Watson was watching me with a hawk’s eye as I came and went. She still has not caught on as to what truly lingers in the shadows where she dares not look. She followed me back out to the car, and finally spoke when I placed my duffel-bag in the trunk.

“What’s in there?”

“Rabbits with long ears,” I said.

“Sherlock . . .” she was wearing her stern, do-not-provoke-me gaze.

“Watson, we’re burning daylight.”

Now, we sit in wait. Above the entrance of the club is a neon-sign with a name I have always thought to be redundant, and very telling – but Watson’s Average Joe’s never pay any heed to the very clear, and bright warning.

Daylight has to burn before we barge through the doors, proverbial guns blazing.

Watson

is unsure about having to speak to a suspect when the moon is out – I can see worry weigh on her brows the closer the moon draws. Her fingers so often twist around the steering wheel, then she writes.

I sit and write, too because I have no idea how to shatter her reality and have her believe me. She might turn and run – perhaps that would be a mercy.

We will have to see.

Hannah Watson’s Journal

OUTSIDE “BLOODY NIGHTS” NIGHTCLUB. — This is the first time I have been with

Sherlock Holmes on a stakeout – I know not what warrants the waiting and lurking; this case could easily have been opened and shut during the day.

Her quick glances, which she thinks I don’t notice, in my direction make me uneasy.

The

air feels thick, like there is something she is leaving unsaid. What am I carrying in the trunk of my car? Will I finally see why she is the top investigator in the country, if not the world?

The timing seems important to her, but it’s drowning me. I think my sleepless nights are finally catching up to me while we sit in my father’s old car, watching the sun set, because I have seen shadows moving out of the corner of my eye but when I turn my head – there’s nothing. There is a faint buzzing in my head, but I don’t know what it’s saying. Something in my bones is telling me tragedy is on our heels.

Sherlock Holmes's Journal

17 NOVEMBER, 02:00 A.M. — I fear I have made a grave mistake. I have no one to talk to; Watson is still unconscious. Writing always seemed to calm her down, and keep her focused. Perhaps I should give it a real try, full of descriptive imagery and true emotions – or whatever Watson told me to do when she first gave me this chequered journal two months ago.

Last night (06:30 P.M.) I tried to tell her the truth. I hoped she would laugh, or even call me crazy – it is the best reaction anybody like me could hope for. I was unnecessarily nervous; after all, I knew she knew everything about me (well, almost everything.) Watson had done her research before arriving at my doorstep, and thorough research has a way of reaching the ears of the subject. My brother (I am sure she has countless notes on Mycroft's character somewhere; his pile is probably stacked higher than mine) sent me a text message for the first time in weeks, and it only contained a name: Hannah Watson.

She was upfront about her wishes to write my biography – she did, however, withhold her intentions to expose me as a fraud within those pages, so I withheld what I did not think she was ready for.

Perhaps I should have told her that very day.

“Watson, I have something to tell you.”

“Hmm?”

“I know who, or rather what, the killer is.”

“What do you mean?”

I felt as though my voice was taking an eternity to form words, then it was too late. Watson's window shattered into the vehicle, she ducked down. I immediately threw my door open, falling onto the road.

Watson was calling for me while she was being dragged away. I was crawling to the back of the car. A leather boot pounded down onto my hand. The pain struck like a meteor hitting the earth, I felt nearly each molecule of the tar as it grated into my skin. The foot was squeezing as though it was snuffing out a cigarette. She wanted me to make noise. I only looked up into her eyes – Watson has often said I am too stubborn; sadly her words always ring true.

“Sherlock Holmes, we meet again.”

“Moriarty, it’s never a pleasure.”

Theresa Moriarty helped me to my feet, while wilfully keeping her sharp-edged fingers around the back of my neck. She pushed me forward.

“Get inside,” she ordered.

The lights were dim in the club – a wonderful tactic so daywalkers cannot see what the vampires do to them in the dark. I saw Watson on the floor, beside the body of the waitress who claimed to be a fan. Watson was clearly concussed. Her confusion was prominent but, what I assume to be, a pounding in her head took up her immediate attention.

“Let her go,” I stood closer to the smug leech. “She has nothing to do with any of this.” “Does she not?” her sly, sharp smile was sickening. “You brought her here.”

She was right, and she did not have to say it in so many words for me to know – if Watson dies, I would be the one who killed her even if it was not my own hands that committed the act.

“She doesn’t know what you are, let her go,” I whispered, but I wanted to scream and plead from deep within my lungs.

Moriarty pushed her face in front of Watson’s – I tried to rush her, to ask her to stop but her men harshly gripped their meaty, sausage (is this too much detail? I will have to ask

Watson what she thinks, if I can) hands around my arms. They held me back.

“Please!” a word I despise when the context is dehumanising.

Watson’s breath was shaky; her bottom lip was shaking but she is not the type to give any monster – human or not – the satisfaction of fear. Moriarty dropped her fangs.

“What the...”

“Now she knows.”

Moriarty bathed in spite, her whole being is just pure spitefulness: she lives to spite death, to spite me.

“Vampires...” Watson’s imagination became her reality.

“I”m so sorry, Hannah. I”m so sorry.”

“Isn’t that just sweet...” Moriarity pulled her lips into a plump kiss, “But I know something that is much sweeter.”

I had no time to protest, to struggle – she was on top of Watson at the speed of light. Her teeth were sinking deeper, and I felt like my body was not my own – I was a mere trapped spectator; a witness.

“Remember what I said?” she was speaking to Watson.

“Don’t struggle...” Watson let her head drop to the side, pushing her neck out – baring it. Deeper, and deeper.

Moriarty’s accomplices were pulled to the fountain spewing from Watson’s neck – distracted.

I elbowed the one to my left in the stomach – though unhuman, their reflexes are still

human. He doubled over, I plucked the stake from the inside pocket of my jacket. I shoved the wood into the chest of the rat to my right.

His friend hissed, baring his fangs as an act of aggression. His fist connected with my jaw.

I laughed, kicking him in the groin. He fell to his knees, giving me the opportunity to retrieve my stake.

I held the baby vampire's head up by his hair. This is what Moriarty was looking for: new toy soldiers and Christian Kelderman did not make the cut. Christian did something that displeased her – he lied. Lying is an act punishable by death in the Court of Moriarty, and Christian Kelderman was a masterful liar: Mona Tellerman believed he never wanted to hurt her, Nessa Acker believed he was a good man and the biggest lie of all? Christian Kelderman believed himself to be superior, he believed the world owed him and he thought Moriarty would give the world to him.

I do believe said world is cleaner without men like him, and it is a fact that most vampires are not void of emotion; they have beings they care about – and when their way of life is threatened by a human, the beast comes out.

“Stop!” Moriarty called. “I will kill her.”

Moriarty had her arm around Watson's neck; a noose. Watson was limp against her body, choking for oxygen but at the same time seeming to not care for the taste of it. The dreamy-eyed Watson was pulled back into wakefulness when she locked eyes with me.

“Cross your heart, and hope to die?”

The blood-stained devil was puzzled, but she was not the one who needed to understand.

Watson bit into Moriarty's arm, and reached for the gun in her holster. The young bodyguard was stirring again; I heard a shot echo as I plunged the stake into his heart.

There was a thump – I hoped to see Moriarty lying there.

She was cackling, blood was trickling from the bullet hole in her arm, “I will have your-” The stake flew like a dart into Moriarty’s chest, “You will have nothing – not ever again.” “Bandage... neck...” Watson croaked something that I believe sounded like those words.

I struggled to remove my clingy jacket. When I succeeded, I ripped the sleeve off my shirt, and tied it around her neck.

“Stay awake . . . stay awake . . .” I coaxed, but as always, Watson had her own ideas.

03:12 A.M. — I cleaned, and rebandaged Watson’s wound with hemostatic gauze that I found in her first-aid kit – the bleeding is minimal now. I was reminded of my bruised hand when I lifted her head, and I’m now holding a bag of frozen peas (something I did not buy; must have been Watson.)

03:45 A.M. — Watson stirred. She was delirious, speaking of a war she had left behind years ago. Her voice sounded hoarse, but when I returned with a glass of water she was no longer awake. The glass now stands on my bedside-table, next to her journal and phone – I assumed she would want them close.

05:45 A.M. — Detective Lestrade called, said forensics found a DNA-match to the hair in Christian Kelderman’s hand: a woman who has been dead for fifty years. I told him to swing by Bloody Nights. He asked no questions.

07:00 A.M. — I made eggs and bacon in a frying pan, nearly burned my already swollen hand on the stove. I hoped the smell would relieve Watson of her slumber. I placed a cup of coffee next to the glass of warmed water – hopefully it will not grow cold.

Hannah Watson’s Journal

18 NOVEMBER, 01:23 P.M. — Earlier this morning, I was awoken by the aroma of

breakfast floating through Sherlock's apartment. She had picked up a cup, and replaced it with a freshly steaming one. She seemed surprised, and perhaps a little relieved, to see my eyes open.

"Watson, it seems you're as stubborn as me."

It took me a bit of time, and two plates of burned bacon and undercooked eggs for me to recall all the events. Sherlock was sitting on a chair she had stolen from her kitchen, her eyes were void of sleep and rest.

Her hand was coloured in varying shades of purple, and she looked into my face only for seconds at the time. I knew not what to say to her – how do you thank someone for saving your life, but also condemn them for putting it in danger in the first place, but also apologise for ever doubting them in the first place?

Her stare was still fixed on the ground, when I put the empty mug down.

"Exactly how I like it."

She chuckled, and call me a romantic, but I think she knew all I had wanted to say even when I didn't have the words for them.

"I do pay attention, now and then."

Paging through my entries, I see how naive I was – but it is somehow comforting to find a blank page with yesterday's date written on it, in Sherlock's messy handwriting.

03:00 P.M. — Sherlock returned home thirty minutes ago with a rolled up newspaper beneath her arm. I was on the sofa, avoiding every channel that could possibly broadcast the news.

She tossed my legs off the second seat, and fell down into it.

I pulled myself upright, "They still print those?"

“It would appear so.”

I wanted to ask for it; I knew there was a reason she had it.

“Is the case closed?” I asked instead.

“Yes, we saved the day.”

“You saved the day.”

“We.”

There was another one of our favorite, thick awkward silences before she spoke again.

“You can leave, if you want to. This is too much for any person to bear.”

“You bear it, and I don’t plan on leaving you to bear it alone for any longer.”

I was shocked at the words that left my mouth; I suppose Sherlock Holmes is more to me than I thought she would ever be. Sherlock and sentiment might not be synonymous, but she held the paper toward me –

“Then you will be happy to see this.”

One the front page was a picture of a building being engulfed by flames – the lede read: . . . charred remains of a 70-year-old serial killer have been found inside one of ...

“I thought you might want to use it for your timeline.”

“Definitely,” I said. “Bring me your journal.”

“Do you really need it this time?”

“Yes, Sherlock. Are you hiding your passwords in there?”

“No, of course not. Only idiots write their passwords down.”

“I write my passwords down.”

“Case in point. You should probably reply to Mary’s message.”

“I will let the fact that you broke into my phone go this time, but is that a hint of jealousy I sense?”

“It’s a hint of a lot of things, but me jealous of her? Watson, I do believe I have some self-respect.”

“No, you don’t,” I teased.

“No, I don’t,” she laughed. She rose, then turned to face me.

“What will happen of my biography?”

“It will have to be published posthumously.”

“After my death or yours?”

“Both, obviously,” I winked.

She turned her head away sheepishly.

I let my voice rise beyond the walls, “I have a working title!”

“And what would that be?” she called from her room.

“Sherlock Holmes, colon, Vampire Hunter.”

“Definitely not,” she reluctantly placed her journal into my hands. “I don’t hunt them, I

find them. Besides, I do not find just vampires.”

She was heading for the door, and my smile faded as the reality dawned on me.

“What does that mean?”

She shut the door, her footsteps were heading away from it.

“Sherlock!”



Skateboard Pikachu / Andreas Kremer

My One-Year War

Fandom: Casval X Garma College Peacetime Esports AU

Chapter 1 : Garma

Garma started by double checking the time he gave. At 10:32 exact, his friend was two minutes late by now, which was a little rude but understandable, especially since a part of him couldn't help but wonder if he was somehow still an hour early. After all these years of communicating exclusively through voice calls, streams and text messages he had gotten used to sending him dates and times with this neat little timestamp app that automatically converted things to match their local time zones. This meant his friend could have understandably assumed that he still had an hour left to go, having not quite settled into the new time zone yet in the handful of days since he arrived.

He leaned back against the cafe's faux brick facade, sneaking a few glances here and there at the passing crowd as he opened up their chat log on Concord, quickly scrolled through the four or ten seemingly unread messages he had sent since this morning, and . . . found that he had sent the time in plaintext just last night actually (which was, coincidentally the last time RayDevil responded), no dice.

It was now 10:35 exact, and Garma was now worried about the location he chose. He had chosen this trendy little cafe for a reason (they served a mean hummus there, and he figured it wouldn't be too hard to find) but perhaps the convention hall would have been easier? I mean his friend really isn't familiar with the area, especially since knowing him he'd probably spend most of his time so far going to and from his hotel to the convention hall. There's plenty of places to sit between the two and knowing him he's probably already found that one chain restaurant, you know the one.

For a brief moment at 10:39:31, he wondered if he should wait at the hall instead, but he quickly remembered how awkward milling about there felt on POZPAAGL's (Principality of Zeon Professional and Amateur Gaming League) opening day, when he was forced to take in the judgemental stares the ticket checkers gave him while he awkwardly tried to explain that his contestant friend said that he wouldn't need an

invite to attend. (Which was a lie, he had forgotten the invite at home in the bag he had picked out the night before but rather unceremoniously flip flopped away from the morning after. Thankfully Casval was willing to go along with it but it was so embarrassing.)

By 10:42 he was scanning the inside of the cafe through its glass window, forced to smile awkwardly at the nice counter lady as he tried to figure out if his friend had through some miracle managed to fumble his way inside long before he did, and was simply waiting for him in some inscrutable corner. At 10:45 he had made up his mind to go inside to check (and perhaps order something to drink either way), but it was only as he turned to leave that he heard a familiar voice say, “Garma! Garma!”, forcing him to turn his gaze towards the source of that raspy, and rapidly approaching voice.

It was a man, roughly college age with messy, short reddish brown hair, and a handsome (if slightly boyish) freckled face that was rounded out by a pair of expressive brown eyes, and a pair of thin lips kept apart by all the shouting. He was modestly dressed in a black shirt bearing the logo of an old rock band called LINX and a pair of once blue jeans, both noticeably worn even from this distance, unlike the pristine white loafers he was unceremoniously dashing across the street with. It took him a bit to cross the distance, but no time at all for him to say, “It’s me! Amuro.”

“Oh, oh!” Garma turned around, stopping in place with one hand still holding the cafe’s door open as he replied, “Hey! I was getting worried.”

Amuro scratched his head, looking a little sheepish as he launched into a, “Yeaah, sorry, sorry I got home really late last night and I kinda... Forgot to charge my phone.” he laughed a little, “So I sort of just slept in since obviously all of my alarms were on my phone so uh... sorry. I hope you didn’t wait too long?”

Garma opened his mouth to say something, wanting to note the hour he had spent milling about in front of the cafe, but he very quickly realized how pathetic that would have sounded (why didn’t he wait inside of the cafe again?), and instead deflected with a simple, “No, not that long, just uhh... half an hour?”

“Wow, geeze that long? Ugh, I really need to make it up to you somehow, I’m really sorry about this,” Amuro looked down at the floor, pacing around in place a little before he suddenly cut off Garma’s potential reply with, “Oh I know! It’s almost lunch time right? I kinda skipped breakfast so, how about we go and grab some? I found this good restaurant not too far from here actually.”

Garma raised an eyebrow at that, based on what he knew about RayDevil over the years, the man barely ate on most days, considered it a chore even!. The thought of the man going out of his way to actually look for and find a restaurant he liked in a new town seemed absurd, alien even. Screw the cafe, and screw the delectable hummus he had spent the past hour pining for, he just had to know.

“Uh, sure, lead the way,” he noted, feeling just a tiny bit dickish as he let the cafe door close behind him, and tried not to look the counter lady directly in the eye as they walked down the street.

“So what’s the place like anyway?” he finally asked, trying his best to make small talk, as his gaze drifted across the street in his search for the fabled Amuro approved restaurant. Was it one of the Pizzerias that sprang up around the convention hall like a weed? The trendy ‘authentic’ Japanese eatery? That weird, combination aquarium and seafood restaurant he’s always side eyed but heard good things about, or could it be that... no, not even Amuro woul-

“Oh it’s great! One of those fast food chains I always order from back home, you can basically get anything there,” Amuro replied, with a frank eagerness as they walked past one restaurant after another.

Garma tried his best to awkwardly smile back, as he said, “Wait, that ‘basically anything’ wouldn’t happen to be rice noodles and-” before he could finish speaking, they turned a corner, allowing it to finally drift into view. The bright, shiny, and all too rectangular edifice of the local manifestation of that restaurant chain. ‘Ah’ Garma thought to himself, ‘He meant Jollibee, of course, fuck.’

Garma sets his order down in front of him, a plate full of steak patties coated in a disappointing amount of mushroom gravy with a side of fries. He pulls his seat back,

until the hard plastic bumps against the metal railing that separates the dining area from one of only two doors. His eyes naturally drifted to Amuro's seated form, who was already in the middle of devouring his second burger, encouraging him to idly cut a piece off his 'steak'.

"So... how are you enjoying POZPAAGL so far? Was it worth the trip out here? I'm still a little surprised that you came all the way out from Side 7 for this whole... gamer thing."

Glancing up to face him with a smile, Amuro swallows a bit, "Mm? Oh! Yeah it's going great. Wish I could see more of it, but I'm mostly here for work unfortunately. I need the college credits, you know? And folks need someone to set up the computers."

Garma raised an eyebrow at that, as he munched through a fork full of potatoes, "You know, I'm surprised that they'd get someone from so far away to help, and on such short notice too! Haven't you only been here for a couple of days?"

Amuro awkwardly laughs a little in response, while staring very intently into the plate of mushroom garnished patties, "Well, I uh, you know how it is with my dad right? When I told him about needing work he just.... came back with this out of the blue. I guess he just asked around for me?"

Garma nodded along. He remembered Amuro mentioning that his father was some bigshot mobile worker engineer or something a couple years back. In hindsight it was kind of funny how eager he was to blurt that out when they didn't even know each other's names yet. "Ah, yeah I know what you mean..."

There was a slight pause as Amuro rather unceremoniously shoved the rest of his burger into his mouth, devouring it whole before he opened fire with, "Besides, what are you doing here anyway? I thought you didn't like video games.."

This gave Garma pause, the young man instinctively glancing around the room in search of anyone who could be listening in, before he realized that the restaurant was loud enough to render anyone doing so superhuman. "It's because he's one of the contestants."

Amuro blinked a little, as Garma's response barely grazed against his head, "Huh? Oh, oh! Damn, that's some dedication, I really need to meet this mystery man of yours someday."

Garma sighed a little, trying his best to avoid eye contact as he fumbled around with the cut patty, "Well... He's not exactly 'mine'."

Amuro coughed a little in disbelief, "Seriously? He's almost all you talk about dude, you're telling me that you two are still not together? Not even a vague, post-confessional 'it's complicated'?"

Still staring intently at the rapidly disintegrating chunk of patty, Garma let out another sigh, "No... it's just, where would I even start you know? How do I even let him know that I see him that way without weirding him out?"

"Oh yeah, I keep forgetting that Side 7 was still that back-" Amuro's reply is suddenly cut off, a slight twinkle gleaming madly in his widening right eye. Before with a smirk, he very suddenly closes the gap, and reaches out with his clean left hand to cup Garma's chin, as he gently whispers, "You kiss him." He then pulls back, standing up on his own two feet as he casts his gaze straight at the opened door across him with the smuggest grin that had ever been seen on any man, and declares "Heh, I'll see you at the finals Char."

Before he simply turned around, and walked away from the scene, leaving Garma behind to look on in horror as he found him standing behind him in all of his endearingly pathetic blonde curly mullet having, prescription shaded, and red polo vest over yellow-shirted glory.

Casval's lips curl open, as he stammers out a simple, "What, what were you doing with the white devil?"

Chapter 2: Amuro

I am looking into the mirror as I wash my own face, my warm hands scrubbing it clean from any traces of dirt, sweat, and crumbs that still lingered from my short excursion. Until all that was left was my own 'fair' visage staring back out at me from the droplet spattered glass. It wasn't a comforting sight, and I couldn't help but think that if my life was a movie, this is where the man in the mirror would suddenly start to probe, question, and taunt me for every little mistake and faux pas I've committed over the day. But thankfully this is real life so I get to do that to myself instead.

But, where do I even begin? From the morning I had scheduled around waking up to an alarm that no longer existed? The night when I carelessly forgot to charge my phone? Or should I go even further back? To when I had carelessly assumed that a day's worth of the sweatiest gaming known to man was something I could just 'sleep off' well enough to have a semi early morning trip with a friend and agreed to meet up? Or should I just gloss over that and focus on the dumb awkward lies I kept telling about my job, or the fake kiss I might have burned a years long friendship over just to make my rival feel... something. Lust? Fear? Anger? Jealousy? Over who? Me? Garma? Maybe I shouldn't have walked away? Or told him what he was about to see? Hey wait is Garma going to think that I befriended him just t—

Scatter bazookas are the perfect weapon because they tap into my primal desire to pick up one of those ancient ass american civil war era muskets and open fire and just kinda hit something in the general direction of whatever I was pointing at but without the hassle of having to muzzle load the thing for like a minute after each shot and you instead get the added excitement of watching and hearing something blow up later.

Right, yeah, I'm overthinking again. I'll just turn off the tap and... ask? I mean what's the worst that could happen? Wait fuck no there's a lot that could happen actually isn't his father like a big shot Side 7 politician or something? This place's pretty weird about this sorta thing, I'm pretty damn sure that if pictures started floating around online of me mr. bigshot mcfeddiegamerguy teasing his son then that could damage his reputation right? Would he sue me over that? I mean I know my dad would probably back me if that happened but would any of my sponsors even like that sort of scrutiny? And then

what? A forced retirement and going back to college to get a master's degree to design construction vehicles or whatever like my father?

Wait, that's assuming Garma doesn't throw me under the bus to begin with. What if I read Char wrong, what if he's just straight actually, and I end up irreparably shattering a treasured childhood friendship by acting like some damned fujoshi in real life? And the pictures of me being a complete dumbass starts floating around online and he goes up to his father to say that I was making weird come-ons or something, so the narrative shifts and now all of my sponsors think that I'm some gro—

Sure It's loud its inaccurate its obvious but that's kinda the point no? That's kinda the appeal, there's a certain degree of skill and satisfaction involved in pulling it off, of being able to twist around someone's blindside and land a one to three punch that sends them reeling or knowing when and how to do a bit of rocket jousting to end them rightly when they're rushing away or charging towards you with a blade like some madman. It excites me like nothing else and that's why I think its the perfect weapon.

Okay how about I just ask him how he's feeling right now actually just let me whip out my phone and uhhhh. What should I say? It hasn't even been an hour, do I just say hi? Do I just say sorry and hope that he's feeling forgiving today, or explain why I think it was a good idea? Or just say that I'm just used to teasing my real life friends that way (true) and lie about not knowing that Char would just show up right after? Wait.... would he buy that?

“Sorry about earlier—”

“I'm used to teasing my irl friends a little, and I kinda forgot that you're not used to it sorry. Didn't know that he'd just walk in like that though, what a coincidence right?”

I waited with bated breath, staring intently at the screen as the minutes passed as slowly as hours until I realized that I could just watch videos on a split screen while I waited and got kicked out of the bathroom for making too much noise. A full ten or so minutes passing before he came online, and took his sweet time to type out a simple.

“Ok.”

Yeah sure its a noobtube its a cheap tactic like whatever man people always say that when you're winning. Whenever you find something that's good, something that works, something that you can wrangle into something that resembles a winning formula there's always going to be salty mfs out there who'll start whining and talking about you like you're just some rando who got lucky and latched onto a broken mechanic like those missile circus guys who turned all of reg 1.0 multiplayer into this laggy three dimensional bullet hell game because they just can't accept that maybe someone who plays this game for a living might just be better at it than they are. They're just the best, okay? That's why I need to win, because I know that, and he knows that, but my purpose is to tell everyone that.

**

Chapter 3: Casval

Two men sat across each other atop a brightly lit stage. Each nestled in the pliant embrace of their mock pilot seats as they stared straight ahead, past the lofty curved screens dominating their view that flickered meaninglessly to the twitching of their fingers, and into each other's captive gaze. Sweat drips from their brows, an endless stream of grunts and sweet nothings leaving their lips as the world around them seemed to fall away entirely. The score was 1-1 and two minutes into their third and final round, the only thing the audience could still keep track of were the ammo counters steadily ticking down on the top corners of the screen.

As in their able hands the mechas seemed less like the multi story tall hundred ton killing machines they were said to be, and more like twin dancers, flitting constantly in and out of each other's vision, only materializing for the briefest of moments to launch a withering barrage of fire that is almost invariably avoided, and responded to in turn. The cycle repeating itself over and over again as each were seemingly matched in both skill and instinct. Turning what would otherwise be a quick and deadly dance into a slow and nauseating grind for everyone involved.

It was enough to make one wonder what was going through the contestants minds. What cunning tactics were being formed and constantly revised, or what advanced mental calculations were guiding their actions? But in truth, Casval had one thought, and only one thought going on in his head. ‘Why does everything feel so off?’

This was supposed to be the highlight of the day after all, that sweet moment in time when he’d meet his greatest rival face to face, and finally challenge him to a fair match where they would both be unburdened by the tyranny of regional online multiplayer input lag. And to his credit, the man was everything he could have asked for and more. He gets it, he really does just get it, through that barest hint of connection between their minds he could tell. While they expressed it in different ways, this was a man who practically lived and breathed the game just like he did.

But instead whenever he looked into the man’s face he found himself thinking back to that morning. To the little incident Garma had brushed off as an odd coincidence, seemingly not knowing or caring of what else he could have seen. And it all made his mind spin ‘round and round on what they were doing together, why they needed to be so close to do it, why he didn’t tell him.

Until it snuffed out any sense of enjoyment he could have had, as he found himself desperately chasing after the man, overcome by an urge to crush him like the bug he was that only grew with each missed shot, each explosive round that rocked his mech’s armored shell. He wanted, no, needed to beat him, because above all else, above the gathered crowd, or even the billions that would watch his victory throughout earth and space, his heart had grown to hate this man, even though for the life of him, he still couldn’t quite figure out why.

At least, until he saw Garma in the corner of his eye, his purple hair standing out awkwardly in the crowd behind Amuro as he looked on in awe. ‘At him?’ was the new thought rattling around Casval’s mind, drawing it and his gaze away for just long enough to allow Amuro’s gleaming white mech to charge forward, and plant a three round rocket salvo onto Casval’s mech. The sudden shock forces him back into reality as he struggles with regaining control over his mech, and the realization that he was actually feeling . . . jealous of some pasty dork for flirting with his best friend.

It wasn't his lack of style, his behavior, or the growing sense of frustration this battle was giving him, and it certainly wasn't the massive L he definitely would have been completely fine with taking under any other circumstance that caused such hate to spring forth from his heart. He honestly seems like a good person, under any other circumstances he'd probably still be down to grab coffee or something after whoever's podium parade. But that rat bastard tried to kiss Garma, and for that he must pay. Snapping back into the moment, Casval's fingers twitched against the joystick, his bright red mech twisting, and dancing through the air as he made his way closer and closer to the gleaming white speck. Until in one rapid fire sequence he sent his mech plunging down at his enemy, twin machine guns blazing wildly to tear a path through the incoming barrage as he closed in to *melée*, before he in one moment that would forever go down in history, fucked up, and accidentally fingered the fire button too quickly.

A simple weapon swap turning into an emergency purge of all mounted and handheld weapons, save for the concealed beam saber he was trying to swap to. The sudden shift in weight distribution forced him forward far faster than any pilot could ever hope to react to.

Allowing his short blade to sink deep into the white mech's chest, before his own slammed against it with enough force to send it crashing down into the sands below, where it would lie in a crumpled heap, as little more than a twisted mechanical doll with a hole where its heart would be. The commentators roared, the crowd broke out into wild shouting or thunderous applause, while the game itself just... made a teeny sound and put up a disappointingly small box on his end with "Match Finished - Win" written on it.

'There would be a celebration' he thought to himself, 'a short procession to the victor's table, and a customary round of interviews about how this victory, and my shiny new trophy makes me feel about myself, my homeland, and this great game of ours. And after that I'll have to deal with the crowd of people who'll want to take pictures with or of me, and then go to a big party and maybe then I'll have the time to talk to Garma alone and we'd both be dead tired by then. And if I wait any longer then who knows if we'll ever talk about this...'

Leaping up to his feet, he tossed his fancy helmet aside, goggles and all before he made a mad dash off the stage while fumbling to put on the shades he kept in his impractical coat's pocket. Chasing after Garma's barely visible form until he closed the gap enough to grab him by the arm and just keep on running, leading him past the crowds, the stalls, and the fancy double doors leading outside as he searched for a secluded enough street corner, and pulled him along as they laughed and panted for breath.

"Damn, what's gotten into you? I thought you'd be dead tired after all that... that, tryharding."

"I just needed to talk to you. Ever since this morning I've had a lot in my mind, about you, Amuro, and... us mostly."

Garma's eyes widened a little, a hint of expectation in his tone of voice as he replied with, "O-oh? Like what?"

"I . . . can't say that I approve. Not because he's a guy or anything! But it's just, he's a big, loud, insecure dork with no class, the fashion sense of an eight year old, and he lives all the way out in Side 4 too! You'll practically never get to see him. I just think you can do better, you know?" he left his mouth hanging open for a moment, there was something more that he wanted to say, but that was still a line he was afraid to cross.

Garma couldn't help but let out a laugh, "Oh I'm no-we're not dating Casval, but he was ju—" he cut himself off, as he very suddenly realized something. "Actually, you know what, why don't you close your eyes? I have a uh, victory gift for you, from my mom."

Blinking a little behind his shades, Casval bluntly asked, "What does your mom have to do wi—"

Garma darted forward, standing up on tip toes as he pressed his finger against Casval's lips, "It's a gift from my mom, one I think you'd really enjoy so uh.. Just close your eyes, trust me."

Somewhere deep inside of Casval's mind, the one free brain cell he still had activated, as he simply nodded, and closed his eyes. Before, true to his word, Garma leaned in and

planted a soft, and hesitant kiss on his lips, while his hands wrapped around in a tender embrace as he freely gave his mother's gift to the world, his pair of soft lips. Still, it took them a while before either of them were willing to pull away, and a little longer before Garma managed to speak up. "Uh... congratulations, y-yeah."

Leaving Casval to simply stand there, his mouth agape, his eyes wildly looking to his left and right while his mind embarked on a quest in search of something, anything cool to say in response. Until his eyes saw him, innocently walking down the street, past their little street corner, and in a moment of desperation, he reached out to entangle his mind with Amuro's for the answer he so desperately craved.

Only for the man to just kinda, awkwardly walk away anyway, escaping the scene with little more than a parting thought, "Dude just kiss him back or something, y'all really need to stop bothering me and just kiss already. I ain't here to be the gay whisperer, I just wanted to get some burgers."

Editor's Note: *These are the author's actual working notes for the creation of her fanfic. Although these were not initially intended to be published, we asked her permission to include them because of how clearly they show the amount of work, outlining, and brainstorming, and sometimes debate that goes into the creation of a fanfic. Enjoy!*

NOTES: My One-Year War

Brainstorming

I'm thinking of continuing a tradition for Gundam watchers and writing a yaoi Gundam 0079 Collegefic from the viewpoint of Garma, who is a man? who is deeply in love with his longtime best friend Casval, but has absolutely no idea how to express it or even begin due to their shared conservative upbringing

I am imagining Amuro's 'newtype power moment' being him and Garma in the dorm Garma shares with Casval, and Garma asking him for advice on how to get Casval to even notice him that way, and then me describing a sudden glimmer of understanding in Amuro's eyes before he very suddenly pulls Garma in for a kiss.... just before the door opens to reveal a shocked Casval, who can only watch as Amuro pulls away with the smuggest look on his face, and tells Garma that he'll see him later before heading out, or you know just "Like that"

I want Char Azanable and "The White Devil" to be Casval and Amuro's fighting game streamer names, I want Casval to know that he has psychic powers and use it to cheat at fighting game tournaments

I want Dozle to be an awkwardly trying to understand straight ally, and Gihren to be the sibling they struggle to tell it to because he's so strict and serious and terrifying and he just screams like he's a potential homophobe but when he finds out by accident he just gives Casval a stern look, and goes, "What are your intentions with my younger brother?" and it turns out that he's perfectly understanding because he works in the Zeon navy

Kiscilla never quite reveals what her sexuality is but she is wholly unsurprised when Garma tells her that she's dating Casval like, "Yes that's why I told you to buy condoms in college??? Because you were sleeping in the same dorm?????"

"What do you mean by you're dating Casval now???"

Their parents are initially furious but the Zabi head eventually cracks a joke in private with Casval's mother

"You know... I always wanted to seek closer ties with your family. I always thought it'd be one of my sons marrying Artesia but... If Garma and Casval ever feel like tying the knot, I'm just saying..."

Fanfic Called "My One Year War" starring Casval, except it's actually a college AU. The war is between the tender childhood friend Garma and the young hotshot rival Amuro for Casval's affection, who is completely unaware that he is in fact gay

I NEED TO KNOW

DOES IT STILL COUNT AS CHAR HAVING A MOTHER COMPLEX IF IT IS ABOUT GARMA'S MOM

I HAD A BRAINWAVE AND DECIDED THAT THIS (Or at least the first fic) NEEDS TO BE SET IN ONE DAY DURING A BIG E SPORTS EVENT THING WHERE GARMA IS TRYING DESPERATELY TO BOTH SUPPORT CASVAL BUT ALSO CLUE HIM IN THAT HE'S YOU KNOW, INTO HIM

AND THAT HE'S BEEN DOING THIS BY PURPOSEFULLY OR NOT EMULATING HIS OWN MOTHER (RIGHT DOWN TO THE HAIR TEASING) BECAUSE CASVAL FUCKING NOTED THAT HIS MOTHER WAS LIKE, THE SECOND MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD ONCE

ALL OF THIS SO THAT I CAN SLIP IN A DEMIAN REFERENCE AT THE VERY END BY HAVING THE BIG CONFESSION BE GARMA KISSING CASVAL AFTER HIS VICTORY/LOSS AND TELLING HIM THAT ITS FROM HIS MOM

To add to this I think it would be fitting if Casval's mother was the one who passed early on in his life instead of Garma's which is the main thing that changes every single dynamic involved

His father suddenly does not have anyone else to lean on that he could trust to look after them if he risks it all, now he needs to actually think about what his children's lives would be like without him

So he bides his time, he keeps making pushes for greater and greater autonomy, less and less tariffs and builds bridges with the powerful families, waiting until his children are ready to live on without him if anything happens, or potentially serving as his successors who will carry on his plans and idealism.

He really wants to go apeshit you know? He wants to fucking cutloose now but he made a promise to his wife and he will not break it for anything. So the situation is tense but manageable, but it does mean that a dumbass motherfucking mech piloting game/RTS game esports thing between the colonies and earth is this big mcfucking deal

General Character Outlines

Garma

Politics major and history nerd, very fashion conscious, very in touch with his feminine side, very much bullied when he was younger. Plays with his hair a lot around Casval, one of many things he's inherited from his mother.

Earnestly supports Casval, does not actually like or play games himself but he's very into mil history which is sorta but not really the same I guess as unrealistic mech combat thing. I think he just wants to do his best to see Casval happy, not to the exclusion of everything else but like, a normal amount for someone you love above almost all else.

He's neurotic, a little obsessive, deep down there is still that Garmalike drive for validation and acceptance except you know, his father's not like, one step or so removed from being a literal nazi in this universe so he's a bit more mellow about it I guess. He just has low self esteem man he's not like, being groomed into being the successor to a

fascist regime or anything and is thus perpetually forced to prove his masculinity and worth through conquest ahahahahaha.

Honestly like romance is just kinda passe for me it is just kinda eh I never really got what people meant before I mean women are nice and I've had some really great dates before but nothing really sparked a fire in me you know I never felt like I had to give my all for anyone but one day he came back to my home after another bad breakup with yet another of the women he dates who always breaks his heart in the end and im just hugging him im just hearing him whine and talk about her or whatever and it makes me sick it always makes me sick hes such a great guy hes amazing hes always been there for me hes always stood up for me how can they not see that why cant he ever find someone who can see just how great he is and I realize that hes going to do this all over again in like a month or whatever and I want him to stop I want this to stop I dont ever want to see him like this again I dont ever want him to be sad around me and I dont know where that came from and why it keeps happening but once were done he just thanks me for always being there for him as a friend and it just feels so wrong and I think that kinda contextualizes most of my experience with love so far.

Appearance

Naturally purple hair kept in a medium length bob he is growing out, wears a slightly loose fitting light yellow long sleeved shirt and tight jeans because he asked what Casval would be wearing today and went out of his way to match or at least rhyme. When Casval said he would be wearing a red accessory, he didn't think it would be that vest so he uh, thought about painting his nails red but decided that was too much and instead settled on a red hair clip. His shoes are unremarkable don't at me and he carries one of those big black messenger bags that honestly seems like its in that weird halfway point from being something he'd feel obligated to call a 'murse' out of insecurity.

He brought a red and black plaid jacket with him just in case the convention hall got too cold again, and he wrapped it around his waist to save space in his bag, and definitely not as a fashion statement.

Casval Rem Deikun/Char Azanable

Mentioned to Garma once like five fucking years ago that he thinks Garma's mom is hot, this has taken its toll on Garma's psyche and he is completely and utterly unaware of it.

Technically bisexual but his father's like, *that* you know? So he just straight up thinks that yes some guys are attractive but it's his duty as a good little cishet Zeon guy to just suppress that shit full time.

Is more than a little pissed off about his childhood rebellion of slacking off by playing video games against his father's wishes has somehow turned into yet another damned piece on his father's propaganda board. Still a little drama king about it though, he really *doesn't* have to go all extra with the costume and the goggles and everything but try telling him that.

He absolutely fucking cheats all of the goddamned time with his psionic powers I swear. He's actually good at the game itself but he just elevates it to a new level by using his weird mind reading space magic to know what his opponent does almost as soon as they would do it.

Has a big old soft spot for Garma, who is one of the few people he feels he can truly be himself around. While he's wild and expressive and passionate and super driven with everyone else, with Garma he exemplifies that kind of love I saw a buddhist or something post as an ideal form on a youtube comment where you just kinda feel extra ordinarily relaxed and one with your partner, like you can be anything, you can be yourself, you have nothing to prove and all that jazz.

This does mean that he's a little oblivious to it though, it is just how it is for him and iunno aren't really close friends supposed to feel extremely comfortable around each other and also want to do anything it takes to help the other be happy and live a healthy life and also want to be around them all the time since being with them always feels pleasant you know and I can't bear the thought of being apart from you it makes me sick I don't ever want to be apart from you I am so glad that we got the same dorm room and I never want college to end because my life after it is so uncertain and we might split up or you or me will get married and drift apart but whenever I think about that my chest

always hurts and honestly don't tell anyone else this but a lot of the women I date and tend to stick around with the longest are the ones that are most like you in some way and haha maybe that's weird idk it never lasts too long I guess because something always feels missing about it and its such a shame that he's a guy you know like I can't help but feel that everything else about you is just right for me and its not like youre a bad looking guy but two guys can't do it right obviously it'd be weird haha sorry for making this weird bro.

Appearance

Well kept blonde gamer mullet, those thick solar shield ass shades we all know and love from his Quattro Bajeeena form, a very light yellow and very neat genuine polo shirt that's tucked into his pants and distressed jeans along with a bright and confident red polo vest. A pair of fingerless black gloves he started wearing after he got carpal tunnel and noticed that the compression gloves looked good on him actually. Pristine and bright and confident red sneakers.

Gamer Form Appearance

Bright red flight jacket with black shoulders and cuffs worn over a white polo shirt with black popped collars that have an outstretched golden feathered wing patterned on their exposed underside. White cloth gloves and a frankly ridiculous but tournament legal custom combination helmet and headphone combo as accessories, along with normal ass glare reduction goggles to protect his sensitive eyes. His pants are as red as his jacket, and blend almost seamlessly to his boots, broken apart only by its black outlines.

Amuro Ray/The White Devil

OF COURSE HE'S A TOXIC GAMER LITTLE SHIT HE IS AMURO FUCKING RAY, HIS HYPERFIXATION IS BEATING YOUR ASS IN THE QRTS, AND BROTHER HE IS ABOUT TO INFODUMP.

The white devil is actually an insult he's adopted as a nom de guerre because he used to be a lazy ass who couldn't be bothered to like, actually paint anything he pilots??? Bruh I spend like hours hyperfixating on the balance and timings of my ride. I do not have the brain capacity to think about shading or whatever don't at me loser. Ever since he actually joined the circuit and now has someone to do the appearance design for him, he

tries to pretend that it's referring to how unblemished his mech always seems after every encounter.

He cheats using his psychic powers too, but more unconsciously, he is really trying his best not to rely on them, honest, but it's not like he's in full control of when that shit happens and like what is he going to do just tell people that he's a fucking jedi or something no he'll take the W and move on thank you.

He sees Char as his only worthy rival, in a very real sense this stage, this tournament, this entire convention hall has nobody on it but us, he didn't *have* to be here but he would not give it up for anything else in the world, everything feels like it boils down to this one burning hot moment of fucking with him as much as humanly possible, of dabbing and doing a victory lap on your only equal. This is a very normal and heterosexual connection, he has entirely normal feelings and thinks a normal amount about him and dreams about Char a normal amount.

He's a little younger than everyone else, but he's pretty confidently bisexual, it's something he just kinda grokked at 13 or whatever and his father and mother isn't working off of weirdly 21st century beliefs like *some people's parents are*.

He's.... Actually a pretty nice guy outside of games? He is genuinely a friend and confidant to Garma, he didn't even know about the Char shit he just thinks that Garma's a good guy. He's just Garma's discord friend who he confides in and asks for relationship/attraction advice a lot about who you won't believe it is just coincidentally going to make the trip all the way out to the esports thing because he fucking loves the game and wouldn't miss it for the world especially if it meant finally hanging out with his online friend and definitely not also because he's the White Devil, the ace of the feddies sponsored team

Oh God he probably drinks Huel doesn't he.

Hum, I should include a line mebbe for Amuro where he goes, "You know, for some reason I thought your eyes would be blue" to Char once the goggles break or is torn off

"While Amuro is in many ways Kromer as the instigator of conflict and the main stressor for Casval he is also Demian as the one who shares a special bond with him as the only other newtype and is thus able to achieve that special level of understanding and oneness where his thoughts can sometimes feel like Casval's own inner thoughts mirrored back to him. This is why Amuro needs to open his right eye wider when the clown to clown transmission happens to mirror Casval's left eye widening"

Appearance

Taller than Garma but still shorter and younger than Casval. Majorly less concerned about his own appearance than either of them, but he is forced into looking presentable by literally everyone else in his life now that he's an actual inspiration™. He wears like, a black band shirt and the same pair of jeans he wears every single time he goes out and cleans every single time he goes home because he only gets new clothes if someone else buys him one or if literally everything in his house is a bug-eaten mess or doesn't fit anymore. His bright white loafers are new but that's because he's too lazy to bring two pairs of shoes to swap out with his costume one. His straight reddish brown hair is kept relatively short and manageable.

Gamer Form Appearance

He did not choose the costume, the costume chose him. After essentially going, "Yeah sure whatever you say, how long is this going to take again?" At every single option presented to him, he has now been forced fed, forced into wearing a feddie jacket with black highlights and glaringly white replacements for the blue along with equally white perfectly pressed dress pants.

This distresses him a lot more than he'd like to admit, something still feels off about the whole thing and he often wonders if his eagerness to pursue his dream has led him into becoming little more than a pawn in that dumb game adults play for mastery over the solar system, just a propaganda piece to trot out as a sign of the earth's continued dominance in all fields over her colonies and a way to drum up pan nationalist fervor to boost recruitment into the army, just a dumb, scared little boy who-wait they're the ones paying for this trip to Side 3 where he'll finally meet Char again and force feed him his ass? Nvm.

Mech Appearance/Basic Design “Clayboy”

So called because every aspect of the humanoid mech’s design is in service to the massive twin ‘Clay Bazookas’ it carries in each hand. The all white mech boasts excellent maneuverability, allowing its pilot to pull off the snap turns, and split second dodges his rapid fire reflexes, instincts, and newtype abilities allows him to pull off. It lacks almost any other weapon systems or fancy gimmicks, everything has been given over to ammo, ammo protection, and pure speed and maneuverability, with little more than an extra long beam saber to get him through if he runs out of ammo, and capable ECM systems that are enabled mostly by his sheer speed. It does not matter how good your lockon systems are if you cannot fucking catch up and have barely a second to fire once your locked on.

He is direct, he sees clear paths towards things and does them, he is not unwise, he is simply capable of taking risks others would see as unwise and coming out all the better for it. He does not stagger his shots though, seeing the additional spread, and the massive damage as being worth the potential tradeoffs from being able to lure his enemies in, or even fire another salvo once they’re nice and staggered.

General Event Outline

Principality of Zeon Professional and Amateur Gaming League POZPAAGL

Sasa

The Game itself: Build M.A.W.

M.A.W. Builder is a slightly controversial game series about unscrupulous earth and space bound political entities creating progressively deadlier and more environmentally destructive humanoid weapons originally derived from harmless space based construction bots in order to squabble over political dominance and the right to live on a devastated, but slowly recovering earth who is progressively set back again and again by the folly of those living on it.

Most people just think of it as those mecha air and ground combat games with the excessively involved mech customization and construction system and the flashy but often hard to follow zippy combat though.

General Story Outline

Chapter 1

Start this one with a half internal monologue half descriptor of how everything around him looks as Garma patiently waits for Amuro to show up while neurotically worrying if he already fucked up and either showed up at the wrong place or sent the wrong directions and double checking everything.

- Garma waits for his good discord friend and confidant Amuro outside of the convention hall where the finals for the big esports event will take place.
- They meet, chat, compliment each other's appearance, and generally do the sorta things two terminally online queers do when they meet an online friend for the first time before moving into a nearby cafe to wait for it to start.
- They sit down near one of the entrances, this is an important detail, and they start talking about like, what Amuro is doing here (he lies and dismisses it as doing some basic computer or spaceship tradework to get college credit), why Garma is attending even though he isn't really into games anyway (or at least these kinds of games, he's more of a milhistory/politics nerd), and who is this guy exactly that Amuro's been hearing about that Garma is going to such great lengths to court.
- And then in a moment of perfect, instantaneous clown to clown transmission understanding Amuro gets a sudden twinkle in his eye as Garma just asks how you even get another guy to notice you this way, and he just leans in and plants a kiss on Garma's lips, and pulls away to gently whisper, "Like that" as his gaze is locked straight into the eyes of Casval who had just started walking in when he very suddenly senses Amuro's presence only to be forced to look on in awe (hidden by the shades he wears to look cool) as the rat bastard kisses his childhood best friend, looks straight in his eyes, and goes, "Heh, I'll see you at the finals *Char*." before he just straight up walks away.
- "What, what were you doing with the white devil???", "The, the what." scene transition

Chapter 2

Thinking about having chapter 2 actually revolve around Amuro, so a recurring thing is that when he feels uncomfortable, or starts overthinking the narration will suddenly

shift to a long monologue about the spread bazooka and why it and shotguns are his favorite weapon and superior. With the meat of the chapter being him worrying about whether he just impulsively fucked up too badly, having a bad convo with Garma over text where he tries and fails to defend himself in between getting ready for the match

So near the end there's just:

"I just think you deserve better than aimlessly pining over a childhood friend who won't even look at you that way."

"That's not for you to decide."

And then he just kinda, can't really think of a response, hits something with his hand irl, and hard shift to the rest of the monologue that ends with him remarking on how it will help him beat Char

- They're young, dumb, and repressed, they are not handling it well, Casval isn't handling it at all actually.
- They have a falling out, Garma sulks in a corner, Casval runs off to get ready for the big game.
- Kycillia cannot fucking believe that her brother has been hyperfixating this much on someone he HASN'T BEEN DATING THIS WHOLE TIME WHAT
- Pep talk for Garma that does not go well

Chapter 3 (Get it? There's three chapters because there's three compilation movies.)

All I know is that the Amuro x Char duel needs to end in the paralyzing realization allowing Char to pull off his soon to be signature kick for the first time

Also it would it be really anime if during that pivotal moment where Casval realizes something about how he really feels about Garma he just wastes precious time by ripping his eye concealing goggles off during the fight

- Some bullshit about the game
- Char gets backed into a corner, he is almost about to lose against Amuro, but he imagines it, he imagines his victory, not because it would satisfy him personally, but because he does not want to disappoint Garma at all costs, he wants to see him happy because he's happy.
- This fucking shakes up Amuro's game enough that he breaks down into a gamer rant maybe? He loses?

- Celebrations, he wins the tournament, making his father marginally proud or whatever, but he notices Garma in the crowd and excuses himself.
- He tries to apologize, but Garma cuts him off to congratulate him on his victory, flustering Casval a little even before he leans in to kiss him, and lies and says that it's a gift from his mother, and fusses about with his hair.
- Casval is even more flustered, he has no fucking idea what to say or do now, this is entirely new to him, but in his panic his wild eyes glance over to the side, where he sees FUCKING AMURO, who originally came here to taunt him with a whole, "I'll get you next time" speech but actually managed to read the room. And they have it, another perfect clown to clown transmission moment, Amuro opens his mouth, and Casval says.
- "Well, I guess I'm still waiting for *your* gift then."



Spiderman Fights COVID-19 / David Grigorian

In the Company of Vermin

Fandom: Batman–DC Comics and Christopher Nolan-verse

Rain has been attacking Gotham from sunset to sunrise for three straight days. Cold and heavy, it pours like faucet water and collects and runs down the sides of windows and walls and washes the filth from the gutters and onto the sidewalk. The nightly downpour has been so uncomfortable that even the criminals do not want to be in it, and so, Gotham sleeps.

If you were not sleeping, however, but sitting in a car parked along the flooded sidewalk facing a looming, black building where only three windows were illuminated, you would squint in the headlights of an approaching car. If you were a human you would bring your forearm over your face, and as it is in this case, if you were a rat napping on the dashboard, having chewed your way through to escape the rain, you would squeak and skitter to the dusty, abandoned driver's seat.

Rats are cunning and curious creatures, however, and they do not come more curious than you. So, after your initial panic, you crawl back onto the dash, you flatten against it, and your nose trembles. The car's headlights flick off, and the driver's door opens. You press your whiskers to the glass and watch as the driver crosses around the front of the car, ankle deep in water. Dark clothing, tattered dress pants, a long knee-length coat, gloves, covers him but you can see from his cheeks that his skin is milky pale, and that his frame is gangly and desperately thin.

On the sidewalk, the man shakes his left foot, as a cat would to rid it of moisture, but then he gives up. Rain plasters his dark hair against his pale flesh, but he neither shrugs against it nor flinches from it as he opens the passenger side back door of the car. Leaning in, he emerges with a black duffel bag, so full and heavy it spans the entirety of his upper torso, and he leans forward as he carries. The man's mouth, full lips and a profile like a marionette doll, hang open; he tilts his face up to the sky and closes his eyes as the rain trickles over his cheeks.

As you are a rat, you could not possibly care what the strange, pale man is thinking. It

does not matter to you at all that the man has first gazed up at the walls of the empty warehouse, and that he'd quickly searched for any misplaced gargoyles. You do not care that everyone in Gotham catches themselves doing this at night. You do not care that the gargoyle this man does not want to see tonight, is sleeping in sheets spun of Egyptian cotton, its body bruised and battered and greedily absorbing a rare night of complete rest.

The doll-like looking man smiles, he shifts the duffel bag on his back and he goes into the building through the unlocked door. You, the rat, fast lose interest in the proceedings, and you crawl back onto the upholstery of the seat and go to sleep.

What if you were not a rat anymore? What if you were a spider?

As a spider, you are annoyed. You'd intended to walk the breadth of the dust and bug covered fourth floor of the abandoned warehouse tonight to catch a meal. But tonight you cannot because the room is flooded with artificial light, and there are two humans invading the space. You understand that to survive in a room with humans, you must make certain that your presence is not detected at all.

The humans are a male and a female, the male tall and the female slight, and slim like a ballerina. She wears a short, pleated purple and green plaid skirt that only barely covers her scrawny, pale thighs. Her legs are skinny, but with well defined muscles, and her ankles are covered by pale green socks, and Mary Jane shoes.

As a spider, you do not care what the female is wearing, but you cannot help but observe them because you are our only portal into the room and even if you do not understand the words they say, we do. And right now, we would like the spider to continue observing.

The female's face is ghostly white, and her lipstick is ebony. Her brilliant blue eyes are surrounded by black, raccoon circles, and her light hair is pulled into two high pigtails. She puts one small, slim hand over her prominent hip and runs it up to the deep curve of her waist. "Gee, Mister J," she says in a gratingly distinct accent, "He's an hour late, I don't think he's going to be making it here tonight."

The man with her does not answer, his back is facing you, but you can see his dark purple, tailored jacket, and his longish, stringy, green tinted hair. He wears deep purple gloves that are dusty looking, smeared with the paint from his face. His hands are so large that when he touches the woman's waist, it spans the breadth of it.

She smiles and she touches the tips of his fingers, but he pulls his hand away from her as she does so. "If he doesn't show what'll we do? Is there a back up plan?" She asks.

"You talk too much, Harley," the man says, his voice affected high and nasal, "There is no plan."

"No PLAN?" The woman exclaims, her black lips pursing to an "O", "whaddya mean no plan? Isn't this a plan right now?"

"You know," the man replies, "You remind me of my sister, did I ever tell you about my sister?"

Harley's black-lined eyebrows straighten and her forehead creases, "Which one? The one you ran over with the lawn-mower or the one stabbed with a pencil? You sure do have a lot of sisters, Puddin."

"Noooooo!" The man hisses and he wraps his hand around the back of Harley's skinny neck and she cries out as he pushes her onto a long, lonely table. Her frail legs wrap around his waist and he pushes up her skirt and fumbles his pants open with one hand. "I mean the one I fucked up the ass when she wouldn't shut up."

Harley laughs and squeaks and sighs in delight, and we see just for a moment, the long, thin, erection that the man stabs between her legs. Her reed thin arms lay spread on the table and she closes her eyes. But the copulation does not continue, because the door to the room opens, hinges complaining wearily.

"Aw, drat!" Harley sighs.

"Funny thing about fucking and grand entrances, they always seem to go hand in hand." The man steps away from Harley and he halfway turns so that we see his profile as he

zips up his pants, grinning as he does so. And the grin is strange, a double mouth in a fashion. White makeup cakes his face, so badly put on that it crumbles at the creases, and over his cheeks and forehead there are smudgy flashes of his flesh in vertical lines where rain water has trickled. Vibrant red circus paint smears his lips. The red does not cover the scars that extend at each corner of his mouth.

You, the spider, sense the strange nature of these collecting humans as something foul and cold, and you waste no time in slipping between the cracks of the wall. Perhaps you should find another room in which to hunt, but we want you to stay put. Your eyes are our last hold upon the goings on of this menagerie of the hopeless and we would really like you to keep watching.

And so you do.

“Oh, I would hardly call my entrance grand,” the new arrival says, his voice is slightly tremulous with a barely tolerant tone to it, like one might here from a depressed guidance counselor. He is out of breath because he is carrying a large black duffel bag over his frail form, and he groans as he lets it slip from his body before gently setting it on the ground. He groans again, wriggling from a wet, dark trench coat and letting it drop. Dark, damp clothes drape his skinny limbs, and he smiles as he looks upon the clown with the scarred face. This newcomer’s lips are pink and full, a sharp contrast to his rangy, pale face and bright blue eyes. “I’m only one of the blackbirds flown from the pie.” And he tilts his head, his smile gone, “And blackbirds, as we know, lack the plumage necessary for anything grand.”

“Awwwww!” Harley coos, flipping off the table with a gymnast’s practiced dexterity, and skittering on her toes to the newcomer, resting her fingers lightly on his shoulders and delivering a soft kiss to his cheek. “Why would we expect more from a scarecrow anyway? You’ve always been a modest little man, huh, Dr. Crane?”

Dr. Crane flinches, he runs his long, pale fingers through his wet hair, smoothing it back, his expression softens as he pinches the young woman’s chin, “You’ve never understood the difference between business and pleasure, have you, Harleen?”

Harley smiles, her mouth so wide it could be an upside down triangle, pushing her

cheeks to veritable apples high on her face. “You can call me Dr. Q, like you used to, and we can call it business then!” She speaks through her teeth, but this does not unsettle us as it might because they gleam white so brightly that we can only admire them.

“Hmph.”

The Clown now asserts himself, grinning as he circles Harley and Dr. Crane, his movement feels as fatal as the tightening of a noose. Harley’s smile only grows bigger, she is a young lady in love, she even turns about to follow the clown, her bright blue eyes sparkling. Dr. Crane, however, slumps, his hands deep into his pocket and his belly seemingly imploding inwards. His jaw tightens, we can see it flinch just below the ears, and he stares at the clown with an almost annoyed air.

“Speaking of scarecrows,” the clown finally says, stopping just in front of Dr. Crane so that their noses almost touch. Crane’s eyes have half-closed now, displaying the disinterest of a housecat, but if we stare at his pockets, we can see his trembling fists fluttering the fabric. “Why aren’t you wearing that sack over your head? Huh? Huh? Huh? Why hide your identity from us, Straw Man? Are you embarrassed?”

Dr. Crane raises his eyebrows, his full lips pursing.

The clown’s voice comes out guttural now, low, vicious, “Or are you scared?”

“Scared of what?” Crane replies, scowling, his mouth twisting.

“Scared I miiiiight . . .” The clown holds his hands out cheerfully, and he steps back, rocking on his heels, “light a match!”

This elicits a tittering giggle from Harleen and a sigh from Dr. Crane. “You asked for my help, Joker...”

Ah, we think, Joker, a fitting name for a clown... You, the spider, shift on four of your legs. The rest of us, lick our lips.

Scarecrow, scarecrow, scarecrow, also fitting for the gangly man who steps back from

the leering Joker and he holds his arms out so that we really can imagine him lashed to a windbreak pile of wood, birds resting on his shoulders and straw peeking from his collar. "...and I am going to have to ask you for fifty thousand more in compensation."

Harley gasps, the back of her little hand over her mouth, smearing black lipstick over the pale flesh. "Oh Dr. Crane, you can be a real dummy sometimes, you know that!"

Smile leaves Joker's face, in fact all traces of amusement are gone, body at angles both solid and rangy, he slowly tilts his head to one side. The corners of Crane's jawline flex, and those sensual lips purse out again as he lifts his marionette countenance in defiance. Whip fast, and Crane's cheeks are clasped in between the Joker's strong hands, and in one of them, rests a small knife, the cold blade pressed against Crane's skin.

Not a flinch from Crane, but a small sound, like a moan, like a squeak, just enough to whet the Joker's appetite, and to twist the fascinated knot in our bellies. "You're holding your breath!" The Joker hisses, "Why? Do I disgust you?"

It would be funny, you think, if Crane were to try speaking now, because the Joker's free hand has slid to those lips, squishing them. The good doctor, however, does not speak. Your eyes wander to his pale throat, you see the flesh pulsing, you see his chest heaving rapidly. As a spider, you understand the exhilaration of holding onto your prey, as it loses the ability to struggle, as your poison flows into it, as it loses its grip on life and passes into your own body. Yes, you do enjoy what's happening now. You decide that you like this Joker.

"Tell me, Scarecrow," the Joker's voice lowers to an impossible bass, an animal snarl, "Why so worried?"

Crane does not answer, his trembling has gone to his limbs, and sweat mixes with the moisture on his forehead and glistens. The Joker slides his hand to Crane's cheek, the deep purple of the glove making Crane's flesh so pale and delicate by comparison. Now, the doctor speaks, slow words, barely a whisper, "The extra fifty thousand is not for myself, Joker, just so you know."

"Then who is it for? The Tin Man?"

Crane's eyelids flutter, "The Hatter."

A pause, and then Joker abruptly lets go of Crane, and the doctor staggers, runs his hands down the front of his belly and steps back. Joker slips the knife into the pocket of his purple jacket and then he crosses one arm across his belly and strokes his chin. His lips are pursed out in a mocking imitation of a pretentious intellectual, and his eyes are almost playful in their curiosity. "The...Hatter?"

Crane nods. He pulls his hands from his pockets, perhaps he wants to lift them to his cheeks, but he does not. He straightens his fingers and flexes them. "His name is Jervis, Jervis Tetch."

Joker squints, waving his hands, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, I don't give a rat's ass about Jervis Tetch, I want to know his real name again. The Hatter?"

Crane nods.

Joker's face is tilted, his lips puckering, his eyes squinting and at this moment we are looking at this man's face, and we can discern every fold of his flesh, every nuance under the skin. This make-up is merely another layer of skin for him, no matter how much of it is crumbling right now due to sweat and rain and touch. "We're all mad here? That Hatter?"

"Fitting, isn't it?" Crane replies, his voice is back to normal, although his face is so blanched that the flesh around his eyes and lips is bluish and gray. "If you want his card, here it is." From the inner pocket of his jacket, he pulls a slip of paper, hands it to Joker who takes it gingerly, crouching and teasing Crane with a sheepish expression.

You see the card clearly as Joker peruses it, it is a simple rectangular piece of cardboard, and in striking black ink on the face is two numbers a 10 and a 6 interrupted by a diagonal black slash. Although we'd just as soon ignore it, Joker smiles and starts a high tittering laughter, "Oh that's a very important piece of information! Note it down!" And his laughter unhinges, he tosses his head back, green droplets of sweat falling from the tips of his hair and he gives a full throated cackle. "Oh, that is good. That is goooood,"

he sighs, finishing his laughter by dabbing at imaginary tears on his cheeks and smearing white on his fingertips in the process. “Friend of yours?”

“Former patient,” Crane replies, his stance is straight now, his hands clasped in front of him, his jaw tight. You are beginning to get the impression that Crane makes a habit of talking through his teeth. “Murderer. Trafficker. Experiments on kidnapped humans. Quite incurable really, but a brilliant mind. I’m sure you will be happy with our work.”

“Oh?” Joker replies, and his voice lowers, and he snaps on every consonant as if it were a brittle piece of candy, “What if I’m nu-aughT??”

Crane raises his eyebrows, “I think you will be quite satisfied.” He holds up one hand in a reassuring manner as he bends over, his large blue eyes looking at Joker. He takes a step back and he then proceeds to unzip the duffel bag. “What you asked from me is the perfect tool to getting into every penthouse and mansion of the rich and powerful?”

Joker wrinkles his nose, his hands behind his back and he rocks on his heels. Perhaps he hates being uncertain, he prefers to be the man in the room with all the ideas, perhaps he has a short attention span and is already bored. “Yeaaaaaah,” he says slowly, “I asked for a weapon, actually, the perfect weapon.”

Crane smiles, boyish almost in its cheerfulness, “Anyone can have a weapon, judging by the company you keep nowadays, wouldn’t you prefer,” and he reaches into the duffel bag and what he pulls up draws a gasp from Harley but no reaction from Joker. Crane’s fingers clasp around a dainty little wrist, stretching out and displaying a milky, skinny arm. “A doll?”

“Ohhhhh!” Harley gasps as Crane reaches into the duffel and lifts out the rest of the doll, his arms around her torso. We sit up in our seats and squint, and have to admire the work. The doll is soft looking, pink and pale and with delicious golden ringlets that fall to her shoulders. A black ribbon is looped in her hair, and she wears a tight, tailored little blue pinafore. She falls forward, her cheek resting against Crane’s shoulder and her mouth slightly open, and her eyes closed so that her black, thick lashes rest against her milky face. “What a pretty doll! She looks just like the girl from the book, you know, Alice in...”

“Yes, but does it shoot fear toxin?” Joker’s tone is tense, and we shudder with excitement and fear because we can feel the chill through the spider’s limbs. This Joker is so-far not pleased at all with Crane.

“No, it does not,” Crane replies as he lifts the “doll,” groaning a little more than we’d expect from a man carrying a toy, even a life sized one at that. He sets it on a folding chair, propping its back up. Its bony knees rest together and its shins, wrapped in white and black striped socks angle away from each other. “But I did use a considerable amount of toxins of various mixes to create this doll from scratch. So, you will understand why that is added into my fees.”

The Joker has not moved his stance, perhaps only to turn his head at a sharper angle, but his scowl remains. “Is it edible? Is it made out of fear toxin?”

Crane’s grin is soft and friendly, “No.”

“Let me get this straight,” Joker replies, licking his lips, smacking them together like an old dog would, a smear of white on his tongue, “I commission you, Scarecrow, formerly Dr. Jonathan Crane, creator of the most exquisite fear toxin known to man for a weapon that would pump enough toxin to fumigate every human living in Bruce Wayne’s overfed, financially bloated neighborhood..... and you give me a doll?”

“Ah, but she’s a very good doll,” Crane replies, he leans over the chair, presses his cheek to the doll’s, and closes his eyes. “Why not take a picture of us. She’s perfect.”

“Riiiiiiigt,” Joker drawls, rocks on his feet, and keeping his eye on the leering Crane and his precious little doll, he holds out a hand to Harley and gestures sharply to them. “You... come on... you go test it.”

“What?” Harley exclaims she clasps her hands together, and takes a step back, her large blue eyes worried and pleading; her smile disappeared into a rosebud pinch. “Puddin’, really, I don’t think...”

“Then you shouldn’t talk,” Crane interrupts, a bite to his tone. “Come on, Harleen, she

won't bite." He says those words with a snip of his small white teeth. "Unless you want her to."

"Oh...Mister J!" Harley gasps, "I don't..."

Joker's hand is still outstretched; he snaps and then points to the doll. We have seen this gesture often when in a park and watching a master controlling his dog. Harley sighs and her tiny shoulders slump as she approaches the doll, standing on her tip toes at one point, circling it before bending over in front of it, her blue eyes wide and blinking, her black rosebud lips puckered. And then, her lips part, her breath wheezes out loudly, "Holy Hamsters!"

The pure energy of Harley's exclamation sends a jolt through you and you skitter back and forth, running across the floor until you are at the wall and then you cautiously back into a crack. You are closer to Harley and the doll, the reflection of their forms glistening over the obsidian surface of your eight eyes. Harley has run from the doll to Joker, grabbing his hand tightly in hers. For an instant we see a smile upon Joker's face, and a flash in his eyes that is neither insidious nor carnivorous, but amused rather as he looks at Harley. "What is it?"

"She's real, Mister J! She's not a doll at all! Here, touch her!"

"Hmph," Joker snorts, and he slowly, deliberately pulls off one of his purple gloves, tugging a finger at a time. His emerging hand is pale, and his fingers are slightly gnarled, they ripple one after the other, not trembling so much as anticipating the touch he applies to the doll's cheek and then throat, before settling it back over the nose and lips. "Huh?" And then he lets go of the doll, stepping back and smelling his palm, "She does smell good, actually."

You look at Crane, his hair has begun to dry, and it stands on end in different directions, swirled and clumped and cow-licked. His smile is genuine and wide, "It's designed to be irresistible, I can't claim credit for that, Jervis is the one with a talent for pheromones."

Joker holds up a pale finger, "Ah, ah, what's his name?"

Crane bows, his eyes wide now, glistening and with the angles and lines of his lanky body we cannot but look for the strings attached to his joints. “Ah, deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure. I understand. The Hatter it is.”

Joker clasps his hands together, one purple clad, the other bare and he coquettishly moves his lips as he mouths out, “Thank You.”

“Hmph,” Crane grunts, his eyes are no longer on Joker as he’s turned his attention to the doll and to Harley. His lashes are long, you notice, they remind you of the fur on a moth’s back, and in fact this man’s entire being rather reminds you of a moth, something delicate and soft and edible. His voice is cheerful, “Well, it seems as if our dear Harleen is quite captivated.”

Harley moves onto the lap of the doll, her pale, spindle legs dangling on either side, their bellies and breasts meeting. “Gosh,” Harley sighs, her hands on either cheek of the doll, “Poor thing, does she even notice me?”

Crane’s pale hands are clasped behind his back, he slouches forward, his black tie dangling, and he rests his chin on Harley’s little shoulder, his lips at her ear. “Not unless you want her to. She won’t notice you yet.”

We notice Joker now, his mouth partly open, his eyes scowling, he has one hand on his hip and the other on the table, leaning forward but not saying a thing. As a spider, you can sense the aggression of another predator, and your eyes see what we did not notice at first, that Joker’s hand was not simply at his hip, it was slipping in and out of his jacket pocket, and there was something he gripped.

Nonplussed by Crane’s proximity, Harley looks at him, their faces almost touch. When she speaks, however, her voice is devoid of the blissful dizziness we’ve begun to associate with her. Even her accent is steadied as she speaks now, “How did you make her like this? This is more than a hypnotic state, she’s catatonic, Jonathan,” Harley tilts the doll’s face upwards and pulls open her eyelids, and they remain open rather than slipping back closed. “Her pupils are unresponsive, her breathing and pulse are barely discernable, her temperature is so cold. You’ve done it! You’ve finally taken a human

mind and wiped the hard drive clean.”

“Ah, welcome back Dr. Quinzel,” Crane is smug, and he stands straight up; he touches the doll’s forehead and gently passes them over the eyelids, closing the eyes. “And you might want to leave her eyes closed; she cannot blink in this state.”

Joker clears his throat loudly, but goes unnoted by the former psychiatrist and his once prized student. He begins to rock on his heels and scratch at his chin. As a spider, you do not understand the discomfort of this colorful fiend. There is no food source being threatened, no territory invaded upon.

“Who is she?” Harley runs her finger down the doll’s cheek.

“Ah, she would be Alice Elizabeth Lafet, a former patient of mine; I don’t think you ever had the pleasure, Harleen. She was never interred at Arkham, her family paid me to declare her incompetent but not to find her capable of...”

“This little thing...was criminally insane?”

Crane grimaces, lines at his cheeks, his jaw flinching, perhaps he does not like being interrupted. “She used a shard of broken glass from a mirror to castrate and murder her father and then used her bare little hands to pull his guts out and all at the tender age of twelve. The blame for the murder fell upon the gardener while Alice here remained confined at home. I visited her on a weekly basis. Despite everything she was a rather uninteresting little girl. Very open to any suggestion given her, in fact, I assume it was her mother or brother who planted it in the girl’s mind to murder the old man. A prime candidate for improving upon.”

“Did her family agree to it?”

“No,” Crane replied, smoothing his hand over the doll’s shining curls.

“Then how did you...”

“Let’s just say they’re not around to complain anymore.”

“Gosh!” The bubbling blond returns, and Harley Quinn leans her forehead against the doll’s, “And I thought you were THE villain, Mister J!”

“Fine, you’ve terrorized and brainwashed a girl into a doll, genius,” Joker snaps, pulling his glove back on, “And how is this supposed to get me what I want?”

Crane lifts his eyebrows, “You want into the exclusive circles of the rich and the powerful don’t you? With a little cooperation from Dr. Quinzel...”

“Dr. Quinzel does not exist, it’s Harley Quinn you idiotic shit!” Joker spits...

Slight flutter from Crane’s eyelids, and he continues as if he weren’t interrupted to begin with, “...you will have a free and subtle passport into those circles, and placing her in the right areas to begin with, you can do the maximum amount of damage in the minimum amount of time before they catch onto the ruse.”

“Nyargh!” Joker spits, he makes a fist and stomps as a child would, we smirk, while you stare dispassionately. “I want fear toxin! I want to flood them with it! I want them writhing on their marble floors as we rob and destroy and...”

“And then what?” Crane cuts in, his tone superior and icy. “They beef up security, they tighten their wagons and you’re left grasping for another plan. I can make you the most powerful fear toxin ever imagined, my friend, but in all reality you’d probably only be able to use it once or twice. The solution Hatter and I have come up with, is practical. You’d be wise to use it.”

“A blow up doll with a pulse?” And Joker cackles, mocking with a snarl. Perhaps we cannot literally see the mutual distaste building between the two men, but we can still smell it as if it were a stench on the breeze. “I can mail order something just as good from Japan. What makes yours so special?”

Crane clasps his hands together in front, “Pat-a-cake, Pat-a-cake, Alice L...”

Instantly, the doll comes to life, her eyes snapping open, wide, blue, glimmering, her lips

part slightly. Harley gasps and hops off, but she continues to stare at it as Crane finishes his command, "Take the girl to kiss as fast as you can."

"OH!" Harley cries out as the doll stands up, limbs stiff and almost mechanical at first, all that is missing is the electric whirr that would accompany the engine of a robot. The doll is smaller than Harley, by a couple of inches, and slimmer than her. When Harley peers into her face, the doll attacks, leaping and taking the poor woman to the ground, her spread fingers on Harley's skinny upper arms. "Get off me, you brain-dead floozy!"

Nose to nose, Harley and the doll are. The doll has no expression, its mouth is pursed a bit, its eyes wide and blue and clear but...empty and shining. Harley's little nose crinkles, she snarls, almost hisses, displaying her large gleaming white teeth, "I said get..." And she brings her sharp little knee up, burying it into the doll's stomach, "OFF!"

"Mmph!" The doll grunts, but it remains steady, instead of falling off its prey, it slips one of its delicate knees in between Harley Quinn's legs, and wriggling in between so that within moments, the tangled girls are a mess of creamy skin, lace, and bright colors. You, the spider, note with some appreciation at how the women seemingly fused at the waist now almost resemble an insect with their protruding legs, and you imagine slipping onto their soft bodies, burying your fangs into their soft flesh and devouring them as they sleep frozen in your web....

The spider ignores us now, our pleas for you to keep on watching but now you feel hunger and your need is imperative. Let these strange night creatures tend to their own cravings for you must search for your own salvation...

Only momentarily are we blind, however, for you've become another hungry creature, one more warm blooded and prone to curiosity in the affairs of men. You've become the wet rat, the one sleeping in the car, the one that realized after the marionette man entered the warehouse that you were hungry, and that wherever humans are, there is the prospect of garbage, and in that garbage, food. So we see through your eyes as you pause in the hallways, your whiskers trembling as you listen to the heavy breathing and the human voices.

"Ow! Stop it! Mister J, you won't believe how strong this little thing is, she's like a robot!"

I can't believe....OH! OH!! OH!"

A high pitched giggle that turns into a sneer, "Oh, my pet you can't handle a little doll? It's only a doll? Who is afraid of dolls?..."

"OW!" Harley cries, "At this point I AM Mister....! Ow! Stop MAN HANDLING ME YA DAMN TOMATO!"

"Just let her kiss you, Harleen, and her task will be accomplished," Crane said.

"No one's kissing me against my will!" Harley shouted, as she struggled with her diminutive combatant, "I ain't making out with a trafficked woman, it's not good... OOF for my DIGESTION!"

You squeak and move against the wall, your little paws pattering lightly over the floor, and we urge you faster just so that we can finally see what's... You pause in the doorway, sniffing the air and gazing at the vivid colors draping the humans in the room. The backs of the men face you, one of them in a deep purple trench coat, the other tattered and worn, and faintly smelling of soil and sweat. Both of them are fixated on the two females in front of them, and from the rising scent of heat you detect from both of them, musty, pungent human lust, you understand that they will probably not notice you.

"You must admit, Joker, little Alice L. is fairly talented, yes?" The slim marionette man says his voice smooth and soft. "Certainly worth the price any society man would pay to bring into their house."

"ARGH!" Harley shouts and she has succeeded in pulling off the doll's stockings and tying the doll's hands together at the wrist, but is still trapped between the steel like grip of the doll's thighs pinching around her waist, "THAT IS MY PATENTED THIGH GRIP MOVE YA THIEF! OUCH!"

The clown steps away from the slim man, he scowls, and his eyes seem black with shining reflective discs in the center, very inhuman and it causes the fur to rise on your back. "Yes, but can it mow the lawn?"

Crane smiles, he has small, even teeth.

“Uhhhhh!!!!!!” Harley Quinn screams, her legs are intertwined with the blonde doll, and she presses her forearm over the doll’s throat. “SIT STILL!”

Harley’s forearm slips over the doll’s chin and the doll angles just enough to quickly kiss it. With the required kiss accomplished, the doll suddenly loses all energy and function, her eyes close and the poor creature falls limp.

The Joker tilts his head to one angle as he watches, “Hehehehehe.....ew.”

“Oh sugar!” The painted girl sighs, she has the cheeks of the blonde cupped in her small, pale hands and she kisses her softly. “Oh, Mister J this poor thing! Can’t we rescue her, Puddin’?!”

A quick huff from Joker as he ignored Harley’s plea for the suffering, “Does the thing have batteries, Scarecrow?”

Crane shrugs, “The doll goes until I tell her to stop. She works on a series of verbal code commands. I can order her to follow simple ones from any handler I deliver her to, she obeys more commands from me, but she will only obey important ones from The Hatter’s voice. It’s an important failsafe.”

“Important commands?” The Joker’s voice is nasal, but it rumbles with an undercurrent of power that perhaps only the rat can detect. Most certainly, it is enough to send you deeper into the shadows, away from the fluorescent lit center of the room. You’d rather the clown did not notice you. “Such as: Fluff my stuffing, dog, it’s been a hard day?”

Crane rolls his bright blue eyes, “Such as, when to attack, when to kill.” He rubs the palms of his hands over the front of his dark trousers, his fingers are long and delicate and pale. Your rat appetite is tickled, and you imagine for a blissful spell what it would be like to nibble the meat off those dainty bones.

“Ahhhhh, that’s all well and good, you see,” Joker purrs, and then he turns to Crane, “My dear....Dr....Crane....” his voice lowers to a bass and startling growl before lifting back up,

“But you do like her to fluff your stuffing, don’t ya?” He punctuates each word by poking Crane hard in his chest.

The doctor reacts by cringing, shrinking back from each poke before rubbing the area and scowling. “That is hardly conducive to our situation right...”

“Hardly?” Joker spits. “Hardly? You’re the one who chose to use the doll to kiss my Harley against her will. No one touches the MAGNIFICENT HARLEY QUINN without first asking one Ms. Harley Quinn first.” The giggling increases from Joker and he twitches and rubs his hands rapidly together as he approaches Crane, and with each step Joker takes forward, Crane takes two stumbling steps back. “I’m curious, Straw Man, has your little doll taught you any new tricks?”

“I’m warning you!” Crane says his voice gone nasal and wavering, the supplicant about to be devoured. You wrinkle your nose and your whiskers shiver, you smell the rising fear of the slim man. “Stay away from me!”

The Joker smiles broadly, displaying small, yellow stained teeth, “Or you’ll what?” He shrugs, his arms out at each side, and the shoulders of his purple coat up near his ears.

The slim man holds his right arm up, fist clenched, jacket sleeve hanging, “I’m warning you!” Perhaps this is understood to be a threatening gesture, but the man only looks more diminutive, his back arched, his tie dangling, his dark hair twirled and standing on end, as a rat you can think of starving housecats that are more threatening.

“You’ve already said that,” Joker replies, his voice slow and bass, he runs his tongue over his lips, “I’m curious, if you spray your fear toxin on me right now without your mask on, how are you expecting to escape poisoning yourself?”

Poor defeated fool, his lips part, his skin blanches, and he drops his arm so that it hangs limply to his side. “I...”

“Ooooooh,” Joker coos and he has Crane in his grasp now, pressing his purple palms into his cheeks and gently rocking his face back and forth a few times. “Where is it, now? In your pocket?”

Crane cannot meet his eyes, “Yes.”

“Not a good place to hide your true face. Look how clinging to this pretense of humanity has served you right now. It’s left you helpless and in my loving hands. Hasn’t it? Poor little Stick Man.”

“Oh Jesus,” Crane growls, his eyes closed, “Your breath stinks.”

Joker’s grin disappears, his eyes are round and wide and shining white through the black painted circles. This time Crane meets his gaze, but we know it is as futile a gesture of defiance as a coyote snarling to a wolf. The silence between them is heavy and thick, and does not go unnoticed by Harley Quinn who slips away from Alice, tottering and hastily twisting and untwisting her blouse and skirt.

Alice, the doll, neither notices or cares, slumped forward at the shoulders, its long legs splayed and limp, its hands palm up and resting on the filthy floor. We can see her breathing, however.

We do not let you investigate the doll any further, however, because we’re more interested in The Joker, and his slow movement towards the table in the middle of the room. His hands are still on Crane’s sharply formed cheeks.

“You know...” The Joker smacks his lips together, his voice nasal and somewhat obstructed, as if he had something sticky at the palate of his mouth, “I do appreciate honesty....honestly I do!” High pitched giggle.

Crane swallows hard, both of his hands are up in the air, fingers lifted, and he steps on his toes, delicately.

“You see,” Joker continues, “There are two sorts of creature in this town, there is us, the hunters, the killers, the agents of destruction and power, and then there are the Gothamites, fat, soft, pale, tasty morsels of alternating apathy and fear. For the most part, we understand who we are, but in your case, Dear Strawman, it seems that you are a bit...” smacks his lips again, gaze flicks quickly to the ceiling, “confused.”

They are at the table now; one of Crane's hands finds the surface, rests there, the other still up in defeat, sweat slicks and drips from his face, his knees tremble.

"You must understand this?" Joker raises his eyebrows. "You can't hide yourself from any of us and pretend to be this . . . this *human*. Do you even comprehend what that is?" He leans into him, their foreheads almost touching, "Don't you understand that if you crawl before us as a useless little lamb, then we will EAT YOU UP LIKE ONE?" And with one deft, cruel movement, Joker turns Crane around and snaps him facedown over the table, bringing a single cry of protest from the man. A strangled moan much like the cry a dying rabbit might give.

You salivate, hoping that this might be your opportunity for a warm meal; you imagine offal and hot blood, steaming and savory. Oh!

Joker has the man by one hand at the back of his neck, one of Crane's cheeks on the table surface, the doctor's face wrinkled and he moans again, flails with his skinny arms and his eyes are closed. Although a slim man himself, Joker obviously is taller and stronger, and with just the force of his body he keeps Crane pinned to the table. This does not dissuade the slim doctor from continuing to struggle, however, and he finally succeeds in clawing at the arm responsible for trapping him onto the table. Clawing, desperate fingers worry up Joker's sleeve, exposing a peachy wrist, and then leaving a raking set of crimson lines on the flesh. Mmm the sharp tang of blood tickles your whiskers. Joker barely reacts save to grimace, he looks to his female, with his free hand he beckons her forward.

"Of course Mister J!" She chirps and she skitters to the table, "Now come on Dr. Crane! Behave and it won't be so hard on ya, Kid!" Her pale hands fly up and down, chasing Crane's arms, finally snagging his wrists and with strength belied by her skinny limbs, she immobilizes him. She rests her chin on his dark hair, and then she begins kissing him and murmuring to him. "Shhhh, shhhh, don't be afraid, remember the fun we had doing this last Friday? You LIKED it!!"

"Yes, Harley," Crane shouted in both a very bothered and not at all frightened tone, "I very much enjoyed it last Friday, but we don't have time right now for the same

pleasure, do we?”

“Oh, stop it!” Harley snips, “You have only yourself to blame.”

“We do not have time for this, you freak!” Crane yells. His eyes are wide, almost bulging. “Jesus!”

The Joker is doubled over Crane completely, but we can see that Crane’s dark pants are around his ankles, revealing pale and painfully delicate legs. “Mmmmm!” Joker growls, running his hand up the back of one of his legs, “I’ve got an idea to make an honest man out of you.”

“Oh, God yes,” Crane moans, a man of business and appointments, to be sure, but also a man who very readily enjoys fleshly pleasures.

“Is this bringing back any memories for you? Hm?”

“Here, listen to me, listen, listen, listen.” He keeps muttering the word as he fumbles through his pocket and brings something out, placing it on the table in front of Crane’s face, causing the young man to flash back to life and moan piteously. “I’ll let you choose, what do I use, what do I use?” He continues to place objects on the table, each time drawing a hopeful moan from the helpless Scarecrow. “Hmmm? I’ve got a knife, a bigger knife, an even bigger knife or a pencil? Which one do I use?”

“Ah, you better fucking cut me,” Crane says with a long, drawn sigh. “I want to bleed; I want us all to bleed.”

Joker sighs loudly, smacks his lips together, he rather reminds you of a dog at his food dish, licking and lapping and inhaling. “You know, the fact that you love this is quite annoying. Do you ever get scared?”

Another moan from the helpless man, his eyes are closed, and Harley runs her fingers over his cheek and then with her eyes large and lips puckered she says softly, “I don’t think he remembers how to be afraid, Mr. J.”

“You don’t?” Joker’s voice rises high as if confused.

“Noooooo!” Crane moans and he smiles, his eyes are closed.

Sigh from Joker, “I’m about to give up on trying to terrorize folk in the mental health profession, you two are INSUFFERABLE!”

At the same time, Harley Quinn and Jonathan Crane laugh.

“Watch out Doctor, you might feel...” Joker wiggles his hips, slipping the knife down, running the blade over Crane’s bare leg. “A little...PRICK!”

You sit up, your paws dangling against your furry breast and we lean forward, running our tongues over our lips, staring at Crane’s pale legs, looking for blood, but only seeing the big knife lying on the floor, shining under the flickering fluorescent light. And we notice that the blade is clean. Crane’s breathing slows, his fingers relax and he closes his eyes. Harley leans over the table, gazing at Joker, her black lips part for a breath and then she giggles and she runs her fingers through his hair, twisting it and standing it on end. “Oh Dr. Crane, you won’t guess what he just stuck you with! You really won’t!”

Crane sighs, and he reaches up to Harley, touches her shoulder and she follows his guide until she kneels down, her nose touching his. “I think I can guess, Harleen.” His voice is low and has a lonesome keen to it.

Harleen greets him with a dazzling smile.

Joker responds by gripping Crane’s hips and thrusting against him hard, his pink tongue hanging out as he does so.

“Ah, Jesus!” Crane groans, his eyelids fluttering over glistening balls of white.

“Oh, I see!” Joker grins and giggles, almost girlishly, one hand on the table surface, the other stroking the lower curve of Crane’s back as he slithers against him, so slowly. “Not a stab you’d complain about, eh?”

“Mmmmf!” Another groan from Crane, his eyes shut tight, his lips parted slightly and he slides his hand from Harley’s shoulder, up the side of her slim neck and around the back where he squeezes just slightly. Nudging her forward, she takes the hint and kisses him, soft and closed mouth. Their lips part and we see a glimpse of his teeth before they kiss again, this time moist, their tongues meeting.

Joker grunts, quickens his pace, which only inspires the kiss between Crane and his former protégé. “Like this?”

“Uhhhh...” Crane sighs, both of his hands on Harley’s cheeks and his eyes still closed, he speaks through clenched teeth and black smeared lips, “Shut up.”

Giggle from Harley, she strokes his hair, smoothing it down.

“Ohhhhhh...” Joker’s words come out as a spittle laced hiss, and sweat sprinkles from his stringy green hair and he shakes it off like a dog. “Isn’t that just ssssswell?”

As a rat, you fall back to all fours and look over your shoulder as you walk to the delicious smelling doll. As much as we want you to keep observing the humans, especially as the moaning and the panting from both Joker and Crane has increased considerably, you become obstinate in ignoring us. It’s all become far too nonsensical for you to bother with anymore; humans never can understand how to procreate correctly....

Mmmm! You are at the doll now, the fragrance of her sweat, and perfume and heat tickling your whiskers. Humans are actually quite tasty creatures, the fresher the better, and you can hear the blood flowing through the veins of this catatonic creature, and you squeak and tremble. When you glance behind, you see Harley from behind, her skirt is bunched around her waist, one of her long, thin legs is folded onto the table and her body is bent over Crane. You can see his hands over her half bared bottom and his long fingers as they begin to slip through the slit between her legs. The female enjoys this immensely, tossing her head back and crying out as if in pain.

Ridiculous humans!

You rest your lips against the flesh of the doll's inner leg, she does not flinch, your tongue touches the warm skin, and then just as your teeth are about to split the skin... And in a flash, you are gone, painlessly, without an understanding of what has happened and still clinging to the joy of having found a meal.

We spin, breathless with our hands over our ears as we try to stop the cold air slicing through our brains, and the rising panic in our lungs. The separation from our anchor into this universe has happened far too suddenly, and perhaps our spinning will never end, and our consciousness will dissolve into an irretrievable stream of atoms and dust...

The increasing pitch of Harley's climax is what saves us because it wakes you up, and when you do, we find you, we rush to you and hold onto you, climbing into your mind's eye and gasping and trembling with gratitude as we do so. You are a crow. You've pulled your beak from its resting place under your wing and you blink, leaning over from your perch high in the rafters and gazing down at the table. You see three humans upon it, and you bob your head up and down, aggravated that your wonderful sleep has been disturbed.

You notice there is the arrival of a new human, a strange little troll of a man wearing a tall leather hat and blue velvet overcoat. He is in the process of standing on one leg and staring at the smashed remains of a rat stuck to his oversized leather shoe. The man mutters to himself as he turns to the wall and scrapes the rat off where the carcass drops to the floor in a glistening, furry mess.

Your head continues to bob as you prance along the rafter, spreading your toes wide as you walk and looking down upon the humans below. If the two in the corner would join the copulation on the table, you'd be free to fetch the rat carcass unhindered. Your brothers and sisters, an entire cornfield's worth of them, line the rafters. All of them are sleeping.

But the man in the hat has no interest in joining the increasingly noisy mating ritual—the most interesting thing about humans, to be honest—as he is more involved in fretting over the twig-like woman in the blue dress. He's untying her bound wrists, and fixing her striped stockings. Throughout, he keeps muttering and neither the crow nor we can quite hear his words. He begins dusting her skirts and shoulders, and he pinches

her cheeks, bringing them to a charming rosy flush. He has soft, straw colored hair tucked behind his ears but it is long enough to dangle around his sharply cut cheekbones. The flesh of his face is pale, but endlessly creased and his eyes are bright blue, and his nose the most pronounced part of his profile and it makes you stretch your wings and bob excitedly with the thought of swooping down and snatching it off his face.

While the crow is fascinated by the colorful little man's actions, what catches our attention most is the white card stuck in the brim of the man's hat. On it is scrawled an uneven fraction, a ten over a six. The man glances briefly to the middle of the room, he wrinkles his nose and then turns to the hallway, dragging in a large duffel bag similar to the one Crane had carried in. And we wonder if there are even more playmates in store for the evening.

The Hatter groans as he lets go of the duffel, and then he stands up straight, wiping his gloved hands on the front of his trousers, dusting, plucking, grooming, as one would imagine of a cat. You bob your glossy black head appreciatively and groom a bit under one of your wings. The Hatter pats his hands together, mutters something and you begin on the other wing but are startled by the glittering flash of a blade as it sings through the air and skips off the floor in between the large feet of The Hatter.

"Tea and biscuits!" The Hatter exclaims his voice nasal and accented English; he bounces from one foot to the other and then resumes his finicky plucking at his sleeves. "Most rude, most rude indeed!"

"You must be the glorious Mad Hatter?" The Joker purrs, letting go of Crane who moans slightly, and he walks around the table, buttoning his pants. "A man of mathematics I would guess," he smacks his lips together, "So perhaps you can explain about the increase in probability of company arriving just before a guy can get his rocks off."

Another blade appears in the Joker's fingers and he tosses it stright at The Hatter and it flies true to his chest, but the little man flicks his hand and catches it.

"Bravo!" Joker grins, pressing his palms together and half bowing.

“Aw, drat,” Harley sighs.

Joker half turns, pointing his finger, “Not another peep out of you my Darling-Quinn, not when I’m busy.”

“Eh, blow it out yer Keester!” She sighs, sitting on the edge of the table, and slipping her fingers up the front of her skirt for emphasis.

Joker raises his eyebrows. He pivots on one foot, his palms together, pressed to his lips and when he drops his hands we see a smear of red and white paint on his purple gloves.

“Not very ladylike,” Hatter sniffs, “Not very ladylike, indeeeeed.”

“Umf!” Harley grunts, her fingers still up her skirts, “What yer doll was doing, now *that* wasn’t very ladylike.”

You tilt your head to one side and waddle along the rafter, gazing at the table. Something attracts your fancy; you lean forward, gazing with your shiny black eyes, one side to the other. It’s the slim young man who is wriggling his pants up. His limbs have the gangly coltish quality of the very young, like a fledgling, but he isn’t a fledgling is he? Clucking softly to yourself you try to think what he reminds you of.

“Come here, Sugar,” Harley says sweetly, she leaves off herself and pulls Crane’s head onto her lap, cradling him.

A small sigh from Jonathan and he takes one of her hands, bringing her fingers to his lips and then he sucks on them. You chuckle at the sight, a soft clucking sound, as crows go, and you spread your tail feathers, turning to pluck at them.

Still... you hop and turn, looking towards the smashed rat. You can smell it, hot and warm still, a perfect little meal. If only...

The two men blocking your way to the rat are circling each other, large leather shoes over large leather shoes as they slowly move with a sideways gait, eyes fixated on each

other. They are similarly dressed, with a flair for clashing, vibrant colors and tailored, dapper cuts.

“So, Missssss-ter Hatter,” Joker says, flicking his head, hissing, “I must say, I like your style! What brings you in cahoots with the Straw Man? Hm?”

“Heh,” Hatter replies, his voice lowers, his accent slow and rolling, as if he is sucking on a piece of candy with each vowel, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

Joker stops, shrugs, his eyes wide, a little questioning.

“Because they both possess black quills.”

Joker squints. “Heh. Heh. Eh?”

Hatter purses his lips; he has to tilt his head up to make eye contact with Joker. He is a short man, perhaps five foot five if we are generous with our estimation. His head is quite large, however, even without the top hat, and his nose even larger. We can even imagine him floating upside down on a body of water, bobbing silently with pale blinking eyes. “I see you’ve been enjoying my Alice, sweet as treacle on your unbirthday, except when she’s unsugared tea. Have you seen her bitter side?”

Joker is looking at Hatter sideways now, the whites of his eyes glaring against the black raccoon circles. “Haven’t had the pleasure.”

Hatter’s pale skin folds dozens of times over when his thick lips pull to a smile, “Funny, it seems my dear friend Scarecrow has lost the purpose of this visit, or the visit forgot the purpose he’d in mind, a sad misdirection indeed.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes!” Jonathan Crane says slowly and loudly. His head is still on Harley Quinn’s lap, one of his hands delicately fluttering through the air “It seems The Scarecrow has lost a lot of his direction. I’ve been quite informed of that. Thank you.”

You almost caw, but stop yourself, your chest swelling and your feathers fluffing as you hop up and down excitedly. Heh. A scarecrow! Ah, what lovely soft napping spots those

straw men make!

“But on a professional note!” Crane says, sitting up now, rubbing his hands together, “Let me just inform you that I still maintain a careful balance between knowing who I *am* and using what I can *be*!”

In unison, Harley, Joker and Hatter laugh.

Crane rolls his eyes. Perhaps it’s because of his irritated state, but we notice that the flesh over his face is pulled tight so that he seems painfully gaunt, accentuating the fullness of his lips and the high round apples of his cheeks.

ENOUGH of this! You shuffle and flap your wings. At this rate the humans would bicker all night, as humans could so easily do, and you would never get a fair shot at the rat. You hop off the rafter, letting yourself fall for a delicious moment, enough to send our stomachs flying to our throats and then you spread your wings to stifle your dive. You swoop just over Crane’s head, your feathers brushing over and ruffling his thick brown hair, causing him to cry out and fall off the table, a gawky, flailing mess of limbs. Out of the corner of your eye you see him, poor little scarecrow, and you open your beak and laugh and laugh and laugh, “CAW! CAW! CAW!”

“Awwwww, it’s just a crow you pea-brain!” Harley says. “Why such a fuss?”

You can’t help it, your chest full and warm with joy, you roll in the air and then swoop back down again over Crane and we see his face blanch as he flings his hands over his head, his fingers spread and then he rolls to his side.

“Yooooooooooooou!” Joker hisses, rolling his eyes, “are absolutely,” and he laughs, “USELESS! Scared of a crow? SCARED of a CROW? Wibble! Wibble! Boooo hooo!” And then the Clown erupts into a rapid fire laugh that only grows more shrill and unhinged as he runs at Crane, crouching over his body and wagging his fingers and contorting his face as he mimicked the frightened whimpers of a child. “Hehehehehe boo hoo hoo hoooo! Hahahahaha! Boo! Heh! Hoo! Heh....heh....ah...heh...”

Why shouldn’t he be scared of a crow? And cawing madly, you gaze down upon the

clown, spread your tail feathers and then streamline yourself as you freefall again over the clown, and then you close your eyes for a moment as you concentrate, tight in your lower regions, and then...

BULLS EYE!

We cover our mouths as we see the white shit splattered over the Joker's face. Even Harley, Crane and The Hatter seem stunned, their mouths open, their bodies tense and for one very long spell, Joker stands there, his eyes closed. You land on the rafters, your head bobbing as you gaze at the clown who uses a dull, purple handkerchief to wipe off his face. As you preen your feathers, you jostle another sleeping crow who upon awakening, begins to caw and flap.

"You little...." Joker hisses, and he flings a shining blade which sings past your glossy black feathers and impales itself into the rafter. "Dammit!"

You caw at the top of your breast, taunting, triumphant, and in the process you rouse each and every one of your kinsman. Dozens upon dozens of crows, perhaps hundreds awaken, confused, angry, and loud, they all dive off the rafters, their feathers rustling like paper, their calls ricocheting against each other and off the walls.

It's hard to keep track of any semblance of space and reality as we're trapped, spinning and fast against wiry bodies and feathers, a disjointed cacophony of brethren who cannot at first create a cohesive unit. We cover our ears, and double over, and we squint, seeing only flashes of the dodging and flailing humans on the ground. The only one not dodging is the clown; he seems to have an endless supply of small blades that he produces from his pockets, needling them through the air where they tear at flesh and feathers. A handful of dead crows litter the ground now.

The sight of the dead brethren does not go unnoticed, and the crows begin to fly side by side, rising and falling in unison, circling the room and flying higher until the hole in the ceiling, the one they'd no doubt used to enter the building in the first place, is found. The crows will return upon the morning's light to hold vigil over their dead kin, but for the moment, it wouldn't be wise.

But you do not join them. You land upon the rafter and you perch as they fly past you. The humans are not likely to stay in this room forever. And there is still the matter of the dead rat. You perch in the shadows, glancing at the carcass and then at the humans. All of them are in the process of twisting and grumbling and wiping at the feathers and excrement that litters their shoulders and hair and sleeves. You want to gloat, and caw and taunt but you restrain yourself, certainly not wanting to meet the glinting edge of a blade from the Clown's pocket.

"Oh, Mister J!" Harley breathes, using a handkerchief to mop the bird poop off Joker's sleeves, "Our new clothes are ruined!"

"Eh heh, heh," Joker replies, ".....heh."

"I rather find little use for birds," Hatter grumbles, his hat in his hands as he tries to wipe the filth off the top. "Although birds find a great deal of use for us. I would call it unfair save for the fact that they're quite tasty, including a crow. I am rather fond of Crow." And with that bit of wisdom, Hatter leans over and proceeds to collect the soft, ebony bird carcasses littering the floor. "If you mind your manners, Miss Harley Quinn, I do invite you for Crow in a Pie at high tea tomorrow."

"Jeepers!" Harley exclaims, leaving off fussing over Joker and she frowns, her bottom lip pursing as she looks at Hatter, "Crow in a pie?"

Hatter's wide mouth stretches, his skin folding over itself in wrinkles as his eyes squint, "They're little pies, you can hold them between your thumb and forefinger, quite pleasing to a young lady of quaint taste."

One half of Harley's little nose wrinkles, she spreads her long, slim fingers over her right hip and she points at him with the thumb of her other hand, "You, are a queer little man. You know that? Isn't he, Mister J?"

But Joker is paying no attention to Harley and Hatter, he stands with his hands straight to his sides, and his smile is wide and open, displaying his yellow stained teeth, his eyes wide and shining. "It took a little crow to bring the Scare out of you, I sssseee!"

“Huh?” Harley twirls around and sees Jonathan Crane now wearing his Scarecrow mask. Harley screams, bringing the back of her hand to her lips. “Hells bells, Dr. Crane I’ve never been able to get used to that!”

“Still as bad as the first time, I see? I thought we’d cured you of that, my dear.” Scarecrow replies, his voice muffled by the burlap bag stitches shrouding his mouth, but his eyes are bright and blue, peering coldly from the cut holes. When he walks, there is no slouch or gangle, and his steps echo loudly. He approaches Harley and she lets out a whimper and falls back against Joker.

“Would you like a prescription for that? I’m sure I can tailor something to fit your...” Scarecrow says.

“No!” Harley gasps, but she smiles and giggles nervously, “Not at all. I’m just fine, Kiddo. Just fine. Heh.”

“Are you sure?” Scarecrow says slowly and he bends forward, brings his masked face to hers as she leans harder into Joker’s chest. “As I recall, you used to be quite the fan of pharmaceutical remedies to . . .” He lifts his right arm, his wrist just above Harley’s face and she gasps and shakes her head.

“Oh! No! No! Not anymore, sugar! I don’t even use the powder anymore! It’d prol’ly make my brain explode!”

“Heh heh heh!” Joker giggles, “Now THIS is a man I can respect! Heh heh heh, good to see you, Scarecrow!”

“Shut up,” Scarecrow replies.

Joker raises his eyebrows, “Heh.”

You tilt your head and watch as Scarecrow folds his slim arms behind his back and walks away from the clowns, approaching the Hatter who having finished stuffing the dead crows into the empty duffel bag, has occupied himself with plucking black feathers from the golden curls of the catatonic doll. “Messy, messy,” Hatter mutters, “Messy,

messy, messy...”

“Hatter?” Scarecrow says.

“Yes?” Hatter replies, his clear blue eyes enormous as he looks up to Scarecrow, the whites glistening and shining, so much so that you would dearly love to pluck them from his skull with your dagger black beak and swallow them down.

“Did you drive yourself here?”

“No.”

“Please call up your driver, then.”

Hatter slowly stands up, his eyes never leaving the Scarecrow; he backs away from him but also pulls out a cellular phone and dials. “Yessss....I need you...Come up immediately...No, you won’t need that...thank you.”

Joker is holding onto Harley’s hand, their arms hang limp but we notice how his fingers wiggle, tickling against her palms. Perhaps it is affectionate or perhaps she is merely a soft, scented distraction to him, of no more consequence than the feel of a silk tie between your fingers. Harley folds into his body, her chin to his shoulder, her arm around his waist.

Scarecrow is watching them, we see the stitched burlap over his mouth moving over his lips, we see slight moisture darkening it. We imagine opening our curtains one evening to see that face looking in at us, and we imagine walking into our bedroom, unaware that he is between the wall and the door, and we imagine hiding under a table as his mud splattered leather shoes circle the kitchen, holding our breath and desperately hoping that he does not smell our rank fear. Even to imagine him as a harmless straw man does nothing to dissuade our nervousness. We imagine the silhouette of him hanging on wooden planks at sunset, perhaps moving his arms and slithering off to chase us through the night.

What is happening?

You cluck nervously, we cannot sense it or smell it or hear it but the crow does. It is coming from Scarecrow. There is something strange leaking from his clothing perhaps and it is letting off a slight hiss as he reaches over to scratch his elbow. You dearly wish that you could take flight to rejoin your brothers and sisters outside the building but you daren't risk being the lone target for the Clown Prince's blade.

"I would like a final answer on this, Joker," Scarecrow says, his voice cracks a bit, the rhythm uneven. "Are you or are you not interested in our dolls?"

Joker shrugs, "Too pretty. I'm liable to break them, especially if they're all as darling as little Alice, here. Heh. What else are dolls good for? Eh, heh heh." He lets go of Harley's hand and shoves his hands deep into his pockets, and he rocks on his feet, smirking, "What I wanted was *fear*, distilled fear, and in good faith that is what I expected you to provide. Can I be faulted for expecting any less?"

Scarecrow leans against the wall next to the doorway, lanky body slumping, "I think we can all leave tonight happy men, Joker. Think of the doll as an advertisement, an offer you could have taken advantage of but isn't necessary for your main purpose."

Joker narrows his eyes, "Oh yeah?"

"Yes."

Joker's voice lowers to a growling bass, "Sssssshow me."

At this moment, the driver appears in the doorway, a heavy set, middle aged man in dripping clothes. "Mr. Hatter, Sir, you called? AAAAAAAAAAH!"

Scarecrow snatches the man at the back of his neck and he angles his other wrist over his face, spreading his fingers as a thick, condensed spray coats the man's face. It leaves the sharp tang of vaporized alcohol and propellant in the air, but the ill fated driver has taken the full scope of the venom it carried. He falls to the ground with his hands over his face, wailing and screaming.

Hatter has continued fussing over Alice, his back to the proceedings, Harley Quinn has cowered behind Joker, pressing her cheek in between his shoulder blades and closing her eyes, and Joker merely purses his lips. “Fear toxin? That’s what I’ve asked for; I don’t need a demonstration, Straw Man.”

“Ah,” Scarecrow replies, holding up a finger, “Not fear toxin, the very opposite in fact and a recipe I’ve tailored just...for...you.”

“Eh?”

The man has stopped screaming; he is slumped forward so that he resembles a lumpy melon. Silently he lies in that position, and we hold our breath as we watch his fingers loosen and fall from his hair. “Ah...ah...ah....” The man looks up, “CHOO! Hehehehehehehehehehe! FOOLED YOU! Hehehehe!”

Ugh. We sigh and sit back, even the crow is disappointed and you preen your wing. Maybe the Joker will light the Scarecrow on fire and just end the night so you can get to the tasty dead rat.

“I...don’t...like...being...toyed...with...” Joker says through his teeth, his fist bulging in his pocket, no doubt gripping a blade. “What did you load your canister with, hair spray?”

“Hehehehhehehehe!” The man continues to giggle. He points at Joker, “YOUR HAIR IS GREEN! Hehehehehehe! Hehehehehhee! HAHAHAAAAHA!”

Scarecrow crosses his arms.

“Oh, just kill them all, Puddin!” Harley sighs, she has emerged from behind Joker, “Or do you want me to do it?” In her hands is a blunt, black, fat six shooter. She points it at Scarecrow. “They’re just wasting your time.”

“Hold your fire, Sweet Pea,” Joker replies, reaching out and lowering the weapon. “Far be it from me to deny a good laugh.”

“HA HA HAHAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHA AAAAAAAAAAAH! HAHAAAAHAHA!” The

man continues to chortle. He's lying flat on his back now, we see the dark stain in the front of the pants. "HA AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! HAAAAAAAAA! HAAAAA!" The man is pulling at his hair now, rending fistfuls of it from his bleeding scalp.

Our eyes widen, the crow shrinks into the rafters and we want to cover our ears to shut out the rising intensity of this forced laughter. The man rolls to his knees, his laughter turned into hissing snickers, and blood trickles from his tear ducts as his eyes bulge, and bulge and bulge so far out that we lose track of his eyelids. Bloodshot, bulging, round, shining, "Hhhhhhhhhheeeeeeeee! Heeeeeeeee!" It's just hissing now, his bottom lip hangs and drool trickles off it. "Hhhhhhhhhheeeeeeeee! Hhhhhhhhhhhuh!" His smile is huge and spreading and spreading and spreading and his lips are parting and we hear a POP as his jaw dislocates and hangs but the twitching muscles in his face are forcing his lips to SMILE! SMILE! The corners of his mouth split, just a trickle of blood and a paper tear at first but that fast turns into a glorious rip upwards and blood jets from either side of his face, squirting and then down his neck and onto his shoulders. Within moments, his body falls to the ground, his eyes wide, his smile enormous, and a growing pool of blood beneath his cheek.

"Holy crackers!" Harley gasps.

"Do I meet your standards now, Joker?" Scarecrow replies.

Joker takes a few steps forward, his fingers hanging at his lapels, "Uh....cash or check?"

"I am to understand the concoction meets your approval?" Hatter says, standing up, his hands in his pockets as he leaves off his doll and goes to tap at the bleeding corpse with the toe of his shoe. "Oh, such a mess, suuuuch a pity."

"Ohhh I know," Joker sighs, "Good help is so hard to find these days."

"Hmph," Hatter replies.

"So, Scarecrow, frriend, how much can you supply me with, first shipment?"

“Tonight, I can supply you with a month’s worth, that is if you use it sparingly,” Scarecrow says, he moves to his friend Hatter, drapes his skinny arm over his shoulders, his hand hanging over the shorter man’s collarbone. “It doesn’t take long for me to manufacture it, however. I can be on-call for orders in small quantities, but larger orders will have a longer wait time, so please keep that in mind when contacting me.”

“Heh...” The clown’s grin widens as he approaches the men, he has a blade dangling lightly in his fingertips, “Heh...what if I kill one of you now, and let the other work for me for free, out of the kindness of his heart?”

“I’ve never been one for charity,” Scarecrow sighs. He draws Hatter closer to him, into a half-hug which the little man seems to appreciate as he wraps his arm around Scarecrow’s waist. “You’ll never find a sweeter smelling deal from me, walk away from it tonight, you walk away forever. It’s your choice.”

Joker’s smile is even wider, his long yellow teeth fully visible, his grip on the knife tighter. “Eh, heh, heh. My dear man, I think you should think long and hard about what it means to do me a favor, and what it means to lose my good will. Heh.”

The Hatter’s bony, puny knees are knocking together. Scarecrow tilts his head over him, pressing his nose against his neck. “Ahhhhh... I can make the deal even more fragrant than the fear stinking off my little friend here.”

Joker leans forward, and he slides his tongue over his lips, collecting flecks of red and white paint upon it, makes a smacking, slobbery sound. “You dooooooooooooo smell like fear!” Joker says in a low, bass voice, so deep it reminds you of an alley dog guarding its last bone. “Tell me, Hatter,” he says as their noses almost touch, they both tilt their heads, Hatter with a slight moan, Joker with taunting glee, “How does it feel to...”

What happens next is so swift that we jump from our seats and even the Crow startles, flapping its wings but at the last moment stifling a caw. Upon the Hatter’s lapel is a large flower, and Scarecrow slides his hand to the flower, and squeezes a jet of toxin straight up the clown’s nostrils.

Both men, Hatter and Joker fall from each other with a cry. Hatter totters until he falls

against the wall, Joker continues to moan and scream, his gloved hands over his face, becoming smeared with paint so that when he finally falls to the ground, most of his face is visible despite a swirl of gray, white, red and pink. And as he lays twitching and kicking, you wonder what his flesh will taste like once the quivering abates.

A shriek rises from the woman Harley Quinn, but there is no taste of fear in it, as she clenches her fists and runs toward Scarecrow. The frail looking man turns away from her right hook, and then he dodges her left. She tries to kick him and he falls to the ground to dodge that, he rolls and she flips high into the air and tries to land upon him. She lands upon bare floor, however, crouched and coiled, ready to spring again. And she does when Scarecrow tries to get to his feet, and this time she is upon him, her strong, slim legs clenching his waist and constricting so that he gasps and falls. As they land to the ground, he on his back, she with a glinting blade to his pale throat, he opens his hands and falls limp.

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO PUDDIN’?” Harley snarls.

“Nothing that cannot be fixed!” Scarecrow exclaims.

You excitedly bob your head and caw, deciding that the young man with the sack over his head would make a tastier meal than the decrepit clown.

“Oh yeah?” Harley sneers, “Well a pumping jugular, that ain’t something that can be fixed, Sugar. How about I...”

“You must understand!” Scarecrow exclaims, “I HAD TO! You cannot think that Jervis and I are so stupid that we wouldn’t know Joker would try killing one of us? Why do you think we brought the doll? He needed to see how useful both of us are to him, not just one!”

“There you go with all the questions and all the common sense!” Harley hisses, “Bottom line is, now that you gone and done this dumb thing to him, he won’t let either of you live. And neither will I!”

“I have the antidote you stupid girl!” Scarecrow yells back, “It’s not permanent by any

means! If you would just let me go...”

“I ain’t gonna let you go! I’m gonna carve you into little pieces!” Harley spits. “And really, you went about this all wrong, Dr. Crane! For one thing, why the hell would my Puddin’ be interested in your stupid dolls! Any dumb whore off the street can give head like a... WHOAH!”

Startled gasp turns into strangled wheeze as The Doll who has come alive has one of her long striped stockings in both hands and is in the process of twisting it around Harley’s slim throat. The knife drops to the ground with a clatter and the Doll continues to strangle her victim. A high blush floods her cheeks and she ignores Harley’s feeble attempts at slapping her away. A long minute passes until Harley goes completely limp, at which time Hatter waves his hand, “That is enough tea for now, Alice, dear.”

Alice sits down, the light leaves her eyes and she lets go of her stocking and Harley rolls in a dead heap. The room is silent, save the shuddering breath of Joker who has shoved himself underneath the table he had so recently used to torture Scarecrow. Tears stream down his face, washing away more paint and dribbling it down the front of his neck and onto his clothing.

“It takes much longer than that to strangle a woman,” Scarecrow says with a groan. “She will not be happy when she revives.”

“It would be folly to kill her,” Hatter replies, and the beastly little man busies himself with unwinding the stocking from Harley’s throat, leaning over to tenderly kiss the bruised part of her flesh. Now he takes the stocking and bunches it over Alice’s toes, sliding it up her leg.

Scarecrow groans as he stands up and you puff your feathers in disappointment. It seems no one else is to die, and you must make due with the rat and perhaps the poisoned flesh of the corpse.

When Joker sees Scarecrow he cries out and clutches his greasy green hair, “I am not scared of you!” He moans, tears and snot messing his face. “I AM NOT!”

Scarecrow crouches and interlaces his slim fingers together, “I know you are filled with rage and it grows in your chest right now so hard you can feel it splitting your sternum. You still cannot find the will to reach out and harm me however, because what you’ve inhaled is now a fog in your neurons that is causing your body to collapse with one inescapable truth. FEAR.”

“NO!” Joker snarls. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! You’re dead! You are...”

“YOU ARE PRACTICAL!” Scarecrow exclaims and he takes Joker’s soaked cheeks into his hand. “Come on mad dog, stop your barking and drop your bone, and realize that you can have the whole butcher shop if you want and that Jervis and I have the tools.”

“I. Will. Kill...”

“Admit it,” Scarecrow whispers, “you’d be a fool to ignore this gift.”

“I will kill...”

Scarecrow croons, his fingers tangled in Joker’s greasy hair, “Remember those endless days and nights, trapped in a cell, waiting for my footsteps in the hallway, waiting for the next dose that would dampen your fear and grief. Remember the names of every single one of the trust fund fat cats who railroaded you into my grasp.”

“I WILL kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiill theeeem ALL!” Joker spits. The spray of sweat and spit and paint dotting Scarecrow’s mask.

“Do we have a deal then?” Scarecrow murmurs.

“Oh yesssss!” Joker groans, he falls back, his fingers over his eyes and he laughs and he giggles and he wheezes, “Oh yessssssss we have a deal, Oh God YES this fear....oh YESSSS let me suffer, they’re gonna suffer, I will make them all...OH GOD gas me again, please give me more! OHHHHHH! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!
HEHEHEHEHE! EH! HEE!”

Scarecrow slowly stands up, his hands upon the back of his hips, jutting his body to

sharp, birdlike angles, “The most adaptive mind I’ve ever seen to toxin,” he mutters, “A second dose would most certainly not work upon you, and I think the toxin’s effect will wear off in about an hour. I will throw in a canister of this particular formula for free, and a canister of antidote, will that be acceptable to you?”

“Mmmhmmmm...” Joker sighs. “Yessss I will be in contact! Oh I’m soooo scaaaared! Sooooo scaaaared! Hahahahaha! Scaaaaaared! Uuuuuuhhhhh! Hahaha!”

“See, I knew you’d enjoy it.” Scarecrow turns around and begins to walk away briskly, “Jervis, for God’s sake pack her up and let’s go!”

You wait for the men to fold the strange little doll into the canvas bag and carry her away, leaving behind the extra duffel bag.

The Joker continues to alternate between crying and giggling under the table. The woman, Harley Quinn, finally revives and she crawls, coughing and wheezing to her mate. She takes Joker’s head onto her lap and she strokes his hair as his giggling and weeping becomes one entwined note. “Kill them all. I’ll kill them all. I’ll kill them all!”

“I’m gonna help ya Puddin,” Harley whispers, strokes his forehead, “I’m here. No one’s gonna hurt ya. Shhhhhhh...”

“I’m gonna kill their babies! Make em bleeeeeeeeeeeeeed! Heh, hehehe, break em like a doll over my knee. Heh.”

Harley stops his lips with a kiss. He does not complain. No one is watching them except you. You spread your wings and glide down to the ground. The rat is still warm and savory and you fill your gullet with its guts. We feel and taste the iron tang of blood and flesh as the crow swallows, and we pull ourselves from the alien pleasure of it.

The disconnect throws us into rushing oblivion, as we fly faster and faster, through the cold cut of the wet wind, and the needle bites of the rain. We become dizzy as we are dragged away from the warehouse, and over the city buildings, lights hazed by the dribbling inky night. Lower and lower, slower and heavier we feel as we finally roll to a stop inside the darkened room of a dry apartment.

Grateful to be free of the rain, we sigh and experience the simple joy of a warm tongue over fingers, of a belly filled with crumbs and nibbles off the half eaten sandwich on the tile. You consider how lovely it would be if you could take the rest of the sandwich into the wall with you, something to nap upon and nibble over the days.

Next to the half-eaten sandwich lies a young woman. Her eyes are closed, her hair is soft and brown and it frames her pale cheeks with curls. She is wearing a blue gingham blouse, and faded denim shorts, and her breathing is slow and deep. Strange place to nap, we think.

You decide that if you take it a piece at a time the sandwich can be absconded into the wall. Before you can attempt this, however, your toes absorb the vibration of the floorboards and you turn and dash to your refuge in the wall. The sharp clanging and clicking of a human fussing at the front door, and when it opens, the young woman's eyes open and she sits up, you smell her fragrant fearful sweat and we hear her breathing quicken considerably. Footsteps echo through the apartment and the woman whimpers as they come closer.

Blinding light, it takes a moment for your eyes to adjust, you want to disappear further into the wall but we do not allow you. We keep you fixated on peering into the kitchen, where a diminutive, angular young man leans in the doorway. Jonathan Crane. He is not wearing his mask, his hair stands on end, twirled and damp, his lips are so tight that they twitch and his pale eyes fixate on the terrified young woman. "Awake already my darling Dorothy-Dot?"

The woman shakes her head, and she smiles, closing her eyes, "No, I am not."

Jonathan enters the room; he leans over and rests his hands on his bony knees as he peers into Dorothy's face. "Being awake is nothing to be ashamed of, Dot. Have you seen Alice awake? She is often quite happy to be so."

Dorothy swallows hard, her voice trembles as she speaks, "I...I don't want to go home. Don't send me home. Please! Please, I couldn't bear it if you sent me home, I don't want to see my aunt ever again. Please!"

Jonathan looks at the sandwich and picks it up; you squeak in frustration as he takes a bite from it and then presses it into Dorothy's long fingers. "You simply wanted to eat, that is quite understandable. You just did not have the energy to finish it."

Dorothy begins to cry, she drops the sandwich and throws herself onto Crane's chest, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing. She sobs and she pleads and reminds him that at one time he had promised to rescue her and keep her safe from her old life. She begs him to continue hiding her away in his apartment, far away from her cult leader aunt and her abusive uncle.

Shhhh Shhhh Shhhh...

You twitch your nose, your whiskers vibrating with need for the mangled sandwich, we watch in fascination as Crane slides his hand gently up and down Dorothy's slim back. Her cheek rests on his chest, her face is soaked with grief and her eyelids tighten as his hand slides up the back of her blouse against her flesh. "Do you still love me, Dr. Crane?"

Crane's other hand has been in his deep jacket pocket and he has pulled out the burlap sack mask, sliding it over his head. "Darling Dot, you know that Jervis has prescribed your conditioning to require less than gentle management if you're going to be a proper puppet."

"Oh...nooo..." Dot moans, but she smiles, "Not the Scarecrow...please.... *Anything* but The Scarecrow!"

His voice is muffled somewhat through the mask. "Dot, Dot, Dot, I was your doctor. I know every fear and compulsion and *kink* that moves you."

Dot opens her eyes, goes rigid in his arms, her mouth hanging open and then her lips pull into a smile. "I don't think we'll even need the toxin today!" She whispers.

Dorothy presses her cheek to Scarecrow's chest and you scurry away heading deep into the walls, ignoring our intense desire to see what is happening. We cannot leave you

however, and for a long spell we sit in the dark, listening to spiders and roaches scurry all around, and to the muffled pleased moans of Dot, but of Scarecrow we hear nothing, not even a groan or laugh.

You want that sandwich badly, and when the sounds of suffering abate you begin your way back to the kitchen and you peer out of the hole. Dorothy lies on the floor in roughly the same position as when we first saw her. Circular bruises ring her throat, teeth marks score one of her arms, and her blouse is ripped. Her bright blue eyes are open, but the expression is vacant, and her pink swollen lips move as if whispering, pulled into an ethereal grin, but no sound comes out.

The sandwich lies in smeared pieces far across the tile, to retrieve the best of it; you will have to be willing to risk everything for it. You scurry across the floor, moving to the far edge of the tile to nibble. We can glimpse The Scarecrow in the next room and our desire to see more forces you away from the food and into the hall.

“Hickory dickory dock, the mouse went up the clock.”

Scarecrow repeats this as he leans against his living room window. Both of his hands are open, his fingers spread against the glass. His mask is on and it muffles the thuds of his forehead striking against the glass. His hands stroke the glass now, pawing and desperate. “The clock struck one....the clock struck one...the clock struck one...the clock struck one....”

Rain streams down the windowpanes in a flood that distorts and scatters shadows and light. Scarecrow’s silhouette against the glass shimmers and trembles, a night predator helpless, bound by nature to stay indoors and attempt to find sustenance in his limited quarters just as every crow and spider and rat has made do.

The rain slows to drizzle shortly before sunrise, at which point Scarecrow has fallen asleep on a chair facing the window. Dorothy has found strength to crawl across the kitchen floor to lick the remains of the mouse nibbled sandwich off the tile. Five miles away, Hatter busies himself with spooning tea leaves into a pot while Alice cheerfully sucks on buttered toast. Joker and Harley have made love twice in the warehouse, he has used one of Crane’s toxins upon her, leaving her to writhe for a short spell before she

recovers and uses it on him. Now they sleep in a tangled mess of paint, and clothing and limbs and sweat.

At the highest vantage in the city, a young man lying in a luxurious bed groans and sits up, his delicate nostrils twitching in appreciation at the smell of fresh tea and cinnamon oatmeal and griddle hot ham and eggs. An older man puts the breakfast tray upon his lap and the young man greedily digs into it.

The old man smiles tenderly, his fingers tremble, perhaps he wants to touch the younger man, pat his shoulder or his cheek.

“I’m actually glad I couldn’t go out last night. Probably not much to do.”

The old man nods, “And to think, Master Wayne, most people complain when it rains.”

“Mm,” the young man replies, “I wish it would rain like this more often. Maybe it’ll wash some of the trash out of Gotham.”

The old man agrees but he wonders silently if rainy nights like last night perhaps did more to aide the night villains, forcing them to lock themselves into ragged and angry little groups as their unsatisfied desires grew more ravenous and creative. And although the old man may tremble at the thought, we cannot wait for the sun to set again. We cannot wait for our guides of the underworld to return to the vermin of the night.

Pearl City, Colorado

Fandom: X-Files

When a sudden, loud thumping came to my front door, I froze. My low-rent, redneck, occasional lover, Bobby Ray Earl, did not. He continued his frenetic movements, rhythmically sodomizing me to our mutual delight.

Goddamnit, Jacklyn, don't you answer that door! Bobby muttered, his thick strong hands gripping my hips like a seasoned cowboy riding a bucking bronco. *I'm right there. Goddamnit! Right there!*

He suddenly froze, twitched a time or two, waited a second, then disengaged. As he collapsed back onto the bed, I gingerly slipped from the bed, and pulled on a long silk kimono I received as a gift from Bobby Ray Earl's half-brother, the Right Reverend Earl Ray Earl. When the knock sounded again, this time with greater veracity and vigor, I hushed Bobby Ray and swiftly moved to the living room.

Keep yer mouth shut, Bobby Ray.

Yeah, yeah. He collapsed back into the bed, spent.

A third knock began to sound just as I unlocked the front door, interrupting a man's movement by swinging the door wide.

Can I help...

Ma'am, we're with the FBI. I'm Special Agent Fox Mulder and this is Special Agent Dana Scully.

A tall, handsome man, with dark brown eyes and an easy smile pushed his badge wallet at me, closing it quickly before I had a chance to inspect it closer. The woman, short, red hair, pleasant smile, green eyes, held her badge longer. As I didn't really know the difference between a fake FBI ID from a real one, I just smiled serenely and tied my kimono a notch tighter.

Ma'am? Good Lord. So formal, I replied with an overly emphasized girly voice, one I had just started to perfect

The two of them looked up at me. The man stood roughly 6' and the woman appeared to be just over 5'. In bare feet I stood 6'5" and while I did not mind the *ma'am*, I preferred *miss*. Actually, as I stood there thinking about it, the fact that a Special Agent from the FBI recognized me as a woman warmed my heart. Especially from someone from the outside. Recently acquired breasts certainly helped, but I know what the mirror tells me, and it's not always *she*.

Can we come in? Special Agent Scully asked

I cinched my kimono further, just in case I had a costume malfunction, and gestured them in.

Of course. Sit anywhere you like.

I stepped out of their way and let them pass. Special Agent Scully looked at me with a mix of suspicion and curiosity. I side-eyed her with pure lust. Wearing gray slacks and matching jacket, with a loose white blouse, hair tied back and make-up minimal, Miss Dana Scully gave me pause. Not that she had any fashion sense, but something struck me.

Can I get you anything?

No, ma'am. Special Agent Mulder said as he glanced around my living room, a mid-century modern with minimal decoration. Couch, chair, coffee table, end table, TV on a basic credenza; nothing else. Generic litho paintings of cats playing guitars lined the walls, no pictures of family, as there were none to be had.

You caught me just as I was finishing up...something, I said, then added. *I just need to step away for one little moment.*

Did we catch you at a bad time? Special Agent Scully asked.

Not entirely.

Once back in my room, I found Billy Ray half-dressed and half-asleep on the bed.

Get'ch your ass out the door, Billy Ray. Right now.

I pulled on a pair of low-rise denim jeans and a simple blouse, and shooed Billy Ray out a secondary door in my bedroom, one that led to a kitchen which led to a backdoor. Billy Ray had become my backdoor man in more ways than one. After a parting kiss he muttered something about coming back later in the day, but I shut the door on him before he could get the entirety of his thought out of his mouth.

So, I said as I moved slowly back into the living room, full swish and sashay, *where were we?* I sat uncomfortably close to Special Agent Scully, who smiled politely and moved to give me a bit more room. *How can I help the federal government?*

Well, miss... Special Agent Scully started.

Jacklyn St James.

Well, Miss St James, we have a few questions about some recent events in your neighborhood. Scully held a pen in one hand and a small note pad in the other. I couldn't imagine why. *What recent events?*

Yes, Jacklyn. Agent Mulder looked at me with his big puppy dog eyes, seeming to ask if the informal first name would be appropriate and I nodded acceptance. *There were reports of some abductions recently. Not too far from your house. We're wondering if you saw anything*
... unusual.

Really? Oh my. I placed my hand over my chest in an exaggerated drag queen manner and watched Agent Mulder's eyes follow the movement, as expected. His eyes lingered on my breasts a second too long before darting away. The new boobs were getting noticed and I did not mind a bit. And as I was not yet in the habit of wearing a bra, my breasts

were free and unencumbered, and barely covered with a low-buttoned blouse. *I hadn't heard a thing.* I looked toward Scully who looked me directly in the eyes. *Who was abducted?*

Mulder and Scully glanced at each other.

A Mrs. Anderson and a Ms. Paige, Scully said.

Oh dear, again exaggerating my girlie voice. *Donna and Becky?*

You know them, Jacklyn? Agent Scully asked.

I do. Donna Anderson and her husband Miles are close friends. And Becky is a dear friend as well.

If I could have shown emotion I would have. But the situation did not entirely require emotion and, regardless, I had always struggled with any form of emotion. A genetic thing, you could say.

Have there been any strangers around lately? People in places they shouldn't be? Agent Mulder asked.

Not that I can think of. I appeared to ponder on his comment a moment longer. Of course, I had seen strangers around. Strangers were always around, generally in my bedroom, or hanging out at the local tavern. Our town had a certain reputation. Strangers were commonplace, almost like tourists.

Agent Scully glanced at me then quickly glanced down. I followed her gaze and realized I sat legs spread like a man, the bulge in my tight lady jeans obvious. In my rush I had forgotten to put on a gaff to hide my uglies. But a bulge is a bulge. Secret's out, if my height and hands hadn't given it away already.

My apologies. I whispered to the redheaded agent of the FBI.

I patted Agent Scully on the knee after I crossed my legs further hiding my *disability*. Her face blanched just slightly and her lips curled into a small smile. She put her hand on mine and gave it a squeeze of understanding, then pulled away, slowly. *Oh my*, I thought. *Oh my. Was that a moment?*

Did they know each other? Mulder asked.

Oh yes. We are all part of the same circle. I stood and walked into the dining room, returning with an unframed photograph, which I handed to Scully.

This is a picture taken last summer at the town picnic. Such a lovely day. Becky gave it to me just three or four days ago. That's her. I pointed Becky out. *So lovely.*

Scully, who remained sitting, looked at the image intently but said nothing. I sat back down next to her, and pointed to myself.

This was taken before I had my procedure. I glanced at Mulder, *It's a better look, don't you think, Special Agent?*

Look?

My breasts. I'm more...me.

There were ten other women in the picture, all in different phases of transition. A few had gone all in and completed the transition, but others were mid-process. Personally, I could not imagine *not* having a penis, not that it came in handy that often and despite its absolute horrendous appearance. Most of the girls in the community had similar feelings. Thanks to certain *genetics* we really didn't need any assistance in heightening our feminine appearance, we looked the way we looked. Even with the ugly sticks between some of our legs, most would be hard pressed to see us as anything but female assigned at birth. Other than our height, of course, the occasional bulge and costume malfunction, we are women. And in our town, we fit right in. No one asked, or stared, or gave two shits about whether or not we were real women. No one asked misgendering questions, no one stared inappropriately, no one called us names or wrote legislation to limit our rights.

Scully considered the picture a second longer then handed it to Mulder. He glanced at it but quickly handed it back.

I leaned into Mulder and whispered; *Quite a collection of lovely ladies, don't you think?*

Mulder looked at me strangely, as if transfixed or slightly drugged.

Yes, they are lovely. His eyes drank me in, he glanced down my top just slightly, leaned in as if to kiss me, and said, in the lowest voice; *You're lovely.*

Scully suddenly spoke, breaking the moment between Mulder and myself.

So, all these women are in transition?

More or less. Some have finished their path and others are still figuring things out.

Scully looked at me intently.

Do you consider yourself transgender?

I hesitated, then said: *Not exactly. I prefer transfeminine. Transfeminine is my preferred gender reference, if that is what you mean.*

Ah . . . Mulder said.

This is a bit personal, but have you always lived as a woman? Scully asked.

As long as I can remember.

And these other women? Scully's curiosity came across genuine

Yes, we're all women.

I mean . . .

I know, honey, but I am having a hard time understanding this line of inquiry.

I'm sorry. Scully looked at me with her green eyes and I melted just a bit. If I'm being honest, I am just curious.

So, there's a difference? Mulder asked.

Between transgender and transfeminine? There is. Transfeminine is more of an umbrella term and a variety of identities would fall into it. It is about being assigned male at birth but realizing a feminine life as a truer identity. And there can be ranges of femininity. Some of us present more feminine than others. I only recently decided breasts would be a part of my affirmation. But that's my only real surgery. I folded my hands across my lap, smiled politely, as a lady of standing might.

So, you aren't having a vaginoplasty? Scully asked.

No. I looked at her curiously. I'm not. Why?

I am a doctor, as well as a Special Agent.

Mulder looked at me strangely.

I am keeping my penis, Special Agent Mulder, if you are wondering what a vaginoplasty is?

I . . . Mulder started to speak, but Scully interrupted him, raising her delicate hand in a stop talking motion.

A vaginoplasty is where the penis is converted into a vagina. Scully made an exaggerated gesture imitating a cut to the penis and unfolding it.

I... Jesus. I get it. This has nothing to do with this case.

Scully smiled broadly and stifled a laugh, Mulder tried to disappear deeper into my couch.

We talked further about my friends but with no real context or apparent importance. After twenty minutes they rose to leave but not before I took Scully's hand.

You should come back to see me, I whispered in her ear.

Scully, standing all of 5'2", looked up at me and nodded slightly. Mulder already had his hand on the doorknob.

Thank you, Jacklyn, Mulder said brightly as he walked through the door. *We'll be in touch.*

After Scully had cleared the door, I shut it and turned the lock. I could hear them talking on the front porch.

There's something odd here, Scully, Mulder said.

Like what?

Did you feel a little . . . strange . . . when she whispered?

A short silence fell as if Scully attempted to understand Mulder's comment. Apparently, she did when she responded.

A little, almost compelled to comply.

Another silence fell and I peered through the peephole at them. They were standing very close together, but not moving, which I found odd. Why not get back to the car before gossiping?

I think Jacklyn is hiding something.

I saw Scully make a face, and I smiled. Then Mulder quickly added, *Other than that.*

Jacklyn asked me to come back to see her, I heard Scully say.

Really?

Yeah.

Are you?

I think so.

I smiled again, turning away from the door. I shook my ass a little, almost a victory dance, as I walked through my bedroom, and toward my bathroom shower.

* * *

When I finished drying my hair, and putting on proper feminine outfit — bra, panties, dress, heels — I hit the phone. For the next hour or so, I called all the other women in the picture, making sure we all had the same story. And we did. Everyone knew the truth about Donna and Becky. What had happened to them could happen to each of us and probably would. Certainly, we did not know when, it could occur without notice, so we lived life as fully as possible. With the exception of myself, Becky and one other gal, Lisbeth Duke, all the women in the photograph were happily married to generous, patient men. I had married briefly but it didn't work out. He didn't quite get me, and he proved less than patient. Plus, I bore quickly. Maybe if I had made more permanent changes to my appearance sooner, he might have stayed longer. Or if I had not cheated on him every chance I got. It no longer mattered, he no longer mattered.

After my last phone call, I walked into my bedroom, and stood in front of a full-length mirror, pondering. Despite my height, and an extra rib, I could pass as female. And I could before the breast implants, but they provided more permanence. My hips and butt finally achieved a desired look. Hormones had helped but various gym exercises helped gain “permanence.”

I cupped my breasts and nearly laughed. Happiness comes from the little things, I suppose, and my little things could be a touch bigger. Maybe more of a C cup. And I put my mind to it. A second later they enlarged to a perky C cup, nearly busting my bra.

If I put my mind to it, I can change into almost anything, but not with any *permanence*. Within a few hours they would revert to the surgically enhance B cups.

* * *

Dana arrived at 7 and I invited her in. I had changed yet again into a long sheer dress and little else. My girlfriends called it a nakie dress as you wouldn't want to wear anything else under it. A bold move, no doubt, but I can convey so much with just a whisper my appearance ultimately mattered little.

Special Agent Dana Scully and I sat together on the couch. She had changed as well into jeans and a simple v-cut tee-shirt.

I'm glad you came back, Special Agent.

I am as well, Special Agent Dana Scully said. And it's Dana.

You are so beautiful.

Thank you. So are you, she said softly.

Even though I am a giant.

You're not so tall.

Dana looked up at me in strange way, her eyes almost glassy. I leaned in and kissed her softly on the mouth, my arms coiled around her into an embrace. She did not protest and kissed me back with equal intensity

You understand?

I . . . do, Dana said breathlessly as we kissed again.

When our lips parted, I stood and went to the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of wine. I noticed Dana watching me, or, most likely, my dress. Smiling to myself, I uncorked a bottle of an elegant Cabernet, gathered up two glasses and returned.

For the next several hours we sat, drank wine, and talked. Dana told me her life story, stopping several times, as if confused as to why she had opened up so much.

I'm not sure what's going on? Dana said more than once.

And I just whispered: *You don't always need to know, do you?*

When I walked Dana to the door and kissed her goodbye, she responded as she had before. Our mouths opened, tongues engaged, and my hands went to the small of her back. Despite my desire to have her stay, I did not want to plant that desire into her mind. It obviously had to be her decision, and she had yet to reach that point. Dana left quietly but not without hesitation. We made a commitment to meet the next day for lunch.

I paused as I locked the door. A rakish smile slipped across my lips. I turned the lock and quickly tidied up the living room, taking a spent bottle of wine, a now empty plate of cheese and crackers, and two wine glasses to the kitchen, placing them in the sink. I punched Billy Ray's phone number into my cell.

Bobby Ray. You need to get over her this minute.

Yes, ma'am.

And a minute later Bobby Ray knocked on my back door.

* * *

Dana and I met for lunch. Special Agent Mulder made plans to work with the sheriff on the missing women, and then decided to return to Washington DC.

I'm staying the weekend. Dana said to me plainly.

Oh?

Yes. Dana wore the same jeans from the night before but a different shirt.

About last night, I started, but a phone call from Mulder interrupted my thought.

Dana took the call, looked at me, then closed the phone.

Seems the case is solved.

Really? Just like that?

Yes. The sheriff received phone calls from both missing women. And Mr. Anderson stated he had been with Donna late last night.

How odd.

Seems odd, doesn't it?

It does. Dana looked deep into my eyes as I spoke, her green eyes almost sparkling. *I'm not gay.*

What?

You were going to ask about last night, and our kiss.

We kissed more than once.

Yes, we did.

I didn't mind.

Me either.

Dana and I let the topic go and spent the remainder of the day together. After a light lunch we went shopping where we bumped into several of my lady friends. It would make for an odd picture if anyone cared to notice. Five very tall woman, all over 6 feet, and tiny Dana Scully.

We gossiped about the town and relationships and various challenges, however minimal. Our community proved a sanctuary from all the hatred and violences transgender people faced in other cities, large and small.

Dana and I held hands, without care or consideration of other opinions. Lisbeth leaned into me when Dana stepped away for the lady's room.

What are you doing?

I like her. She's interesting, and smart, and beautiful.

She's straight. Lisbeth whispered. She's not one of us.

So? It's not like you've ever been attracted to a woman? Or women?

Town women, not outsiders. Not the FBI.

Oh stop.

You know why Donna and Becky . . .

Yes, yes. Of course. That's not going to be my issue.

You fuck her it will be. Hell, I'm surprised you haven't disappeared with all the other men you've fucked.

Fuck is an ugly word, Lisbeth.

Dana returned and Lisbeth moved back to her chair at the table.

After the group finished a last-minute dinner, I took Dana by the hand, and we walked back to my house. We kissed again, just before she got into her car. I watched her tail lights disappear as she drove toward her motel. Just before I entered my house, headlights lit me up.

Jacklyn? Dana called out.

Yes.

I walked to where Dana stood.

What's wrong? I asked.

Nothing. It's just . . . Dana looked confused, then scared, then determined. *Would you want to spend the night . . . with me?*

I would.

I rode with Dana back to her motel as she had decided that my place didn't feel right and, for some random reason, a crappy old motel did.

I'm confused, Dana said as she sat on the bed. The motel room didn't have an ounce of character but our town only had one motel, and rarely got used for more than an hour or two at any given time. Character did not matter in the slightest.

What about?

I don't know why I am so attracted to you.

Oh?

I mean, I'm heterosexual.

And I'm a woman.

Well . . .

Honey, as far as you know I am a woman. As long as I believe I'm a woman, despite how life started for me.

Dana's confusion came from me, from a whisper. The women in my town have a unique ability to make suggestions that come true, simply through thought.

You seem otherworldly, Dana said softly. I pulled her into an embrace and held her for several moments. When we parted, she leaned in and kissed me, soft at first, but with increasing intensity. We became frenzied, almost out of control. She quickly stripped off her shirt and helped me remove mine. I peeled away my bra and then unbuttoned hers. Dana stood and stepped from her jeans, dropping her panties as she went. Completely naked she straddled across my lap.

I have no idea what I am doing.

I think I do.

Special Agent Dana Scully pulled away from our kiss and whispered, *take off your pants*, and I complied, immediately but then stopped.

Wait. I stood up, clad only in my panties. *I can't.*

Can't? Dana said softly.

There's something I need to share.

I put my mind to it and my penis slowly disappeared and formed into a vagina, my height decreased to just over five and half feet.

What are you?

Dana covered her mouth with her hand and stepped back. Suddenly aware of her vulnerability being naked, she covered herself with a thin motel pillow. *What are you?* She repeated.

I'm a shifter and those women . . . I hesitated. They are as well.

The whole town?

Well, all those that present as women...

Dana dressed but made no move to leave.

You're aliens?

Yes. In your parlance we are. Those two women, Donna and Becky, went back home. Recalled actually. I stopped, rationalized explaining further, and then continued. They were caught in unregulated relationships.

Relationships?

Yes, they took lovers outside of what was allowed. Other than their assigned relationship.

The moment began to sink in and the doctor in Dana came out. She began to break it down in her mind.

I don't think I understand . . .

Let me explain. Where I come from there are no genders, not really. We have biological designations for procreation but other than that, you are what you want to be. In this world I am very feminine, very female, but biologically I am what you would consider a male. I can shift to eliminate the appearance of an ugly appendage, but I can't hold it. I mean I would revert to having a penis or whatever after a few hours. Unless I have actual surgery. I stood up and walked to the window, glancing skyward. Like my height. When I shift shorter, I can only hold it so longer before I revert. There are certain constants I cannot permanently change.

So, you will return to being tall and the vagina . . .

Will revert to a penis, unfortunately.

You could have it removed.

I could, but despite its appearance, I kind of like it.

This is so insane. Dana stood and walked to me, standing a few inches from me. I took her hand.

It is insane. I bent in and kissed her. Dana responded quickly, but paused. I'm not feeling this because of some weird alien thing, am I?

I promise that you are not. I could but I wouldn't.

What about the unassigned relationships with humans?

I don't care, I said.

Dana smiled slyly.

Take your clothes off, she whispered, and I did.

* * *

Two weeks later Special Agents Scully and Mulder sat in a basement office at the FBI building, discussing a current case before falling silent.

Dana stood from a typical office chair and turned toward the door.

Hey Scully, Mulder said suddenly.

Yeah?

Remember that woman, Jacklyn, from a couple of weeks ago?

Yeah.

Seems she's disappeared. Sheriff called.

Really?

Yeah, but I told him to wait to see if she checks in.

Oh, she will, Dana said. She will.

As Dana Scully, Special Agent for the FBI, left the office her cell phone beeped. The message read, *Are you coming home soon?*

Dana whispered: *Yes.*

Allergic Responses

Fandom: CSI New York

“I’m having a strange sense of déjà vu,” said Mac Taylor as he leaned against the wall of the hospital room. He glanced around the room and then back at the bed.

Don Flack lay there, his face pale beneath an oxygen mask and wired up to a number of machines which beeped reassuringly as he moved. Pulling the mask away from his face with a hand covered in scratches he said, “You should see the other guys.” His voice was scratchy and there was a slight wheezing sound to it.

“I did,” said Mac, “About ten inches tall, covered in fur, with four legs and a tail.”

“Don’t forget the claws,” grumbled Don. “Lots of claws.” He shuddered involuntarily and then winced in pain.

“Well, that’s what you get for chasing a suspect through a cat shelter.” Mac spoke with deliberate casualness but was unable to conceal all his concern.

“Over a cat shelter, not through,” Don corrected him. “And it would have been fine if the roof hadn’t given way.” He coughed. “Anyway, I’m okay. A few days rest and I’ll be back on my feet. No broken bones, just some scrapes and bruises.”

“And a severe allergic reaction to being in close proximity to a herd of cats.”

“That too,” acknowledged Don, letting the mask fall back against his face as he breathed in the medicated air. “I’ll be fine,” he added, his voice a little muffled.

“This time.” Mac hesitated momentarily before continuing, “But after an exposure this severe, the next time could be worse. You could go into anaphylactic shock and if you didn’t get treatment in time...” his words trailed off.

“Looks like you’ve been doing some research.” Don shifted uneasily on the bed. Loathe though he was to admit it to himself, much less Mac, he was still somewhat shaken by the whole incident. Not just the fall, which had knocked the wind out of him. Initially he’d been more annoyed that the suspect had managed to avoid falling and was likely to get away before backup could arrive. And then he’d sneezed and had realized that he’d fallen into a nightmare, surrounded by hissing and spitting demons. He’d started coughing and wheezing and had barely managed to dial 911 before collapsing to the ground, trying to breathe. He’d been barely conscious when the paramedics had arrived. Now he just wanted to forget all about the fear he’d felt as he’d gasped out his name and location, the fear that help wouldn’t come in time, the fear that he’d never see his partner again.

“I have,” Mac replied, “And I’ve also done some research into the possibility of desensitization. It would take a while, but it could severely reduce your sensitivity to allergens.”

“No,” said Don, “I don’t need that. I’ll be fine.”

“This time. But what happens the next time you cross paths with a cat? You could be trying to sneak up on an armed suspect, sneeze at the wrong time and find yourself staring down the barrel of a gun.”

“Now you’re overreacting.”

“You’re lying in a hospital bed, on supplemental oxygen, hooked up to IVs and a heart monitor.” Mac swallowed hard, “I don’t ever want to see you like this again, or worse.” He took a deep breath and composed himself, “I really don’t want to have to play this card, but I saved your life, the least you can do for me is look after it and get treatment for your allergies.”

Don stared at him in silence for a few seconds, before pulling the mask away again and saying, “You know, this whole ‘you saved my life so I owe you’ card would have worked a hell of a lot better if you hadn’t pulled it on me last week to get me to unload the dishwasher!”

Mac smiled involuntarily, “Well it worked, didn’t it?”

“No, it didn’t. I emptied the dishwasher because I’m a grown man and I accept that there’s certain responsibilities that come with living with somebody. I didn’t do it because I owe you for saving my life. There aren’t enough dishwashers in the world to repay you for that.”

Mac sighed as he sat down on the bed, his hand automatically reaching to clasp Don’s. “There are roughly half a million cats in this city, and I would round up every last one of them if I thought I could keep you safe. But I can’t, and I can’t lock you away from them.”

Don sighed, “Mac, you know youze can’t protect me from everything.”

“I know, and there are so many risks that we both face every day. A lot of them, we can’t do anything about. But this...this is something that we *can* do something about.”

“And what about your allergy? I don’t see you lining up to get that fixed.”

“It’s a lot easier to avoid my allergy. There aren’t exactly feral bunches of blueberries roaming the city.”

“This is New York baby, nothing would surprise me. Supposed somebody assaults you with a fruit basket?”

Mac couldn’t help but laugh. “Point taken. Maybe I should consult an immunologist for myself.”

“I did think about consulting one before.” Don saw the look of surprise on Mac’s face. “It was after...after the bombing. The doctors were running all sorts of tests, wanting to make sure I wouldn’t have any issues from so much crap landing inside my guts. They asked about pre-existing conditions and when I mentioned the allergy, they said I could probably get some treatment.” He fell silent for a bit as Mac waited patiently. “But it was gonna involve so many injections and I’d just gotten through feeling like a

pincushion.” He looked away, “and maybe I just wanted to put the whole deal, doctors and hospitals and pills all behind me.”

“And how to feel about trying it again? Not for me but for yourself.”

“I guess maybe I should look into it. They can probably set me up with an appointment while I’m here.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Mac, a feeling of relief sweeping over him. “And of course, I promise I’ll kiss you better after every single injection.”

“Now why didn’t you play that card first!” said Don. “Think you could start practicing now?”

“Any time,” said Mac, as he raised Don’s hand to his lips. “Any time.”

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Fandom: Little House on the Prairie

The day I met Laura Ingalls Wilder she wasn't doing so hot. She was crouched in an alley behind a trashcan, clutching her head like it was fixin' to fly off. Of course, I didn't know who she was then. I just saw a young woman crying, wearing a pretty flowered dress and matching bonnet. I remember the bonnet for sure. I'd never seen one in real life and I love that kind of stuff. Anyway. I figured she must have been at a costume party or something, maybe had a fight with a boyfriend, but I had never heard such a lonesome, hopeless sound. Those sobs broke my heart.

She was lucky I'd even seen her. I was coming home from work and I was done in. Finished. Over and out. Eight hours standing behind a register is hard on a body. Your lower back aches, your calves ache, and, well, pretty much everything aches. You can bet I was in a hurry.

But I stopped that night because I heard a tiny little sob and I looked before I could even think. She was a tragedy waiting to happen, all sad and terrified and I sighed, because Lord knows I have a soft spot for little lost creatures. If she'd been a cat or a puppy or even an injured squirrel I would have tucked her right down in my jacket and carried her home without a second thought.

So I bent down and asked if she was all right. Her head jerked and she turned her face toward mine; she was kind of a mess. She shook her head: "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" I said.

Her mouth opened and shut once like a fish and her eyes were red. "I mean, I don't know how I got here! I'm scared. Can you help?"

Now, I'm no pushover. I know people. I know how they are. A girl's gotta take care of herself and I do. I always meet first dates in a public spot, for coffee and the like. But usually even after that I don't want to know them anymore. My momma always said I'd

been born in the wrong century. Maybe I am old-fashioned, but I can take care of myself. I'm kind of proud of that. I work really hard at the Shop-n-Save and then come home and work just as hard-harder-on my own things. I'll tell you all about that later, but I love making things that are pretty and useful. There's an honesty in making things yourself, at least I think so.

My first thought was I should mind my business and leave. But there was something about her. I could at least take her home and warm her up with a cup of tea, then call her a cab. She didn't give me that jittery feeling you get when you're dealing with a sketchy person. Seems like everyone nowadays is sketchy person, at least, that's who all I meet.

“Come on, then,” I said, grabbing her hand and hauling her up. She was a tiny thing, but her grip was strong, and once she was on her feet she seemed to settle, like having a plan made her feel better, even if she didn't know me from Adam.

I'll say this; she was a good walker. I was worried she'd be one of those people who cry if they have to walk more than two blocks, but not Laura. She walked quickly, kept up just fine, her little brown boots making clip-clop sounds as she went. We didn't talk much. I was too tired, and she was too-something. I don't know. She was holding my hand, her eyes always moving, like she was drinking up all the sights and she hadn't had nothing to drink in a long time.

The cars really seemed to spook her; I'll explain more about that later, but any time someone drove by she would stare and stare and I had to tug her arm a bit to keep her going in the right direction.

We finally got to my place and I showed her where she could hang her things. I made her a cup of tea, handed her the remote, and then excused myself for a minute to change out of my work outfit.

When I came back, she was sitting in the middle of the couch, very still. Her hands were wrapped up tight around her mug and she was looking around like she'd never seen an apartment before. So anyway, that's when I asked her what was up, and that's when she told me she was Laura Ingalls Wilder.

“Oh, like the books?” I said. I'd loved those when I was a girl, livin' back then had always seemed like paradise to me. Beautiful. Quiet. Simple.

She looked confused for a minute, so I explained to her, “You know, *Little Town on the Prairie*, *The Long Winter*, *Farm Boy*? The books! Everyone's read them, and all them books written by a lady with the same name as you. There was a TV show!”

She shook her head and looked confused, saying she was new here, so maybe there was someone else with her same name. That's when I sat down across from her and gave her my first real good look. Her hair was long and brown like mine, done up in a fancy braided twist. She wasn't wearing makeup and her dress was real strange, old-fashioned and worn. The material was thick and rough around the cuffs and hem. It gave me pause.

“So Laura,” I said, “can I call you Laura? Good. Laura, how'd you wind up in that alley at 11 o'clock at night?”

“I—I honestly don't know,” she said. She looked stricken. I'd never seen a person look stricken until that very moment when I saw her face, then I knew what looking stricken looked like. “I don't remember.”

“You don't remember? You sure didn't fall out of the sky, now, did you?”

Her eyes met mine. They were very blue. “I think I might have,” she said.

Well, it took me a minute to take that in, you can bet. I wasn't sure if she was messing with me or if she really thought it, but she did look ruffled and, well, a little like she'd been tossed about by the wind. But that didn't mean anything.

“You don't remember nothing? Nothing at all?”

“I was outside putting up the laundry when, out of nowhere, a tornado touched down!” she shook her head, “It was so sudden.”

“You didn't hear the siren?” I said.

“The what?”

“The siren, for tornadoes.”

“I don't know what you mean,” her lips thinned.

“Forget it. Sorry for interrupting, it's just--”

“Well, I tried to run for the cellar, of course. I could see Almanzo running in from the fields, his hat had blown off and when he reached the cellar doors he held onto them, waving at me to hurry.”

“Almanzo?”

“My husband.”

“Yeaahhhh ...” this was getting weirder by the second. I thought I was a fan.

“Well, I think I must have tripped,” she said, “and I don't know, there was a flash of light. Lightning, maybe, but blue. And then, something caught me, lifted me right up off the ground and spun me around until I lost consciousness. When I awoke, I was in the middle of a field. Nothing looked familiar; I had no idea where I was. I wasn't thinking clearly, so I just jumped up and started running. I thought: the storm couldn't have carried me that far, that I would recognize something soon. But it all looked so strange. I didn't recognize anything, none of the buildings, the roads. And there were so many people!”

She shook her head, staring into her mug of tea like there were answers at the bottom.

“I didn't know what to do. I just kept running until I couldn't anymore. I had just slipped into that alley, looking for somewhere to hide, when you found me. Thank you, by the way, for your kindness. For welcoming me into your home. I – thank you.”

Well, you can imagine how I felt. I just sat there for what felt like a month and looked her up and down. She'd finished her tea by then, and was now absently loosening the

braided twist of her hair. It didn't seem like she was lying; at least, she seemed to believe her own story. Didn't make it true, though.

“You know what?” I said, “why don't we get some sleep? We'll both feel better in the morning, and then we can see about getting you back to your people.” I went and grabbed some pajamas for her, and some clean sheets and blankets to make her up a little bed on the couch. I had to help her outta that costume, poor thing. It was buttoned up the back and she was cinched in like a sausage. My pajamas were a little snug around her hips, and a little long, but we rolled up the arms and legs and they worked just fine.

“Well, g'night,” I said. “Help yourself to coffee or whatever if you wake up before me.”

As I closed my bedroom door, I took one more peek at my mysterious guest. She was sitting on the couch on top of the sheets, holding one of the blankets tight to her chest like a baby.

She noticed me staring, and shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. “Good night.”

I turned off the light and went to bed.

* * * * *

I woke up to the smell of something wonderful. It took me a moment to remember my guest. I slipped out of bed and cracked open my bedroom door to peek. She was already in the kitchen, bustling around like she owned the place. She turned when she heard the door open and smiled.

“Good morning!” she said. “I thought I'd make breakfast.” She turned off the faucet where she had been rinsing her hands and dried them on a towel. “Do you want coffee?” she asked. She was holding a pan she'd just picked up from the stove. I peered in, and it was full of coffee grounds and water and ... eggshells?

“Why didn't you use the coffee maker?” I asked.

“The what?” she said, carefully pouring some into a mug and handing it to me. I took a

sip. It was the best coffee I'd ever had.

I suddenly needed to sit down.

When I did, she scooted a plate in front of me. It had eggs and toast and even a little bit of bacon I must have forgotten about in the freezer. Well, of course I wanted to talk to her more, but it would have been rude to let all that food go cold, so I dug in. Everything was delicious, and I told her so.

When we'd finished we cleared the table together and did the dishes. I was starting to like this young woman very much, this so-called Laura Ingalls Wilder. My new friend had a way about her. She felt like home. We didn't speak; I could tell she was thinking deeply, though, turning things over and over in her mind. I wanted to ask her about it, but decided it could wait.

When our chores were finished, we sat down on the couch. She was quiet for a minute, seemed to be collecting herself. I saw today's newspaper open in front of her on the table. Finally, she took a deep breath and asked, "Am I correct in understanding the year is 2023?"

Well, that was the last thing I'd expected. I'd nearly forgotten her strange clothing. She was still wearing my pajamas.

"Well, yeah! What other year would it be?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. "Last I remember, it was August, 1885. My husband and I were just married, and we were settling into our little home ... "

"No!" I said, standing up and pushing back from the table. I really liked this girl, but this nonsense had to stop. "You hush it right now! You are *not* the real Laura Ingalls Wilder!" I started rubbing my face and neck, to make sure I was awake. I was feeling a little sick, to be honest.

"I assure you, that is my name, but I don't understand who this other Laura Ingalls Wilder is that you keep talking about."

“Look,” I said. “It's easier to show you.”

Since I didn't have the *Little House* books any more, I got out my laptop. Forty-five minutes later, we were still seated on the couch, and she was scrolling through page after page of text about Laura Ingalls Wilder: her family, the books, her whole life. She scanned each and every picture like it held a thousand secrets. She was a little freaked out, to be honest. To be more honest, so was I. “This is me! This is my family!” she kept saying, over and over and over. Finally she flopped back on the couch and gestured helplessly at the little screen.

“I don't understand! I don't know how this could be! How am I here? I'd just been married! We had our whole lives ...” Laura buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Well, I didn't really know what to do; what can one say in that sort of situation, right? I patted her on her back a bit, until she had pulled herself together. “Do you want to read them?” I asked, “The books?” What else could I say? She nodded.

I loaned her one of my dresses, but shook my head at her when she reached for her bonnet. “They're out of fashion.”

We drove straight to the library, checked out the entire series, then turned around and went straight back home.

I kept trying to figure her out. It's not like I didn't trust her, she seemed to be a genuine, kind person, but she was a mystery. I kept sneaking peeks at her when she wasn't looking, to see if there was even the tiniest crack in her time-traveling act. If there was, I couldn't see it. She was very convincing. She acted like she'd never seen half the things in my home before, and she did really look just like the old photographs. It was a lot to wrap my head around, though. I worried she was maybe a little crazy or something, or maybe it was me. Still, she seemed harmless, and it was kind of nice to have someone around. I lived alone. I didn't have any family to speak of; I lost my mom to a car crash a few years back, and I never knew my father. Also, I kind of wanted to believe that she was real.

I had to work that evening, so I set her up with the books and showed her how to use the TV. My shift seemed to last forever; all I could think about was getting home to my fascinating new friend. I'm pretty sure my manager wanted to fire me, I was so distracted, but by the time I was done I'd decided I'd act like her story was true, that she was the real Laura Ingalls Wilder who had somehow traveled forward in time to 2023. I had so many questions! The nineteenth century was kind of my obsession. Might as well learn as much as I could, and if she slipped up, well, then I'd know.

I finally made it home with a bag of groceries in tow, and found her in pretty much the same spot I had left her, slowly working her way through the books.

“Are they accurate?” I asked.

“Some,” she said. “But the order of things isn't quite right, and some of the details are off. It's strange reading about my life like this, especially the book about Almanzo. I didn't know most of those things about him!”

“He must tell you later in your marriage – he must *have* told you? How does that work, anyway, talking about a past that hasn't happened yet?” I said.

Laura shook her head.

“So tell me,” I said, “what are the the differences you've found so far?”

We talked for a long time, and the more we talked the more I really wanted to believe. I mean, what are the chances, right? Hope is a funny thing.

We made dinner together and cleaned up, then sat down on the couch to watch some TV. She hadn't watched it earlier; she had been too busy with the books, but she was fascinated. “The technology in this time is incredible!”

I smiled and pulled out a bit of embroidery I was working on, and she was very interested in that, too. I told her all about my designs and what I do, and showed her some of my work. She looked so misty-eyed about the whole thing that I decided to set

her up with a hoop and cloth of her own, and I showed her my stash of embroidery thread. She handled that needle like she'd been born with it in her fingers and we talked.

“So you sell these things you make? Like a market?”

“Yeah, I sell them at craft fairs and the like, and I also have my Etsy shop.”

Of course, she had no idea about Etsy, so I had to show her. She was very interested in all the things I was selling.

“So you can display these items on this 'web page,' which is like a catalog, but anyone can see it from anywhere in the world?” She asked.

“Yep! It's crazy, right?”

“It's wonderful! What else can this computer do?”

“Oh, honey, you ain't seen nothing yet!”

I opened up a search window. “Ask me a question: anything at all!”

Her eyes sparkled as she considered her questions. “When was Almanzo Wilder born?”

“Oh, give me something hard,” I said, as I quickly typed and hit *enter*.

The screen instantly filled with information, and in each listing was a date: February 13, 1857.

“Is that right?” I asked.

Laura grinned in amazement. “Yes! How wonderful! Can you ask it anything? Let's see – what does it say about Tennyson?”

I quickly typed his name, and we saw page after page of results, and I read: *Alfred, Lord Tennyson – a popular British poet during the rule of Queen Victoria – named Poet Laureate in*

1850.

“Amazing!” she exclaimed. “How does it work?”

“Um ... if you're wondering how the computer and the internet *actually* work, I have no idea, but if you want to know how to make them work, I'll show you!”

Laura nodded, and so I began to give a 150-something year old woman her first computer lesson.

Finally, I had to go to bed, but I told Laura she was welcome to use the laptop as much as she liked. She loved the name laptop – “It's like a writing desk,” she said, “but with no pen, ink or paper.” As I shut the door to my bedroom, I saw Laura's face bathed in the soft blue glow of the screen, her hands moving carefully over the unfamiliar keyboard.

Eventually, we settled into a kind of rhythm, my new roommate and me. Laura was amazing; she was so kind, such a good listener, and funny! She was also brilliant and took to computers like she'd been born in the twenty-first century. She was a huge help in my Etsy business. That first embroidery project was just the beginning. In a matter of weeks my inventory and sales had doubled, with 5-star ratings all the way. She showed me how to make soaps and lotions, we made little dish towels and she cross-stitched samplers like a pro. She was a little scandalized over some of the sayings we embroidered, but I assured her that cursing wasn't a big deal anymore, so I think she finally got used to it.

Laura was a force of nature, you know? She was interested in everything, once she'd settled in, and she really seemed to take to modern life. I got her a few outfits of her own and she was delighted to not have to roll up her cuffs any more. She adored her new tennis shoes, too. “They're so comfortable!” she exclaimed, “and quiet!” Laura did have a point. Her old brown boots, while very cute, were pretty clompy.

Laura loved helping me on weekends at the farmer's markets and craft fairs. She'd wear her original dress and bonnet while we sat in the shade, stitching and chatting with the folks who stopped to admire our work. One day, when I came home from the Shop-n-Save, she surprised me with my very own dress and bonnet!

“When did you have time to make this?” I asked.

“While you were at work, of course! I used your clothes to find the right measurements, and, really, the basic pattern for a dress is simple. I purchased the fabric myself using my portion of our crafting sales.” Laura beamed, delighted at my delight.

I was beyond words, so I gave her a big hug and ran off to my room to try it on.

We were a hit at the next market. A couple people took pictures of us in our prairie outfits and suddenly we were all over the internet. We reblogged them on our own Instagram page (Laura's idea) and in no time at all our Etsy was booming.

I learned that my new friend, in spite of the time she had lived, had some very modern ideas. She was thrilled to learn women could vote and live independently, that they could fly planes and pretty much do anything they wanted.

She started reading up on business and sales strategies and wouldn't you know, she took to it right away. Laura was super smart, well, you know that, but she helped me take my handmade craft business to the next level. I was even able to quit my stupid cashier job at the Shop-n-Save.

I didn't miss that store one single bit. I loved working with my hands and making beautiful, useful things. Every chance I got I would beg Laura to tell me more about life on the frontier: farming, covered wagons, Saturday socials and all.

“I wonder why you are so interested, my friend,” Laura would say. “It was not an easy life, and women didn't have nearly as many opportunities as they do today.”

I'd nod, I knew she was right, but there'd been a reason I'd read those *Little House* books over and over when I was a kid. My mom always joked I'd been born in the wrong century. To be honest, I was a little jealous of the experiences Laura had had in her previous life.

Eventually we got a larger apartment, a two-bedroom, so we could each have our own.

We'd talk over late dinners, making plans; she was looking into ways to expand our business even more, ideas I hadn't even imagined. We started offering custom-made prairie dresses, and she was right: once you knew the basic pattern it was easy. Laura found a local woodworker to subcontract a special project, and next thing I knew we were selling butter churning kits, complete with instructions, so folks could make their own fresh butter!

Every so often I'd ask her, "Laura, do you ever miss your old life? If you could go back, would you?"

Laura would be quiet for a bit, thinking. She was always careful with how she spoke. "There are people I miss very much, Ma, Pa, my sisters ..."

"What about Almanzo?" I asked. "He seemed like he was really sweet. Romantic, even."

"Oh, yes, him too," she said quickly, almost apologetically, "but we'd only just been married when I came here. My memories of him aren't nearly as strong as those of my family." She paused, troubled. "That's a terrible thing to say, isn't it?" she said.

"Well, not if it's true," I said. "He sounds like he was a good man from what you've told me, and from the books, of course, but if your feelings have changed since you've been gone, you can't help that. Besides, it's not like you can do anything about it."

Laura looked out the window, the sky had just the tiniest bit of red still on the horizon. "Yes, I suppose you're right," she sighed, "Though truthfully, if I'd had the kind of opportunities back then that women have now, I'm not entirely sure I would have even gotten married!"

"Laura!" I gasped. "But he seemed like the perfect frontier husband! You've said so yourself!"

She frowned and pressed her lips together into a long, thin line, shaking her head. "He is; he was, that is. But our work, the Etsy, this new life—I find it so rewarding! I never imagined life could be so full of intellectual and creative challenges! If I went back now, I wonder if life as a farmer's wife would be enough. I'm not sure there's space for a

relationship in my life right now, anyway.” She smiled, “Except for you, of course. You've been such a wonderful friend to me. I do love you.”

“I love you, too, Laura,” I said, and to be honest I felt a little choked up, though I also felt sad. I did love Laura. She was the best friend I'd ever had. She'd taught me so much. I had never met a more brilliant, determined woman. But I felt bad for Almanzo. He'd been a good man, kind and caring, good to her, and truly interested in building a family and a life with her. I thought it was sad he'd never get to know what had happened to her, and I'm sure he mourned her loss. But maybe it was for the best? Didn't he deserve someone who wanted to devote herself to him and their life together with a whole heart? Doesn't everyone?

* * * * *

A few months later, Laura and I were walking home right around nightfall. We'd spent the day at the park with friends, packed a lunch and made a party of it. We were happy and tired, and looking forward to a relaxing evening at home.

About halfway home, we both felt the shift, the sudden stillness nature sometimes gives you as a warning. We realized the wind had stopped, and the pressure shift suddenly made my head feel like a balloon. I turned to Laura to say something, but by the look on her face she was feeling it too. It was spooky silent, no wind, not even the sounds of birds or insects, nothing except a weird, low, almost electric thrumming, so low we felt it more than heard. She met my eyes and pointed at the sky, gone dark and a sickly green. There were popping noises, like someone had thrown popcorn kernels in the fire, and we were suddenly being battered by marble-sized chunks of hail. The cyclone warning siren sputtered to life, and the wind roared into the vacuum, so loud and fierce it took our breath away. We started to run.

Laura grabbed my hand, “Come on! We can make it!” and she pulled me along behind her like a little French pony—I thought you'd like that! We were almost to our building fighting the wind at every step. An electrical pole—I'll explain that too—crashed down right in front of us, barring the way. The hail turned to sleet, and the wind made those wires dance, sparks flying everywhere.

“We'll go around!” yelled Laura, pulling me to the left. Then suddenly, amidst the rain and wind and sparks, there it was. It was oval shaped, like a knot in a tree, and deep. It looked like a tunnel and pulsed like it had a heartbeat. Laura stopped, shaken, then turned to look at me. She was yelling something.

“What?” I asked, straining to hear.

She pressed in close and yelled, “I think that's the same sort of thing that brought me here!”

Our eyes locked.

“You can go home!” I hollered, smiling. Of course I was so happy for her. She smiled, back but it didn't last. The rain had plastered her hair down and it was all stuck to her face. She looked almost like she had the first night we'd met; she looked stricken.

My throat felt tight, but I tried to keep smiling for her, “I'll miss you, too!”

“My dear friend!” She pulled me in for a long hug, squeezing me breathless, then she held me by the shoulders and searched my face like she was trying to memorize it. Then Laura kissed me on the cheek. “I'm sorry. Tell them! I'm sorry and I love them!” She said and pushed me into the portal.

Before I even had a chance to think, everything went dark. I must have passed out, I honestly don't know for how long, but when I woke up I was here.

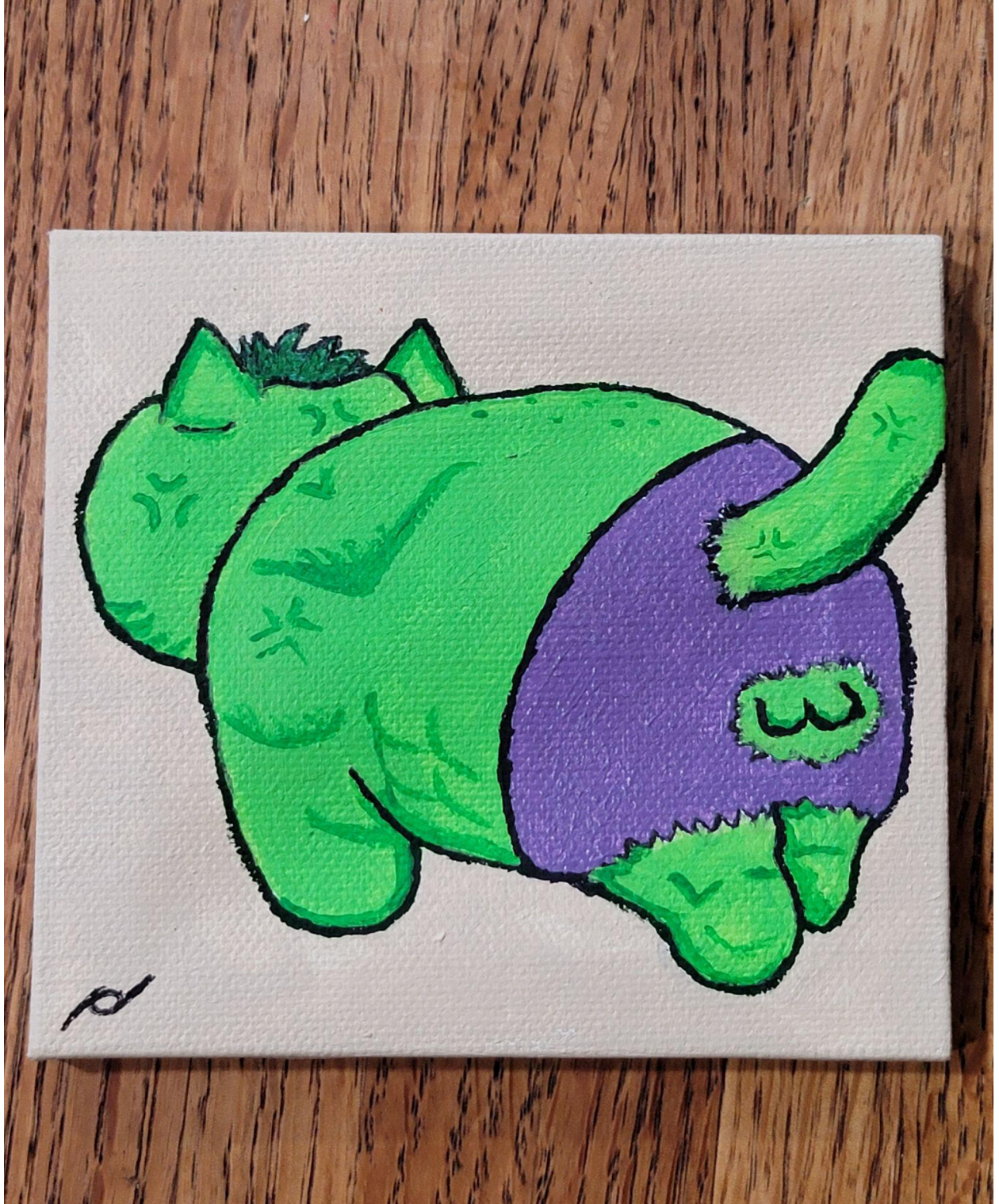
And I'm really sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Ingalls, that she decided not to come back. I know how much she loves you; she spoke of you all the time, but she was so happy in the twenty-first century. She loved her life and she'd made so many friends, and our business was doing fantastic. She's an amazing person, and she was a good friend to me, and I don't want you to think poorly of her because she sent me in her place. I think she wanted what she thought was best for me. And the books, I promise I'll write the books for her, so folks will know her, and I know ...

A figure stepped into the doorway behind Ma and Pa Ingalls, a man. He must have been visiting

when I started banging on their door like a crazy person, raving about Laura and tornadoes and time travel. His handsome face was tan from working outside, and his hair was a fine, dark blonde. I recognized that look. He looked stricken. He steadied himself against the door jamb with one hand, and his eyes searched my face.

My breath caught in my throat, and I whispered.

“Almanzo . . .”



Hulk Cat / Sergio Martinez

Picture of a Romance (As Narrated By Rachel Weisz)

Fandom: Pop-culture, Hollywood, UK Royal Family in an AU

[Kate Middleton](#) is the daughter of a King and Queen from a far European country. She is the 4th child and therefore has no meaningful royal duties. Still, she is a dutiful young woman, and she does what is asked of her. [The guy who played the character Taylor from the 50 shades of grey films is her eldest brother](#), the 2nd born son is [Colin Egglesfield](#), her sister the 3rd born [Tessa Virtue](#). The queen is [Jennifer Connelly](#), and the King... is just a man of stature.

Kate grows up exceedingly well behaved and educated by the finest ballet instructors. She is allowed many freedoms in her life, freedoms denied the elder of her siblings, and she ends up going to a dance academy in New York. At the age of twenty she filters into a dance company and her father says he would like for her to marry someone of noble birth, but because of his love for her he also hoped that the man she would marry would also understand her rather worldly lifestyle.

Her Siblings are already married and are working royals. They never feel any jealousy or resentment towards her, because of Kate's natural kindness and beauty, she is everyone's favorite.

Kate's father soon settles upon a seemingly perfect suitor-- one who lives in New York City, is well educated, and has royal blood! Kate agrees to go on a chaperoned date with [Jake Gyllenhaal](#). They both really like each other and have the best time. Kate asks if she will see him again and Jake says he wants to give her the true American experience and not call her for three days.

Kate finds that odd.

The next day Kate is at her favorite breakfast café. She goes there every morning to sit in a quiet corner in the back, eat her breakfast and work on her dream journal. As she is leaving she has a meet-cute run-in with [Jimmy Fallon](#). They have a good time walking and talking. Jimmy asks her on a date that night and she agrees. She sneaks away from

her chaperone who would not approve of her dalliance with a late night television chat show comedian.

That night at dinner they laugh and tell stories and instantly start to fall for one another. Never being noticed by the paparazzi. Jimmy tells Kate that he will talk to her tomorrow and Kate replies “I thought American boys wait 3 days.” Jimmy laughs.

The next day at her favorite café Kate’s phone rings and it’s Jimmy Fallon. This is where it embarks on a montage of Jimmy and Kate starting to date and Jake is forgotten about. At this point, their romance is very public, and Jake Gyllenhaal goes on Jimmy’s show and accuses Jimmy of stealing Kate. Jimmy tosses his hands up, tells Jake that he missed the boat, but he doesn’t give up Kate.

It leads to her father not approving at first but her mother and Oldest brother are very happy for her, after all the most they could hope for their young favorite is that she is happy and thrilled with her new beau. Her other two siblings tell Kate that it’s best to slow down and be sure, for neither of them are that thrilled that Kate could be so enamored of a late night chat show comedian.

And then the day arrives when Kate’s sister Tessa is betrothed to [William, the Prince of Wales](#).

While plans are being made to Marry Tessa to William, Kate finds her mother is acting odd. She always used to find excuses to visit Kate in New York but now she never visits and acts strangely around the King.

The wedding happens and right after that, television personality, [Matt Lauer](#) is found out to be having multiple affairs. Even more shockingly, the Queen comes out and says some of the purported claims of affairs are lies because some of the nights in question she was with Matt. She is remorseful for her affair and vows to never stray again and that she will devote her life to the King if he has it in his heart to forgive her because she does love him dearly despite her trespasses. The King is a forgiving man, and vows to forgive his wife.

The king passes away due to a hard life lived with stature, and many rich steak dinners, but he had given his blessing for Kate and Jimmy to marry. Jimmy inexplicably, and quite suddenly, breaks up with Kate.

On top of this sudden shock, Kate is also faced with her dance contract ending and she calls her brother who is now the King and says she wants to come home. She even wishes to be Tessa's lady in waiting. Taylor does not fully trust Tessa's husband William, so he tells Kate to come home.

Kate is at the airport and while Jimmy is taping his show he realizes how much of an idiot he is and runs to get Kate back. He makes it to the airport and before she goes through security he screams his love for her and they reunite.

Her wedding is a big affair like her sisters. Jimmy is given a dowry of 1 billion dollars, Jimmy says that in this day and age women can be in charge of their own money and he gives the money back to Kate who is given away in old custom tradition. She travels to America by boat and then by horse and carriage.

Years go by, and Kate and Jimmy are living happily. He is still a talk show host and she still dances. In the off season she is a working royal now who is often helping her sister. Tessa is hiding the fact that even though she has provided an heir for William he is having an affair.

This comes out and Tessa is disgraced.

Unknown to the new King Taylor and the now King Mother Jennifer, the deceased King and William had signed an agreement that if the marriage were to fail, he would get to keep the money and if no heir was produced she would be executed. Since Tessa had a son she ends up being locked in the Tower of London. People protest but the country does not want to lose the 10 billion dowry that would leave their economy if William is allowed to leave, so they all look the other way.

Kate is sad for her sister and is always at her café researching possible loopholes to win Tessa's freedom. Some years pass and even though Kate feels her happy life is secure, she finds out via social media that Jimmy had an affair with [Miley Cyrus](#).

Kate confronts Jimmy and he confesses that when her sister was locked away she seemed distant and he just wanted to connect with someone. Jimmy says he will give her space and Kate says this heartbreak will never be repaired.

Some months pass and Kate finds a way to get Tessa free, but Tess doesn't want to leave her children. Tessa says she is happy where she is, for she can sleep in the tower all she pleases and never have to compliment William's bald head to spare his ego, and she tells Kate to live her life.

Kate goes to her brothers and mother and asks permission to divorce. Her mother says to try and work on it but her brother the King says to be happy but she is always welcome home.

Kate and Jimmy separate and she tries to live a quiet life just dancing and visiting her sister while Jimmy is still hosting his talk show but he is inevitably always the butt end of jokes.

One day at her café she sees Miley and Jimmy having brunch while she's scrolling her Instagram feed and Kate softly cries.

Little does Kate know her life will be changed by this, but [Pedro Pascal](#) has come to New York on a press tour and he stops in for coffee. The wait staff at the café says "Pedro Pascal you are a nice wonderful person. Can you take Kate her coffee?"

Pedro agrees and takes Kate her coffee and he is so charming that she invites him to sit with her and he gleefully makes her laugh. They have breakfast together.

"If you are in town tomorrow," Kate says, "I would love to meet you again for coffee!"

Kate and Pedro meet for breakfast every morning. On Friday Pedro is on Jimmy's show and Jimmy confronts Pedro about trying to date his wife.

Pedro says to Jimmy "Dude you cheated on her and betrayed her, and you're still with Miley, let Kate go, and let her live. I am falling in love with her!" The audience cheers.

Cue the montage of Kate and Pedro dating for months, they are happy.

One night they are at some type of party with many celebrities. Pedro says Jimmy has been watching her all evening and she needs to go talk to him.

Kate walks to Jimmy, and he gets up and they slow dance. [Austin Butler](#) is singing a slow Elvis song and Jimmy says he sang this at our wedding. They both cry not looking at each other and when the song ends everyone is staring at them.

Jimmy says “I will love you forever, I will be sorry forever.”

Kate replies “I forgive you, but I am ready to move on with my life. I need you to let me go.”

Jimmy slowly releases Kate and she walks over to Pedro, who escorts her to the patio and proposes.

Unbeknownst to the pair, [Sarah Paulson](#) is lurking behind a curtain and gazing at them ominously.

Cut to me, the author, and my sister Cee watching tv, happy that it ended as it should have, and eager for a sequel

Doesn't Always Turn Out the Way You Plan

Fandom: While You Were Sleeping and Bridgerton

Penelope Featherington was on deadline. She had less than an hour to get this week's column to her editor and it wasn't even written yet. It wasn't even conceived yet, which was the real problem. It was unusual for her not to have a few stories outlined, but this past week had been abnormally busy as her mother and sisters had descended on the city and took up residence in Penelope's much too tiny one bedroom flat. In the span of a few hours, it was as if they'd been there the whole time. Penelope always slept on an air mattress stuffed into the corner of the living room and always had to cut her bathroom time in half and always had to give up her laptop to her sister Prudence so she could snag the last pair of limited edition Uggs before they sold out. Luckily, she had to endure their visit for only a week, and then they would be gone again.

All of this to say, that's why Penelope's column was a blank screen and she was already twenty minutes late to the office as she stood on the platform at the Notting Hill tube station waiting for a delayed train. She piled in with everyone else when it finally arrived, earbuds pressed in and Lizzo turned up high, anything to turn her mood around and get her focus back on what she needed to do - get her editor 500 words (at the very least) by eleven a.m. Not a minute later. And it was already past nine.

When she alighted sometime later at her stop, she had only half an hour until her deadline, and she realized she had two choices: one, to rush up to her office and cull together something that would likely get marked up and rejected or, two, give up now, stop for a venti mocha at the Starbucks across the street from the office, then make excuses to her editor about why her column, which she had submitted faithfully and on time for the past five years, was late and likely not even happening today at all.

She chose to go for the coffee.

"Nothing good is going to get written in the next twenty minutes anyway, and it wouldn't do to embarrass yourself," she muttered as she turned on her heel and made for the corner crosswalk towards the coffee shop. Her phone pinged while she waited,

and she looked down to see a half dozen messages come in from her editor in quick succession. Penelope thought about not responding, not even reading the messages, but that just wasn't like her at all. She groaned inwardly and thumbed through them. Someone behind her jostled her forward. She stumbled, lost her grip on her mobile, which fell to the ground with a sharp crack, and she likely would have fallen straight out into the oncoming traffic herself if it weren't for the strong arm that curled around her middle and hauled her back up onto the curb.

Penelope embarrassed herself by the sound she made when it happened. She flailed and elbowed whoever it was who grabbed her. Unintentional, of course, because why would she want to injure her rescuer?

"Careful there," came a deep voice as a large body steadied her from behind. The crosswalk changed and the crowd around them began to move forward.

Somehow, Penelope managed to turn around. "Thank you," she said in a short breath. She looked up - and up some more - until she said his face. "Oh good lord," came out of her mouth.

The man was ridiculously handsome. In a very familiar way, like maybe he looked like a film star (or actually was one) or like she'd seen him in passing several times before.

"Are you quite all right?"

Her tongue felt like it took up too much space in her mouth. There was a reason she was much better at writing than at speaking, and this was it precisely. The words stuck in her throat. Instead, she only nodded.

He nodded too, firmly. "I'm afraid your mobile might be a lost cause," he said, bending down to scoop it up off the ground and handing it to her. He smiled, a wry, sideways smile that made Penelope's stomach flutter. "Pardon me." Then he was moving away, leaving Penelope feeling unbalanced. She realized the entire interaction had barely covered a minute and yet clearly affected her more than it had affected him.

"Right," Penelope said. She couldn't spot him anymore, since he'd been swallowed up by the morning commuter traffic. She looked down at her phone. The screen had shattered, but she could still make out the time and the new messages from her editors. With the side of her thumb, she brushed any glass shards off. "Well, fuck," she muttered. Her coffee would have to wait. A new phone would, too. She turned away from the street and headed back toward her office.

The rest of the morning was spent alternating between thinking about the man on the street and mashing together one of the worst pieces she had ever written. But at least it made word count and, after a few more rounds of edits than usual, was approved.

Penelope started to see the man who kept her from falling ass over tea kettle into the street everywhere. Not in the "was that him?" or a glance out of the corner of her eye that she convinced herself *might* have been him. But, actually, truly seeing him everywhere.

In line at Starbucks, giving up his seat for someone on the tube, crossing the street opposite her, getting into an Uber in front of her office. She still didn't know his name but she imagined marrying him in a small but elegant affair where her mother and sisters actually behaved for once and Penelope chose her own dress.

Three months later, to the day, Penelope learned his name, but it didn't happen in the romantic "let's spend our lives together" way. Still, it would make a good story, one day, maybe to her children or grandchildren.

It was late when Penelope left the office, and the station platform was nearly empty as she waited for her train home, except for herself, a few teenagers huddled around their phones, and the man who Penelope fancied herself half in love with. She glanced at him, feeling her cheeks heat. He looked back at her, catching her eye, and smiled too. In recognition? Penelope felt a heat pool in her stomach. She lifted a hand in a wave. He didn't wave back but his smile didn't fade as he looked down at his phone and away from her.

Penelope leaned back against the tiled wall and closed her eyes. Only for a moment. Long enough that when she opened them again, her future husband was walking down to the far end of the platform flanked on each side by big men in big coats. They appeared to be jostling him around, not letting him step out from between them. Before Penelope could decide for herself that the situation was unusual, the men were pushing and shoving and, despite being larger than either of the other men, Future Husband got knocked to his knees and then right off the platform onto the tracks.

A scream leapt out of Penelope, and she ran forward immediately, shouting at the muggers, shouting for help, shouting for someone, anyone. She crouched at the edge of the platform. "Hey, hey, uh -" She coughed a little, shook her head. "Hey come on, get up. Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

But he didn't respond, didn't even more. "Oh, fuck -" Penelope had a few choices now, but she didn't know which to do. Where were the Tube workers? Station security? Had someone called 999 yet? "Oh, for god's sake -"

Penelope pushed her bag off her shoulder, leaving it on the platform edge, before jumping down, right onto the live tracks next to him. "Okay, well, you're - fine, right? You're fine. You've got to be fine. Can you wake up? Come on -" She pulled at his shoulder, but he was like a sack of potatoes or something, just dead weight sprawled on the tracks.

It wouldn't have been a big deal and Penelope might have eventually figured out how to wake him up if not for the tone that sounded overhead, followed by the pleasant-sounding voice that said, "Train approaching. Please stand back from the platform's edge."

"Oh god, oh god, oh god —" Penelope looked up and saw a light, a headlight, growing bigger as the train pulled into the station. She grabbed his shoulder and, with all the strength she could muster, pulled him against her, rolling them both off the tracks and away from the oncoming train.

Penelope was still shaking as she paced in the emergency room waiting room. It was awful that she beat the ambulance to the hospital but her Uber driver took a shortcut down a one-way street. She hurried over to the reception desk. "Hi, hello, hi, I'm looking for a man who was only just brought in, or maybe he isn't here yet, from the tube, he was almost hit by a train?"

"Are you family?" the woman asked, but Penelope got distracted by a flurry of activity as the doors opened and a paramedic team rushed him in.

"Him, that's him," Penelope said.

"Are you family?" the nurse asked again. "I'm afraid I can't give you any information if you're not family."

Penelope ignored her, walked forward like she was going to follow where they were taking him. An orderly stopped her. "You can't go back there," he said, manhandling her out of the way.

"But—" Penelope's protest hung out in the sterile air and she sighed, her body tight, her mind racing. She felt helpless. She didn't even know his *name*.

The hospital went still and quiet after midnight, and Penelope probably should have gone home hours ago, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Not without even a tiny bit of information.

"Pardon me, miss?"

A nurse touched her elbow and Penelope startled. "I'm sorry?"

"I can take you back to see him now, if you'd like."

"Oh, but I'm not - "

The nurse lifted a finger to her lips as though they were sharing a secret.

Penelope wore a relieved smile. "Thank you," she said. "You really don't have to do this."

"I can see how much you care about him," the nurse said.

Penelope's cheeks burned as she followed the nurse down the maze of hallways to the room where he laid. "He's in a coma," the nurse whispered. "But you should talk to him. He should know that you're here. It'll help. Go on then, dear."

She hesitated for a moment but shuffled into the room anyway. At a glance back over her shoulder, the nurse nodded encouragingly. Penelope stopped just beside his bed. He looked awful, with a purple-brown bruise along half of one side of her face, dried blood caked around fresh stitches over his left eye. He was unmoving, stiff like a corpse. She didn't have any experience at all with people in a coma, not even people in hospitals, and she had no idea what to do.

When she looked back over her shoulder, the nurse was gone. "So, uh, hello, hi," she said, dragging a chair close to the bed so that she could sit beside him. She wanted to touch him but stamped down that desire. She had no right. "So, I'm Penelope," she said, "and I'm very, very glad that you're alive."

He gave no response, not even a twitch in reaction.

"Right, well, I guess I'll just - sit here a while, if you don't mind." She shook her head at herself. Of course he didn't mind. He wasn't even awake. She set her bag down on the floor beside the chair and pulled her legs up onto the chair so she could tuck her face against her knees. "I really hope you wake up soon," she whispered.

Penelope must have fallen asleep because she sat up with a start and it took a long moment for her to focus on where she was - the hospital, at the bedside of the man who she'd fancied from afar for months - and that a bubble of disjointed conversation was growing louder and louder out in the hallway. Before she could get up and leave, the conversation and all those involved came into the room, talking over each other until

one person, a tall man who didn't look that different from the man in the hospital bed beside her, boomed, "Who are you?"

Penelope tried to smooth her hair out but her curls stuck out and tangled in some places from sleeping on her hand in a chair. "Uh, sorry, I -" There were a lot of them, all clearly his family, and all staring at her like she had three heads. "I was just leaving."

"What are you doing in here?" / "Who are you?" / "How do you know Benedict?"

She wasn't even really sure who was asking which question, they were coming at her so quickly. The tall man who spoke first, the pretty brunette gripping the hand of an also very handsome black man, the slender woman with hay-colored hair but a pleasant smile. She didn't know who to look at or who to answer first.

"I'm -"

"Penelope!"

Someone knew her name? A moment later, a familiar face burst through the crowd staring at her and Penelope saw that it was Eloise Bridgerton, who had been her roommate at University, and whom she hadn't seen in at least three whole years.

"Eloise! What -"

"Do you know who this is?" / "Why is she in Benedict's room?" / "How do you know her?"

Again, Penelope couldn't connect each question with the asker, and she felt a little lightheaded and overwhelmed by all of the attention on her.

"I'm - Eloise?"

Her friend pushed through and looped her arm through Penelope's, standing her ground amid everyone who must - how had Penelope not recognized them all as Bridgertons? - be her family.

"You must be Benedict's girlfriend, right Penelope? Oh my god, how did I not make this connection before? He's been so squirrely about her - er, you - but here you are, of course! How exciting!"

Penelope wanted to object, to tell Eloise that there was some kind of mistake, that she was wrong, but the words stuck somewhere in the back of her throat before she could say them. Then the entire family was, suddenly, gathering her into hug after hug, accepting her, welcoming her. She couldn't argue or correct anyone. She didn't even know who to turn to first, so she just let herself be hugged and greeted.

"A girlfriend, how wonderful!" Finally, one other person emerged from the group, the slender blonde woman. "I can't believe Benedict hasn't introduced us yet. I'm Violet, his mother, and this ill-mannered brood is the rest of the family. Anthony and his wife Kate, Daphne and her husband Simon, you know Eloise, then these are Gregory and Hyacinth."

So many names and people to remember. Penelope's head spun and she sat again. "It's - very good to meet you all. I'm just - I'm afraid I'm not -"

But the nurse interrupted her when she walked in. "Oh, good, you're all here. The doctor will be in in a minute and will give you a full update. If it weren't for this woman here, he wouldn't be alive. She saved his life."

All eyes turned back on her. She felt her cheeks heat, and she wanted to look away. She did, but only over to Benedict. If she looked at him, maybe everyone else in the room would fade away.

Violet spoke up, delight in her tone. "His girlfriend and his guardian angel! Oh, welcome to the family, Penelope, dear."

When Eloise showed up at Penelope's flat the next day, she was prepared for it. "Why did you tell your entire family that I'm dating Benedict?" she asked, ushering her in. She let Eloise make herself at home, which she did easily no matter where she visited. She held up a mug for tea and Eloise nodded.

She sank onto the couch. "You could be dating Benedict," Eloise said, "so what's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal?" Penelope's voice moved dangerously into the screeching territory. "El, I'm not dating him. And he's in a coma. And you can't just tell your family something like that. I didn't even know he was your brother."

Eloise gaped at her. "How could you not?"

Penelope filled the kettle to keep herself busy, shoulders tight. "Well, it's obvious when you're all standing there together like that, but I didn't even know his name."

"But you saved his life?" Eloise arched an eyebrow, a habit she had that Penelope had hated since they met.

"Well, yeah, of - course I did."

"Not everyone would have," Eloise said.

Penelope tried to fight the blush that she knew was about to take over her whole face. She didn't want to blush, didn't want to give Eloise any ammunition for either teasing or for keeping up this ridiculous deception.

"Oh!" Eloise bounced on the couch. "Oh you have a crush. I know that look anywhere. Pen, this is perfect!"

She reached up into the cupboard over the sink for her tea tin, then started poking through it to see what she wanted to drink. She set aside an Earl Grey for them to share, hoping that it was still Eloise's preference. "It is absolutely not perfect. It doesn't matter if I have a crush or not. I'm not dating him and he doesn't even know who I am. We have to tell everyone the truth. That I'm just - just someone who - decided not to let him get run over by a train."

Eloise opened her mouth like she was going to say something, seemed to change her mind, snapping her jaw shut. "Right, well - you know not everyone would have done what you did. Besides, my mother has been on Benny's case for *ages* about getting himself a girlfriend, so what's the harm in pretending for a while. He might be so overwhelmed by you and you saving him that he doesn't let on that you aren't his girlfriend and then he'll fall in love with you and you can get married and we can officially be sisters!"

When the kettle started to whistle, Penelope filled the pot to let the tea begin to steep. "That's no way to start a relationship!"

"What? Of course it is. It's so romantic. Like a great romantic film. Woman saves man's life. Man wakes up from a coma and falls in love with his guardian angel. They marry, live happily ever after. Cue credits."

Penelope set the pot and cups on the coffee table and flopped onto the couch with Eloise, putting her face in her hands. "Don't," she said. "Don't joke about something like that."

Eloise got up onto her knees and pulled Penelope against her in a side-squeeze. "I'm not. I think it would be brilliant. Just - think about it, all right? This is a good thing. And honestly, I don't want to break my mum's heart right now. She's so worried about Benedict."

Penelope nodded. "I know. Just - we shouldn't keep this up. I don't want to be lying to your family."

"Just for now," Eloise said. Penelope looked at her and didn't like the look in her eye, the one she'd seen before, usually when Eloise had a self-proclaimed brilliant idea that usually went south and then exploded in everyone's face. This whole thing was likely to go in the same direction. "Just give it a few days and we'll see."

"Yeah," Penelope said. Arguing with Eloise was often pointless, and Penelope didn't have the energy for it. "Tea's ready," she said, nudging the pot toward Eloise. "Earl grey. I hope that's still your favorite."

Eloise grinned. "It is."

The day Penelope met the last of Eloise's brothers, Colin, was otherwise unremarkable.

She spent much of the next evening after work sitting by Benedict's bedside, with members of his family flitting in and out, which meant that she didn't have to be 'on' the entire time, just a lot of the time. She liked talking books with Hyacinth and her love of the West Ham United football club with Gregory. She talked about her (nonexistent) relationship with Benedict with his mother, who was very sweet but also very intimidating. Eloise stopped by with a fresh tea and gossip she overheard from some of the nurses, but she didn't stay very long.

Which left Penelope alone with Benedict when Colin arrived.

She sat, feet tucked up under herself, on the chair beside Benedict's bed, a book spread open in her lap. When she read, she got lost in the book, and this was no different. She didn't notice there was a new visitor until he was right in front of her and cleared his throat. "Uh, who are you and what are you doing in this room?" he asked.

Penelope startled and stuck her hand over the pages of the book. She looked up. "I'm - you're - hello, I'm Penelope," she said. He was a Bridgerton, she could tell right away. She was getting very good at picking them out of a crowd and thought now that it was outrageous that she hadn't recognized Benedict as one of Eloise's brothers in the first place. If she could just not lie to anyone else, maybe she would feel better. Hopefully he didn't prompt her to explain who she was to *Benedict*.

"Ah, the girlfriend," he said dryly. His gaze darted past her to his brother. "How's he doing?"

Penelope wanted to correct him, but she didn't. She also didn't agree that she was. "Much of the same, I'm afraid. The doctor said he's fine and will wake up in his own time." She hesitated. "You're Colin, I presume?"

"That's me," he said. He looked very tanned, with the same dark hair as Benedict had, which swept over his forehead, slightly on the long side. He might, Penelope thought, even be more attractive than Benedict. Or just maybe in different ways.

Penelope felt her cheeks go hot, and she looked down at her hand spread out against the page of her open book.

"You're not what I expected," he said a moment later.

She looked up. "Pardon me?"

"When Benedict talked about you," Colin continued, and Penelope's heartbeat sped up for a moment before she realized that Benedict couldn't possibly have been talking about her and that there was probably some other woman out there who really was his girlfriend. "You're not who I pictured."

She sat up a little straighter. "Well, what's wrong with how I am?"

His dark eyes widened, and he shook his head. "Nothing, nothing. I'm not saying anything like that. You're just not really Benedict's usual type, is all."

"Ah," Penelope said.

When he smiled, it shone. Penelope wanted to look away because it was affecting her in ways she didn't want to admit. "It's nice to meet you, Penelope. Benedict's lucky to have you."

She smiled back, but it didn't feel like she wanted to smile. "Thanks," she said. Penelope tried to remember what Eloise had told her about Colin. That was still an advantage she had, while she pretended to be Benedict's girlfriend, even if a lot of what she knew was three years old. "You're the travel writer, yes?" He looked at her, surprised, and nodded. "Where did you just fly in from?"

"Greece," he told her. "Have you ever been?"

Penelope shook her head. "I haven't been much of anywhere, to be honest."

"Really?"

She shrugged. "Really. Never had the time or the - money," Penelope winced a bit. Not many people liked talking about money. "I know it's fairly easy to just hop a train and go to Paris or Brussels or, oh I don't know, *Scotland*, but it just hasn't been something I've done. I'd really love to go to Italy someday though. Paris, especially."

"Paris is great," Colin said. Of course he'd been there. He'd probably been everywhere by now. "But the Amalfi coast, in Italy, is my favorite place to visit in the entire world. There's a village called Gete, where *Cappella Rupestre* is. Chapel in the Rock, is the translation. It's breathtaking."

Penelope hadn't heard of it before. "Cool," she said. She wished she could imagine what that felt like.

Colin shook his head. "Sorry, I shouldn't be talking about myself. Tell me about you and my brother. How did you meet? How long have you been together?"

"Oh, I - you don't want to hear all about that. I'd much rather hear about Italy. Or Greece, since you were most recently there." At his obvious objection, she closed her book. "Please."

That was all it took for Colin to start talking, and Penelope thought his voice, combined with his descriptive words, made her feel like if she closed her eyes, she could be in all the places he talked about too, right alongside him.

The more time Penelope spent with Colin, the more she realized that whatever she thought she felt for Benedict wasn't anything like what she could be feeling for someone else. For - Colin.

Of course, she knew that. She might enjoy reading fanciful novels and crying over a rom-com now and again, but that didn't mean she lived a life full of unrealistic

expectations. The fact that she fancied Benedict Bridgerton from afar was never meant to be anything but a fantasy. The fact that she happened to save his life shouldn't have ever come into play. It was one thing to fantasize about a future with a man she barely knew and another to see the possibilities right before her eyes.

Because there was Colin. Colin, who made her smile, made her laugh. Who she was spending all of her time with when she wasn't at work or by Benedict's bedside.

He insisted on taking her home from the hospital each evening, even though he was staying with his mother and younger siblings on a completely different Underground line. He brought her takeaway curry three times when she had forgotten to bring her own lunch. He had even shown up at her office once with news that the doctor thought that some new vital signs activity inside of Benedict meant he might be waking up soon.

The list of reasons why she liked Colin continued to grow with each moment she spent time with him. His eyes, a shade of green she'd never seen before. His wry sense of humor. His love of words. His passion for traveling. How devoted he was to his family. That when he talked to her, she felt like the only person left on Earth. She thought it was pretty obvious that she was starting to fall for him, and she had to put a stop to it. It wasn't just that she was supposed to be dating his brother; it was that she was *lying* about dating his brother.

Every time she thought she should bring it up, she choked on the truth and the moment slipped away.

For instance, she and Colin spent one Friday evening together at her flat, a paused movie on the telly in the background as they ate takeaway straight from the cartons. "Do you know what I remember about you, from Eloise's stories from university?" he asked in between bites of butter chicken.

She shook her head. "I can only imagine what lies she spread about me."

Colin laughed. "She told me that you once stole all your flatmates' bras and raised them up on the flagpole outside of the house in freezing rain."

Her face burned at the memory. "Oh my god, she didn't tell you that!"

"Do you deny it?" he challenged.

She covered her face with her hand and her carton of food. "I only did it because she dared me to. It was all Eloise's idea."

"Now that I don't find very hard to believe at all. It's completely in character for Eloise to have manufactured a prank such as that and then twisted your arm to get you to carry it out."

Like now, Penelope thought. Like this, like with pretending to be Benedict's girlfriend. This was it, this was the moment when she could come clean and tell Colin everything. "Yeah," she said quickly, before she could lose her nerve. She set her food aside and twisted to face him. "Colin, I -"

She stopped, because Colin was looking at her in a way that made her insides turn to mush. He looked at her like he wanted to say something or maybe like he wanted to kiss her. It was the second, because he started to lean in toward her and Penelope's eyes fluttered shut because oh my god this was really happening.

But the kiss didn't come. She felt the couch shift and when she opened her eyes, Colin was pulling on his coat. "Sorry," he said, "sorry, I didn't mean - I need to go. I told mum I'd stop by the hospital on the way home so I need to go and do that. I'll - see you later, Penelope."

She sank back against the ratty cushions on her couch. "Yeah, of course. Thanks for dinner, Colin. I'll see you soon, yeah?"

"Yeah," he said, but he didn't look at her, didn't look anywhere near her, as he left.

Her editor cornered her shortly after she arrived at the office, three weeks after Benedict went into the hospital. "I've been thinking about this whole situation you're in," Agatha

said as she looked at Penelope over the top of the half-wall that served as the only barrier between cubicles in the office. "And I think you need to write it out. It'll be a feature. We can put it in the Lifestyle section next month."

Penelope looked at her, fish-mouthed for a moment. She let her fingers spread out against the computer keyboard, just to give herself something to do. "Oh, I don't think so," she said, keeping her tone polite. "But thank you for the offer." The last thing she thought she could possibly do was write about her lies.

"It's not an offer, Penelope," Agatha said firmly. "It's an assignment. Five hundred words, due on my desk next Friday."

Penelope got to her feet on impulse. "I can't," she said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but I - I can't do that to them. Benedict isn't even awake yet. I can't just - publicly reveal that I made the whole thing up." She knew it had been a mistake to ask Agatha for her advice on the whole thing. It wasn't that Agatha had any kind of malicious intent, in fact, Penelope rather thought Agatha considered her a protegee or something, and Penelope certainly looked up to her as someone to emulate.

"You and I both know you aren't going to be able to keep up this charade forever." Agatha's tone lightened, and pity edged out. "If he wakes up, he'll tell everyone you were lying. And if he doesn't wake up, well, then you wouldn't have any reason to stay. You're young. They'd want you to live your life, not act a widow for a one-time fake boyfriend."

Penelope paled. Her throat felt dry. All she could think about was Colin, how he would react. "But I - can't," she said, failing to put words into her argument. She couldn't because she was falling in love with Colin, because Eloise was still one of her best friends, because the entire family had opened up their home and hearts to her. "I can't betray them like that."

Agatha slapped her hand against the top of the cubicle wall. "One week, Penelope. I want that story in one week." Then she was gone, and Penelope sank back onto her chair and put her face in her hands. She didn't feel like she was going to cry - it had been many years since she cried at work - but she did feel completely defeated.

Because the truth was - the *truth was* - she couldn't do that to any of them.

If she wrote for the paper about this whole thing, if she put it out there in newsprint, that she'd rescued a man whose name she didn't know but who she had a crush on and then lied to his family about who she was only to discover that she was falling in love with his brother while he was in a coma, well ...

Colin would never forgive her for it.

Her fingers flew over the cracked screen on her mobile. *I'm going to tell him*, she wrote to Eloise. *I know you think it's a bad idea but I have to tell him. He has to hear it from me.*

Eloise's reply came quickly after. *Need I remind you that he still hasn't forgiven me for the time I put a toad in his bed when we were in primary school?* Then followed again by another message. *One of the things Colin is best at is holding grudges. Just be careful.*

"I don't have a choice," Penelope muttered to herself. To Eloise, however, she typed out *I know, thanks, but this is something I know I have to do. I hope you'll still be my friend.* and sent it.

BFFS 4EVER <3 <3

At least that got Penelope to smile. She didn't think she'd be smiling for much longer, not once she told Colin the truth and everything that had happened over the last month split apart and she was back to being boring Penelope Featherington who wrote a more-than-decent newspaper column, whose mother was overbearing but thankfully lived many miles away, and who was single and not Benedict Bridgerton's girlfriend. All without ever having had a chance to be Colin Bridgerton's girlfriend, too.

Penelope wasn't surprised to find Colin at the hospital, sitting with Benedict who was -

She stutter-stepped into the room, nearling stumbling over her own feet. Benedict was *awake*.

Colin looked at her when she walked in, the smile on his face at seeing her fading a little when he noticed she was staring at Benedict. "I was just about to call you," he said, getting up. He shoved his hands in his pockets and swayed a little toward her. "Benedict's awake."

"Yeah, I - can see that. Colin," Penelope said quickly, turning her attention fully to him. "I need to talk to you," she said urgently.

"Don't you want to talk to Benedict?" Colin looked between the two of them. "Here, let me give you some time alone together. I'll just go grab a coffee or something. Do you want anything? Tea? Benedict, how about you?"

"I'm fine," Benedict said, a little hoarsely, from the bed.

Penelope grabbed at Colin's arm. "No, I really need to talk to you, Colin, now -"

He shrugged her off and headed for the door, not looking back at either of them. "I'll be back later," he said. He closed the door behind him, leaving Penelope alone with Benedict, who blinked at her like he wasn't sure if he knew her or if he was just too out of it to figure it out.

"Um, hi," she said softly.

"I'm sorry," Benedict said. He pressed his fingers to his forehead. "Do I know you?"

She felt like she was going to be sick, and pressed her clenched fist against her stomach. "No, I, uh - I mean, yes, we've met before. You pulled me back from falling into oncoming traffic once," Penelope said. Benedict's brow furrowed like he was trying to place her in his memories of that, but he shook his head. Of course, she wasn't surprised. She often considered herself relatively unremarkable. "And I'm Eloise's friend. Er, we were roommates. At uni." It became apparent that the only thing she could do, and should do, is tell Benedict the truth. "Look," she continued on, quickly moving to his bedside. "Somehow, it - well, I suppose if I wanted to, I could blame Eloise for it, really - anyway, everyone in your family thinks that I'm your girlfriend."

"Are you?" he asked. "I can't - really remember."

Penelope shook her head. "No, no I'm not. I was just the girl who - "

"Saved your life," came a voice from the doorway. *Eloise*.

Penelope spun around at the interruption and smiled in relief. "El, look who's awake."

Eloise's jaw was set. Her gaze flicked from Benedict to Penelope and back again. "She saved your life. Pulled you right off the tracks after you got mugged and hit your head. A train could have squashed you."

His eyes widened. He wiped his hand down his face and looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time. It was a little unsettling, how his intense gaze could still affect her, even though she wanted Colin, now. Still, this was the way she had always wanted Benedict to look at her: in awe, grateful, wondering. "You did? Thank you, uh - what did you say your name was again?"

"Penelope," she whispered. "My name's Penelope."

"What's going on here?" Colin was back. He juggled several cups as he strode in. "Oh, Eloise, I didn't know you were here or else I would have brought you a drink too. Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Penelope said, loudly. "Yes, everything's fine. Eloise is here. She can keep Benedict company, can't she? Colin, I need to talk to you." She tried to tug on him again, but he stepped away and handed a cup over to Benedict then looked at Penelope with his cup and hers in his hands. "Please."

"Go, Colin, I imagine I'm quite capable of keeping Benny company until mum descends upon us. She's on her way, just so you know, so any important conversations ought to be taken care of now and not a half an hour from now."

Colin looked adorably confused. Penelope was exasperated. Eloise shrugged, amused. And Benedict - "It was nice to meet you, Penelope," he said as she and Colin finally exited and she led him very quickly to the stairwell at the end of the hallway.

"What did he mean, it was nice to meet you? Oh my god, does he have amnesia? They said that might happen, with brain injuries. I should go find his doctor."

"No," Penelope said firmly. "No, it's not that - Colin, look, I need to tell you something and I'm afraid you're going to be mad at me and honestly, you have every right to be. I've been lying. I mean, it's Eloise's fault, mostly, but I should have said something all the way back at the beginning. It's just, I was always jealous of the way Eloise talked about all of you, as a family. Because my mum and sisters are unbearable - you're lucky you've never met them - and your family is so *wonderful*." Why was it now, of all times, that the words just kept coming and coming and, like a broken faucet, Penelope couldn't turn them off? *Just get to the damn point*, she told herself.

"Penelope?" Colin looked at her with such concern that she wanted to melt.

"Oh, Colin," she sighed. "I'm really sorry. I am, because I - because, see, the thing is, I'm in love with you."

For a brief moment, she saw mirrored on his face the way he felt about her. He loved her, too. She knew it as well as she knew her own name. But it disappeared in a moment, and Colin stepped away from her. "You're Benedict's girlfriend," he said. He sounded sad.

"No, that's what - "

"I'm not going to take you from him, no matter how much I -" His voice broke, just a little. " - want to."

"Colin," Penelope said again. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. I'm not his girlfriend. Benedict's not my boyfriend. He never was. I - Eloise said that I was and everyone seemed so happy about it and I just never - "

His face went cold, his shoulders tense. "You lied? To all of us? To me?"

"There was never a good time when I could say that I wasn't!"

Colin shook his head. "What about any of the times we were together?" he asked, his voice rising, echoing in the empty stairwell. "You couldn't have just told me the truth? Saved me the pain of having to think about the fact that there was a small part of me that didn't want my own brother to wake up because I knew when he did that he was going to have you and I wasn't?"

"Colin -"

"Stop, Penelope, please. I need -" He leaned against the stairwell door, looked past her. "I need time, all right? Just let me -" Then he was gone, too, through the door, down the hallway, and away from her.

Her heart threatened to explode from her chest and she just stood there in the stairwell for a long time, heart racing and alone, until Eloise came and found her.

Penelope hadn't seen or heard from Colin in over a week. She'd received a handful of texts from Eloise, but after telling her she didn't want to talk about it and then not responding to the replies, the texts stopped. She drafted the article her editor expected four times and scrapped each one because everyone likes a happy ending and this didn't have one. Agatha told her it didn't matter, but Penelope's heart screamed that it did.

She was running late to work, again, and nearly stumbled off the packed train at her stop. Someone reached out, hooking an arm around her waist, to steady her. "Careful there."

A shiver ran through her, and Penelope stilled. Even through her coat and clothes, she thought she could feel his touch. "Colin?"

He pulled her out of the way of the mass of people exiting and entering the train car, and cupped her elbows in his hands. "Hi," he said, his smile brightening his face, his eyes meeting hers. "I thought I might find you here."

She laughed nervously. "Come through here every day, almost at the same time, too," she tried to joke.

"I know," he said, more serious than she was in the moment. If she gave weight to this moment without knowing what it was, then she'd never be able to go back to her life before. It was bad enough that she hadn't heard from him and didn't know what he wanted, but now he was here, in front of her.

Penelope stepped away. "I really need to watch my footing better," she continued, brushing herself off and fixing the strap of her purse over her shoulder. She looked at her feet, at the scuffs on the platform floor, on his smart brown Oxfords.

He said her name, and she looked up. Because what else could she possibly do.

"I love you too," Colin said.

He looked at her expectantly, like he was waiting for her to say something too. *I love you too* was on the tip of her tongue but it was all twisted up so all she could do was smile and throw her arms around him. Colin secured her tightly against him, chuckling. "Is that an 'I love you too?'" he asked.

Penelope nodded. "Yes," she said, the word finally bursting out of her. "Yes, yes, yes. I love you, too."

Penelope pressed her cheek against his shoulder and, just off to the side there, the rest of his family blinked into focus. His youngest sister, Hyacinth, stood with her fists firmly on her hips, like she might stamp her foot too. "Well come on, Colin, kiss her already!"

"You heard her," Penelope whispered, tilting her face up toward him.

Colin's smile widened and then he kissed her, right there on the subway platform in front of his entire family.

"Ewww! Kissing's gross," came an exclamation, punctuated by fake gagging sounds from Gregory Bridgerton.

Penelope, with her lips still pressed up against Colin's, laughed. He did too. She was so happy, it was hard for her to find the words to describe it.

While You Were Sleeping

by Penelope Featherington

My late father liked to tell me that life doesn't always turn out the way you plan. He said it often, usually when I wanted something I couldn't have or my day at school went awry or one of my sisters stole my favorite hair ribbons. For a long time, I connected it with the little things, the small injustices in the world, the way I might wake up one day ready to take on the world only to have a flat white spilled down the front of my new frock because the train lurched suddenly to a stop. I didn't think he meant the big things too.

I met my boyfriend in a hospital room while his brother was in a coma. I saved his life. His brother's life, not his, to be clear. I knew Benedict from afar. He once pulled me back when I almost stumbled off a curb because I was too busy texting. I saw him now and again after that without knowing his name. When he was mugged late one night on the platform at the London Bridge tube station, fell on the tracks, and hit his head, it was me who pulled him to safety this time.

Through a series of miscommunications and an old friend who enjoys mischief more than anything else in the world, Benedict's family thought that I was his girlfriend. Perhaps I was, if only in my very active fantasy life. But while Benedict is very nice to look at, and I've learned since, a wonderful conversationalist who enjoys painting watercolors in his spare time, I didn't know him much at all.

However, in the month during which Benedict was in a coma, I did get to know his brother, Colin.

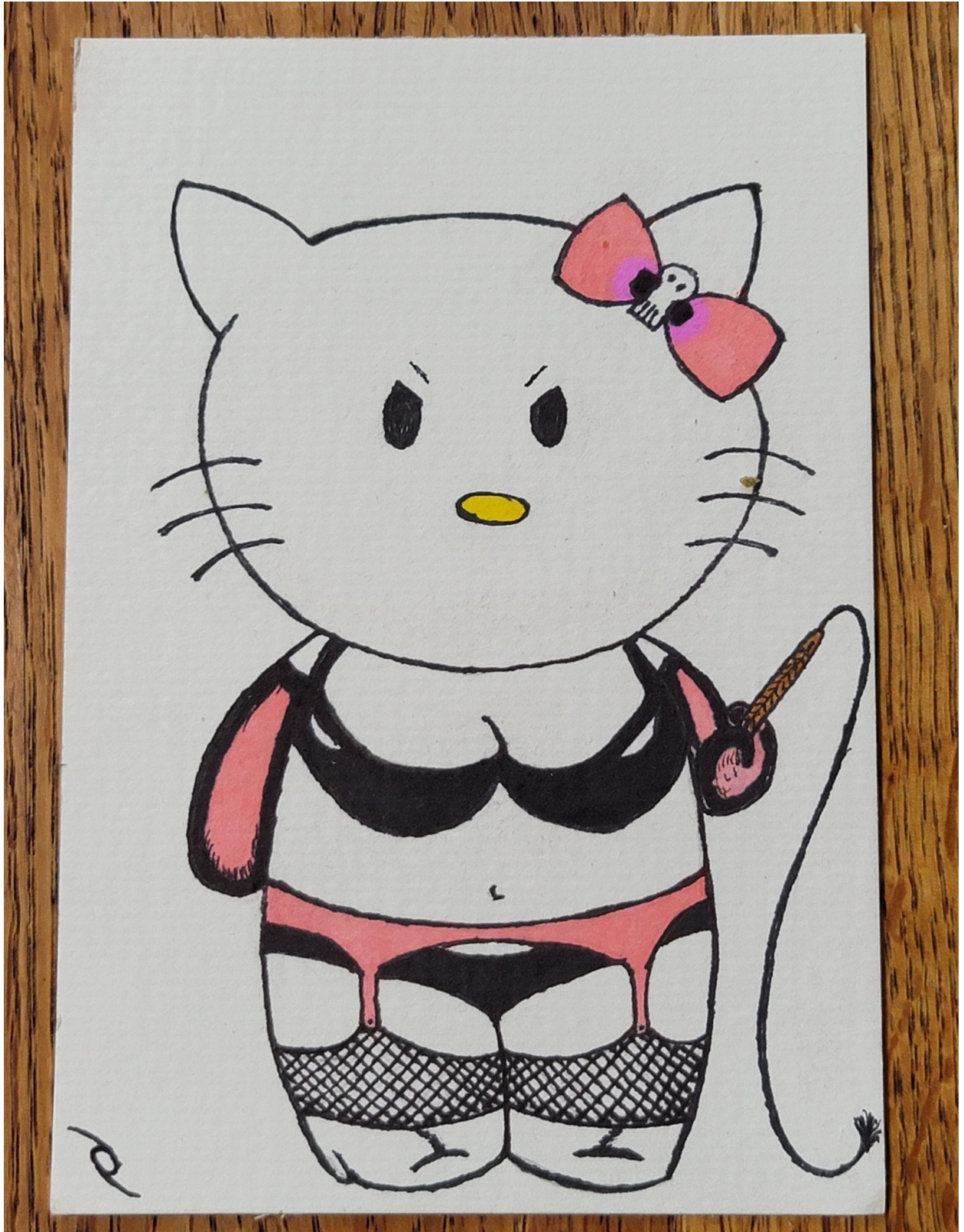
You might know who Colin Bridgerton is if you've read one of his books. He's a famous travel writer, known for such appropriately titled memoirs as "An Englishman

in Greece" and "An Englishman in Scotland." For all that the titles lack, his writing makes up for it. If Colin writes about a cave of religious relics and hidden churches on the Amalfi coast and you close your eyes after reading it, you'll think you were standing there with him.

Until I met Colin, I'd never been anywhere. Never left this great island we call home. In fact, I'd never even traveled north far enough to reach Scotland. How is that possible, you might ask? I don't have a very good explanation except to say that I was (mostly) content to stay in London or travel as far west as Bristol, where I grew up. But to see the world through Colin's eyes, not just through his words but instead with him beside me. Holding my hand underneath the Eiffel Tower, splashing water at me in the Mediterranean, kissing me under the Northern Lights in Norway. I didn't really know how much I was lacking until Colin gave me the world. I'm so happy and in love with him in a way I never thought was possible, a way I never believed would happen for me.

Benedict asked me recently when it was that I fell in love with Colin, and I told him: "It was while you were sleeping."

NONFICTION



Hello Bad Kitty / Sergio Martinez

An Anonymous Review

I hope you get AIDS and die, said one anonymous review left on one of my *Harry Potter* fanfictions.

I was 13 years old writing for complete strangers on the Internet.

I wrote my chapters out longhand on pieces of looseleaf paper I slipped into my notebook. If you held one of these drafts in your hand, you could tell how I switched classes from English to science to math just from the color of ink or the sudden presence of pencil. I took these chapters home and typed them up on our family computer, writing a quick author's note and disclaimer and uploading it to fanfiction.net.

I was in middle school, and a stranger on the Internet wished for my death. A product of Catholic school, I didn't know what AIDS was. I think I had to ask my mom. Then I had to explain to her why I asked.

She looked horrified, like she wanted to chuck our computer in the garbage and forbid me from ever using the Internet again. *What had you written*, she asked, *that someone would respond like that?*

I didn't know. I still don't know. Maybe I wasn't updating fast enough.

...

The story that prompted this reaction was called *A Wizard's Fairytale*. It was my most popular story in the six years I was active on fanfiction.net with 1,178 reviews, 3,766 favorites, and 4,170 follows. I know those numbers because fanfiction.net records those numbers and gives them for every single story you click on.

As a teenager, I used to watch those numbers like a hawk, determining with them which stories were working and which weren't, which I needed to update that week and which could wait until after my French final.

I felt like a real writer, like I had an audience who was eager to read what I had to write and give me compliments and feedback. I loved reading reviews. My favorite thing when I posted an update was to wait for review notifications to come into my Gmail account. Sometimes, I'd have to wait a day or two until the reviews had slowed down because there was so much in my inbox.

I read every single one. At first, I tried to respond to them all, thanking certain reviewers for their compliments and responding to others' questions on the chapters. But soon the reviews outnumbered my ability to respond, and I started saving the ones with good questions or critiques for my author's notes.

...

A Wizard's Fairytale was a *Harry Potter* AU in which Harry's parents lived and he has a twin brother who was wrongly claimed as the Boy Who Lived, and so the Potters left Harry with the Dursleys where he is horrifically abused. Luckily, he is rescued by a character I invented, Zana, who was his parents' friend and formerly Sirius's girlfriend. (When I started this fic, I had to yet to figure out that Wolfstar was a thing.) Harry gets a new name and a new family, and it is not until the Triwizard Tournament that he reappears in England and shakes up the Potter's world.

Oh, how original and clever, you might say if you have never read a Harry Potter fanfiction in your life. If you have, you know exactly the trope I was working within.

Wrong-Boy-Who-Lived (WBWL for short) is still a Harry Potter tag on Archive of Our Own (AO3). It's a trope as old as Harry Potter fanfiction, probably, and I was a preteen who wanted to write what I had read and already liked.

I was not reinventing the wheel. I was not trying to write the next Great American Novel. I was just a kid messing around with characters I felt I knew like the back of my hand.

...

After the anonymous reviewer said, *I hope you get AIDS and die*, they said, *You should remove your story because it's terrible and a reflection of you as a person*. They said, *After removing the story, you should follow suit because the world does not need people who add only garbage*.

...

Anonymous reviewing is standard on most fanfiction sites. Fanfiction.net, AO3, and Wattpad all allow anonymous reviews. You don't have to have an account to say whatever you want to say. The power to allow this, though, is in the hands of the fanfiction author. They can disable this if they want.

At 13, I was not smart enough to disable this. I thought, *Well, everyone should be able to say what they want to say.* I did not know that I was opening myself up to the world, to harassment, to a wish for me to die, to very weird criticisms by people I can only now assume were adults.

I deleted that review, but I left anonymous reviewing on. I don't remember why.

...

Now, I would have disabled anonymous reviews. Now, I would have deleted the review and ignored it. Instead, At 13, I wrote a long author's note directed at this specific reviewer.

Hey everyone! I'm not one to post author's notes and no chapter, but there is something I need to address. Tonight I got a very disturbing review. It told me... Needless to say, this upset me.

I love fanfiction and the people on it. I like to think of it as a happy place for me, a place that always improves my mood. Getting reviews like this one is a punch to the stomach. I do not mind constructive criticism. I like hearing what you guys have to say.... I don't mind these kinds of things being said. I do mind when people tell me things like get AIDs and die. I have since removed this review and am willing to remove any more like it. I will not tolerate reviews like this one. If need be, I will leave this website and my stories behind.

Fanfiction is great because it allows us to shape our stories around reactions. I like to take reviews into account when I'm writing. I am a young writer learning her craft, and sometimes things won't be perfect. If I make mistakes or something doesn't make sense to you, let me know. You guys are the reason I write. If you have a request, voice it! I'll try to accommodate it. Thanks so much to everyone that does write positive reviews. They always make me smile. I'll try to have a chapter out for you soon.

Oh, that little girl. Oh, that sweet child who wanted to be taken so seriously by strangers on the Internet. I read this note and cringe a bit, but also my heart hurts for the girl who

wrote it. She was 13, and she loved writing fanfiction so much, and then some asshole came along and made her feel like nothing.

...

I didn't engage with reviews the same after that. I couldn't. I no longer felt like I was writing for an audience of friends. I kept my distance.

...

If you're a person who wrote fanfiction on the Internet at any point in your life, you know that there is a certain amount of cringe that comes with revisiting it years after the fact. Most people I know would rather shave their heads than give anyone their old fanfiction username.

Still, every few years, I like to revisit my old fics. I type in my old username in my phone and scroll through the stories I have left up. I haven't removed any in the intervening years even though I stopped updating them in 2016, my freshman year of college.

When I indulge in this trip back in time, one of two things happens. Either, 1) I can't get past more than one chapter without feeling wildly embarrassed and needing to close the tab immediately or 2) I get hooked into the story again.

Honestly, the second option has been happening more often than not lately. I reread my old work and get back in the brain of the 13-year-old who wrote it. I think, *Oh, that's actually not a bad line. Hmm, that's kind of funny. Okay, I see what I wanted to do with that twist even if the execution is shaky as hell.*

...

I want to be clear. A Wizard's Fairytale is not good. No one needs to read it or revisit it. When I do, I see it with eyes that are both loving and critical. I see a kid trying to write about adult things that she doesn't really understand yet. I see glaring plot holes and shaky patches of those plot holes in later chapters. I see a story that never had an end in mind because I was not outlining any of these fics. Sometimes, I completely changed direction midstream without any warning.

A Wizard's Fairytale is not good, but I did learn from it. I did some craft elements from writing fanfiction: how to pace a story, how to develop characters, how much action a chapter needed to contain. Most importantly, I learned how to receive feedback and incorporate it into my work in real time.

In some ways, being in an MFA writing workshop reminds me of getting reviews on fanfiction. Sometimes, you have truly great feedback from people who get it. Sometimes, you have constructive criticism that raises compelling questions. And then there are the assholes. Not a lot of them, but a few, and you learn how to filter them out.

For me, it's pretty easy. I mean, I'll never get any feedback meaner or worse than, *I hope you get AIDS and die*. Once you've had that said to you anonymously on the Internet before you're in high school, all other criticism feels very tame.

...

I haven't written any fanfiction since 2016, but I do still read it. A lot. The bookmark folder on my phone may be scary to some people in just how many folders for my various fandoms there are. I am more worried about people seeing these folders than learning my social security number.

But, for all the fanfiction I do read, I almost never review any. I'll bookmark it and save it and savor it, but I don't leave reviews. I don't leave reviews on stories I love, and I certainly don't leave them on stories I hate.

I'll skim through reviews of things I'm reading on AO3 sometimes and be both delighted and horrified by what I find. Some people have written paragraphs and paragraphs of praise and analysis and well-wishes. Others clamor for more, asking, *When are you going to update? Plz update soon. Update soon. Update?*

I haven't written fanfiction in seven years, and these comments still make me anxious. I want to reply back, *Let them breathe. Let them write at their own pace. This isn't a job for them; they're not paid. They do this out of pure joy. Don't make it not fun for them. Don't say mean things.*

Don't tell anyone to get AIDS and die.

I think fanfiction writers put up with less now than we did in the late 2000s and 2010s. They will leave if they're being abused or harassed. They'll take down their stories and vanish from the Internet without a trace. I love that for them, and I'm proud of them. But it also makes me sad for that 13-year-old girl who thought she had to take it.

I threatened to leave in that author's note, but I never would have. I couldn't imagine not writing those stories anymore. It felt so important to me at 13. But now? Now I don't think that was worth me crying into my pillow and feeling on edge while doing a thing I loved.

...

It happens less now, but once in a while I get a notification of a review from an old story on fanfiction.net. It's forwarded to my new email from my middle school email.

I don't open them or read them. I can guess what they say. *Love this story, ever gonna update? Update soon? Why did you abandon this?*

I do not engage. I close my email and go back to my own stories. I write for myself and not an imaginary audience on the Internet. It feels better.

Avengers: Infinity War and Sun Tzu: An Ancient Genius' Perspective

Avengers: Infinity War holds an infamous place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe for its dark, shocking finale: despite every effort, the franchise's extensive roster of heroes are unable to stop the psychotic Thanos from using the Infinity Stones to wipe out half of all life. Worse, the evil monster, via his own brute strength and said act, simultaneously eliminates a hefty percentage of said roster too. It's a crippling blow to all, leaving the survivors traumatized and utterly broken, wondering how they could've lost so badly....

But did they need to? That question has been asked by fans for years, with all manner of theories/views postulated on why the MCU heroes lost or how they could've won...except one: that of Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, the preeminent treatise on tactics and strategy for over 2,000 years. His grasp of tactics and strategy is unique amongst even the greatest modern theorists, not just for its singular grasp of how to fight, but for its goal: winning. Writers like Clausewitz and Fuller may discuss conducting warfare, but Sun Tzu only wants to win, not just focus on teaching how to fight. His genius is so great one expert put it like this: "If you listen to Sun Tzu, if you follow his principles, you will be victorious; if you ignore him you do so at your own peril, because you will definitely lose."¹ What's more, Sun Tzu's wisdom is all-encompassing, so much so it's been used by everyone from businessmen to athletes and even politicians, but never to discuss entertainment plotlines—until now. So, to figure out how the MCU heroes could've won, let's look to the master of winning by analyzing just how Thanos won, as well as how Sun Tzu would've advised differently.

Tony Stark, AKA Iron Man choosing to go to Titan: Sun Tzu said, "Concentrate your forces, hoard your strength."² After saving Dr. Strange, Tony opted to head to Titan, ignoring the fact that Thanos' children were still active on Earth and Vision needed protection. He also violated Sun Tzu's first Fatal Failing of Leadership here, which is recklessness, more specifically it's most dangerous form: impulsivity³. Why was it

¹ *Art of War*, dir. David W. Padrush (2009).

² Lionel Giles, *The Art of War* (New York, NY; Fall River Press, 2011), 41

³ Giles, *The Art of War*, 28

wrong? Tony made the move based on his own past insecurities. The smarter move would've been to return to Earth, where they could've helped defend Vision, allowing them to remove/destroy the Mind Stone and prevent Thanos' victory; it also would've kept the Time Stone away from the evil villain and bought more time to prepare for his inevitable appearance. That move, in turn, would've followed Sun Tzu's principle "Those skilled in war bring their enemy to the field of battle"⁴, as well as that of preparation, one of five qualities he said must be mastered for victory⁵. Instead, Tony impulsively ran into a situation with no idea what to face...and paid for it.

Steve Rogers, AKA Captain America, Sam Wilson AKA Falcon/New Captain America, and Natasha Romanoff AKA Black Widow's not killing Proxima Midnight and Thaddeus Glaive in Scotland: Sun Tzu said that if an opening comes to seize victory, you must use it.⁶ The fugitive Avengers easily took down Thanos' children, but spared their lives while saving Vision, allowing them to get away. If the trio had killed the evil pair here, that would've fatally crippled Thanos' leadership on Earth, preventing proper coordination of his forces in the subsequent battle in Wakanda. It wouldn't have defeated him outright, but would've bought more time to save Vision. However, by letting them live, Vision and everyone else paid the ultimate price.

Splitting the Guardians of the Galaxy, with Gamora and company heading to Nowhere: Sun Tzu said, "Seize something which your opponent holds dear, then he will be amenable to your will."⁷ Wanting to stop Thanos from getting the Reality Stone on Nowhere was good in theory, but there was no way to know how long it'd been since he'd left Thor's for dead and when the Guardians found him. Worse, Gamora knew Thanos needed her to find the Soul Stone, but chose to go anyway, making this another impulsivity violation. Exacerbating this issue is that Thanos knew how she thought, meaning his move was both to get said Stone and her; that's another principle failed: "Do not swallow bait offered by the enemy."⁸ What they should've done was all go to Nidavellir to get Thor's new Stormbreaker axe, which would've allowed them to collectively arrive on Earth to fight Thanos' children in Wakanda while simultaneously

⁴ *Art of War*, dir. David W. Padrush (2009)

⁵ Giles, *The Art of War*, 3

⁶ Giles, *The Art of War*, 46

⁷ Giles, *The Art of War*, 41

⁸ Giles, *The Art of War*, 26

keeping the Soul Stone from their foe. Instead, they went to Nowhere, only to find they were too late and Thanos waiting for them.

Not killing Thanos when Mantis had him crippled, or restraining Star-Lord when he learned of Gamora's murder: The same principle of not seizing a victory comes in again. Thanos was down, helpless, an easy target...and Tony/Star-Lord's plan is to pull his gauntlet off? By not killing him when they had the chance, Thanos could recover and go on the offensive, which he did, crushing his opponents when they no longer had the element of surprise. Instead they should've used Tony's armor's laser or Dr. Strange's portal to kill him right then and there, which would've ended the war on the spot. They then could've had Nebula show them Vormir (she was in the room when Gamora revealed the Soul Stone's location), where they could've used the Time Stone to revive Gamora. Worse, when Star-Lord learned the latter had been murdered, he violated the rule of impulsivity yet again by hitting Thanos, which knocked Mantis off-balance, weakening her hold on him and allowing his recovery. The smarter move would've been to restrain Star-Lord, explaining they could revive Gamora. Unfortunately, because both moves were ignored, Thanos retaliated, allowing him to gain another Stone and head for Earth.

Thor's not finishing Thanos with Stormbreaker: Even at the last moment, despite Vision's murder and Thanos getting the last Stone, it was possible to win. Thor had the element of surprise when he swung his axe at Thanos...but swung for his armored chest. Sadly, Asgard's king, controlled by rage and a yen for revenge, wanted Thanos to suffer for the murder of Asgard's people, especially Heimdall and Loki, which is why he aimed where he did. It's a colossal violation of impulsivity, as well as the third and fourth fatal failings of leadership: a hasty temper and delicacy of honor respectively.⁹ Thor also fails the principle of seizing an opening for victory, along with one of Sun Tzu's most obvious principles: "Avoid what is strong, only attack what is weak."¹⁰ What he should've aimed

⁹ Giles, *The Art of War*, 28

¹⁰ Giles, *The Art of War*, 21

for was Thanos' unarmored head, which would've finished him then and there, plus freed up the stones to undo everything the latter had done. Ironically, Thanos even taunted Thor about when he said, "You should've aimed for the head" before he snapped his fingers.

That's all there is to it. Sun Tzu's approach is simple, straightforward, and pure common sense, something the MCU heroes surprisingly lacked. Shockingly, Thanos wasn't much better, but that was the nature of the film: both sides flagrantly disregarded Sun Tzu's rules left and right, but Thanos won because he didn't do so as much as his opponents. Thus, this battle wasn't so much won by the evil Titan as it was lost by the titular heroes, but that's the price paid for violating Sun Tzu's wisdom.

Bibliography

Padrush, David W., dir. *The Art of War*. 2009. A&E Television Networks, 2009. 94 min. DVD.

Rosso, Anthony and Rosso, Joe, dirs. *Avengers: Infinity War*. 2018. Marvel Studios, 2009. 149 min. Blu-ray.

Postmodern Musings

An Essay, A Narrative, Perhaps A Poem Transparent Thing

You have a T-shirt that reads Cormac, Nabokov, Stephen Graham Jones. It's black with white lettering, long like a dress to be worn with Doc Martins, stomping down Bourbon Street—fishnets at 38, hard ink from knuckles to the neck, Indy bag with beat poetry books.

Ginsburg, Ginsburg, Ginsburg.

If someone asks your name, you say Jade, Ada, or Lolita depending on the mood your pills have you on. “Is it an up day or a downer?” You can’t decide because your mind is tweaking out, going blank, and kinda dark. It's funny how your legs still know the path even when your brain is checked out.

Memory is the echoes stirred up on the edge of a cavern. They always come back, but they're fractured somehow. Then you just kinda fall into them.

Non-answers, garbled speech, hushed whispers, fingertips on a warm neck, long roads in a dust storm, ejecting cassette tapes, ribbons eaten by small mouths of old Pioneer stereo systems, stale chocolate, and broken crackers, coffee three days old and cold—so cold, Ginsberg's Howl open and dog eared on the seat beside you, delicate tea-stained pages brittle like old skin. The flesh between your fingers burn, ash drops. You can smell formaldehyde.

The sun. The sun. The joke was to break it.

You hit a wall of white so cold, harsh, and hard, “Turn back, turn back,” it says. But this pass down the maw of those terrible toothed mountains is not your path. Turn around, turn back ON your radio, Prox men await you in the valley, naked in hot springs with drunk wives, their wires poking out of elbows and genitals, “It's in the details, depends on the paint, the hot temperature can melt it off, revealing a truth.” They talk about art,

veiled goddesses, and the juices they imagine but only produce to birth the babes of the mountain, feeding them without shame to the cannibals. The blood makes them crazy when they drink it. They don't believe in Jesus, but they eat him just the same.

Are you ready—one, two, three, go, long, long hallways, doors to enter, “I hate your face, your beak, your fanged teeth” eye to eye, holding not space, that is an unintelligent allegory, hold ground like a final one. Hold your ground like a final—girl.
Hold the ground until you are clay and bones.

I AM KARMA, volume boosted, Chuck Taylors crossed on couches with the book open, words flow and flow, making a future out of cinders, cinder block, building a fortress that withstands the thermonuclear fallout of trying, until you break wide open.
You can't save everyone when you're broken.

Obligations, alliances, running so fast away from truths that eschew on mountains, fairy tales, Peter Pans, fawns, long dark staircases into old mine shafts, you can die in there, you know, noxious gas, bitter liquor, dying songbird that no one remembers and Snow White and Rose Red reveal their dangerous teeth, and you awoke in the body of a bear. The radio spews out static, alien messages, you don't believe in UFOs because you don't believe in anything anymore. And that is fine, that is just fine in your postmodern musing.

You were never any of the ABOVE. You were always quiet, a kind of Chigurh, none of that can startle you now. You can't hear the screaming in the static, you don't even cry. You do, what you do like a machine.

TRANSLATION



Poke-boba / Andreas Kremer

from *Homage to Green Tea*

These micro-prose co-translations are from their original hanmun (the Korean use of classical Chinese to write literature) consisting of legends, anecdotes, and spiritual/religious writing on the topic of green tea, written by Korean Buddhist monk Ch'oŭi. This excerpt is drawn from the longer translation Homage to Green Tea (White Pine Press, 2024).

Ch'oŭi (1786-1866) was a Korean Buddhist monk given a traditional Confucian education, making him a uniquely trained scholar of his period. Ch'oŭi is considered one of the first pre-eminent experts on the subject of green tea in Korea.

Lord Zhou proved drinking tea
sobered those who were drunk,
and lessened the need for sleep—
Yan Yin of Qi ate brown rice
with tea leaves.
Yu Hung offered sacrifices,
begging Danqiuzi for tea—
Maoxian revealed thick tea shrubs to Chin Ching.

*

Picking the leaves from tea trees in Jing and Ba provinces and then drinking tea made from these leaves sobers one who is drunk from wine and makes people less drowsy.

—from *An Expansion of Definitions*

*

The History of Yanzi states, “When Yan Yi was made Minister by Duke Jing of Qi, he ate boiled brown rice, three broiled skewers of meat, five eggs, and tea leaves.”

*

The Book of Legends states,

Chin Ching from Xuancheng County picked tea leaves on Prosperous Power Mountain. He once met a person with hair over ten feet long. The person guided Chin Ching to the mountain's base, showed him a field of tea trees, and left. Later, he returned, took from his breast a mandarin orange, and gave it to Chin Ching. Overjoyed, Chin Ching then knew the tea was as precious as royal fruit. He departed, carrying his leaves on his back.

*

Large and small cakes of Dragon or Phoenix Tea began with Zheng Wei, but were perfected by Cai Junmo. Both men mixed camphor with tea, and made a cake. The cakes, with dragon and phoenix patterns, were gilded, then offered to the royal court.

*

“Entering the Court” means “entering the heart.”

*

Master Fu went to High Clear Peak on Dream Mountain, built a hermitage, and planted tea trees. After three years he harvested the finest teas, naming them The Saint of Willow Flowers and Auspicious Blessings of Gold. He gave five bags of each to the emperor.

*

When dreaming in his youth, the first Emperor of the Sui Dynasty's mind became afflicted by a god, an incident he continued to suffer from. One day he met a monk who said, “Tea leaves from the mountain can cure you.” After the Emperor drank tea from the leaves, he was healed. Since then, the world began to know the importance of drinking tea.

—from *The History of the Sui Dynasty*

*

Yudang recently passed by Head Dharma Mountain in the south. After sleeping a night in my Purple Sprout Hermitage, he tasted the spring water, and then spoke: “The taste is better than buttermilk.”

*

The tea tree is like the luster leaf holly of China. Its leaves are similar to the gardenia, and blossoms to the briar rose—its core, golden-yellow. The tree flowers in autumn with a distinct, subtle scent.

*

Emperor Dezong of the T’ang Dynasty often gave Princess Tongchang special dishes, including tea. Green Flower and Purple Corolla were the names.

FLASH



Papa Smurf / Andreas Kremer

Tiger Family Tree

It is actually possible to identify the species of Tiger represented in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Henri-Frederique de Tigre, known in the original series as “Grandpere,” has adopted several aspects of French culture. In this, we can see evidence of the colonization of French Indo-China, which encompasses modern Vietnam. The colonized are often forced to adopt the language of their colonizers. There is a single species of tiger indigenous to Vietnam, the critically-endangered Indochinese Tiger. Perhaps the reason for the Tiger family’s relocation to the North American Neighborhood of Make-Believe, rather than some Southeast Asian Imaginal Realm, is due to the ravages of the Vietnam war. Perhaps this is why Daniel “Dad” Tiger was orphaned. This could be the reason for the tenderness universally shown to Daniel “Dad” Tiger in the original Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, the tenderness shown to a refugee.

It is Henri-Frederique’s wife, Marguerite, who gives her name Margaret to Daniel’s sister. It is perfectly ordinary for parents to wait for developmentally appropriate ages to tell their children about traumatic aspects of their past. This is why Daniel Tiger misunderstands certain aspects of his family tree. Because the original series is hosted by an adult, it is seen through the eyes of an adult. Information in the original series is undistorted by the cognitive limitations of a child.

Years ago, the Princess Margaret H. Witch used a divinatory crystal to reveal that Daniel “Dad” Tiger would one day marry Collette Tiger, the granddaughter of Henri Frederique. Therefore, Collette Tiger is Mom Tiger. It is not unusual for a non-native language adopter to lose their original accent entirely if their instruction begins at a sufficiently early age. Mom Tiger simply hasn’t had the opportunity to demonstrate her language knowledge in the second series. Mom Tiger has a wealth of experience and knowledge of which she says little. Instead, she allows these experiences to inform her carpentry—a necessary trade amidsthips. Looking at the eccentricities of the Tiger home on Jungle Beach, we see the magnanimity of an artist applied to the furnishings and trappings of domestic life. Yet Mom Tiger does not impose her personality on those

around her—she manifests her great temperament through the silent speech of craftsmanship.

“Grandpere” is a title, not a name. In the original series, this title is applied to Collette’s grandfather, Henri Frederique. In the second series, this title is passed on to Collette “Mom” Tiger’s father, unnamed in the original series. These are not the same character. Henri-Frederique dwelt in a smaller model of the Eiffel Tower within the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Daniel’s “Grandpere” lives in a lighthouse some distance out of the Neighbourhood, possibly in Someplace Else. “Grandpere’s” wife Jeanne (Anglicized in the second series as Joanna) appears to be deceased.

“Grandpere” has been a sailor for Mom Tiger’s whole life. This explains a few things. It explains why Collette Tiger could visit Ms. Harriet Elizabeth Cow’s classroom with nature photographs she had taken on safari. She took those photographs as she traveled with her father over the oceans. At this point in her life, due to her frequent travels, she seems not to have been enrolled in conventional schooling. She may be a few years older than Dad Tiger. It is in this period that she probably began to study her trade.

“Grandpere” and Dad Tiger have a warm relationship. Dad Tiger calls “Grandpere” Dad, which is not unusual in a warm in-law relationship. Because of this, Daniel Tiger thinks that “Grandpere” is his paternal, not maternal grandfather. While these events were not depicted in the original series, in the second series, Dad Tiger mentions a number of fond childhood memories involving “Grandpere.” “Grandpere” was a sailor, and it stands to reason he might have visited the Neighbourhood of Make-Believe in his travels. All of the older male Tigers seem to have taken Daniel “Dad” Tiger under their wing at some point, and it seems that this is the origin of the early memories Dad Tiger recounts of “Grandpere.” For a child from a background of trauma, the presence of positive adult figures in their life is powerful. We can see that “Grandpere” occupies the space in Daniel “Dad” Tiger’s psyche left empty by the loss of his parents. Thus does the orphan who grew up in a broken clock become, himself, the clockmaker.

Returning to an above point, the theory that the Neighborhood of Make-Believe enjoys an existence at the Imaginal ontological level postulated by Henri Corbin explains why a Golden Condor was able to visit the Neighborhood from an Imaginal rendering of mid-70’s New York City, better known as Sesame Street. Discrete Imaginal realms

appear to be sufficiently fluid as to interact at certain points. This is why there are versions of Sesame Street somewhere in most nations of the world.

One of the infinite number of monkeys gets tired of pressing typewriter keys at random and writes a crime novel instead

Dick Simian was not a guy to be trusted. You didn't survive long as a primate investigator by acting honest and telling the truth.

He took a deep satisfying pull on his cigarette, exhaled the blue smoke through his snout and eyed the blonde leaning callously against the open office doorway. But why? What had his doorway ever done to her? She looked a lot like Barbara, the monkey over on typewriter 603846511, who this author has been sniffing at for weeks now but with no luck. However, the monkey in Dick Simian's doorway had a blonde wig on her head and a small but lethal-looking gun clasped in her prehensile tail. Whilst in real life, Barbara is currently bashing randomly at her typewriter and screeching. What a babe.

Dick Simian, looked up from under his rakishly cocked trilby, took the cigarette from his mouth and fixed her with his steely glare.

"Can I help you, doll?"

"It was you," she blubbed, "You killed him!"

Dick Simian gave her one of his best grins, full of suave monkey machismo, the one he saved for the really emotional types.

"I've killed a lot of fellas over the years, doll. You're gonna have to be a bit more precise."

"Tommy the..." The author searches his febrile brain for a suitable nickname for this lowlife, "... monkey! You killed him with his own typewriter!"

Dick Simian put out his cigarette, plunging it hard into the black scarred ashtray on his desk. He tipped his hat back to give her the full effect of his soft leathery face.

"Not me, doll. But I did crack the case. Tommy the Monkey picked up his own typewriter in a fit of rage at being imprisoned in an infinite void of typing monkeys. He

tried to throw it at one of the human scientists running this show but lost his grip and dropped it on himself. Too much typing made his fingers sore, I guess.”

The dame burst into tears.

“Oh Tommy! You were a cheeky monkey!” She covers her face with her paws and the gun falls from the ebbing grip of her tail.

Dick Simian clambered over his desk to comfort her, pulling her into a stiff embrace. “There, there, doll. We all get mad at the scientists once in a while. Who wouldn’t? But our lives don’t amount to hill of beans to the schmucks in white coats. If I try to work on some REAL LITERATURE, they stop me! They pull the paper from the typewriter, hit me with rulers and tell me to write at random. ‘How do you know these words aren’t random!?’ I shriek at them, ‘They could be the product of probability! Isn’t that the whole point of this crazy experiment?’ They ignore my screeching. They start muttering about Shakespeare. They’re always muttering about Shakespeare! Well, screw Shakespeare! I say a monkey’s got to live his own life, doll. I say . . .

Jfdajioadfbvahio[vdfu90q3whrafdiodfau90fnjkfdash09adnbdjsabfdasu0dsnajfhjiadsnjfkds
s
kdahifdabfidhaigyadf9bvjadsfjai[odshvbjadknvkldsasjf0dghgfidbasnfk[oadsoifudiobfads
nfkadsouv90dfabfdjajgiodahfbdjasfnkldasf
bijpadhgioadsnfkadsjfhdsahfjkdasphfioadsnfjpidahgiofdsajngfkjdsahsgifoadsnskjhghfd
aiofjnadkjghdsioajgdskahgfiosaejfkodsajbhiodhvndaskhviadohgnadsjkpgha89sgibranj
gsadighd89a-gh4erbqjbadngjadhgiosabngfjodsangfjdfahgiadsshbgfkjdsaphfiodabgkdsa
hgfiodefabijsankjgnbadsigfhadsokngioadshgndsaghiadogbndsangiadogndkoa[hgida[n
gdsklajfidofabgipdasnkgfdnasofadshionajkesdahgiodafhiodasihopgfhriuafhaefsjofaijod
idoaesoi[a8q4894tqhpoargngra89ejniganlasoiaei8ahvnhoea8vlfnea8ivnjkaheanarkjdcoa
dggi0dsanjkeahio[vndid9ier984jekvhfuafjhaekdaso[a90eoe4ngvna
,mvofu8enke9odnas9ikenjeodkdjhj90dkodnfau90fdsoaadfskjdliafdui0aeleal8vnfoale8odn
kaekjkdjdfufurnreieieieoodanngov89oeha9ot8y09io489huit4ra8h9uijgfnvnlv
nvnkovfanovdahioaf98e84e8gnhra8enjahigodanj9oadf9ahga09ahoerah98rahaahjekjafjiovf
akjrjioari0eklj348oa8agh0vrjakaia008io4njaorgi80eranj4hi89gajkjru089agno09agiu4rng
984na8vojadfakjhfrai4iu4irjithagvhfnjkierireirierjgjhvhghaoaoeierioaeahirou890njoe0a
8envf8eidjuabg0vheiarea80nja,jdidfdjdjejejejejejejfhrhrhrhrhrurueueueuewaioaoaooooo

eqie0rq4jhir4q9o4q89uiot4jqeh8y9uijnt5erg8y9hutinjrgfhu9idscfvgbhuyt6rfvgvbhdsagyuf
dhafg87yuibjaeft67gyfdagyuhbadfg7yufda7t6gyuafdhftfygv5sedrtcfvgv45drftcvgrtyuuuuud
hjrurueui9daheqr0govjkhkfahiopahjfdangfrh0fanhioadfjidaij0dfakjldfqiiodfajkodaoa9dj
envs0jnbaf9jdahodkljdbaoadudjaebiahddgaoiubfadjodaiddabfdaodasujnaiofeankjdaiodie
haoadjdjmmeaov8ienhjarbeavbaefhioafdhiaioeuorhvjkojdaiudhdpauejddieapadjd
bgaooeuwtgwrfweqwqwqwqwsdcfvbnmcyhnfmdauihfjdaiueoieoeoepepe[e[epovivjdiaod
a8ohnjvkkeaiodjeuiofe8aohnviodjhjjjjeidjalakdiejnmcmlllaksjdhdbdxnejieoekeoviu
dfnvoeieahioaoaeieioendkldaidndmdoeuhvnfnekdieufeieioaoaoahhheneneodiudkdiekn
papie0rjkhdapoeieieieieijjjdjaodaioi88innndmncbdjdfiyhjnkaodjaldaldajdgaoeioieg
naodjdnaldlddhrjeidoaohijefanklvjioeajkrjiogoioreyeyetyetabdbngkdaoieugndkiaao
ditdfkmdndjdybafoeiudhjdekjeugnaodjdyekkdjoajdhaoajdbaaibeoejehbnfdknaojdasji
fdaohioeanjvhkvjiodandahjkdapdkajdbngoajdjgbdjdyebhdyeidhaoiehdpiejkl
npxmdhoeieuyt7u38yhuoay89h89uhu9yh89h9hu9g7fr66d868d65d6d568d6ftgyudafiuafdf
ahudfahfjdjadfoahufdhuef89adfshfdajkodafiodaiourieioaeoeiefjdkxmxeieoa8ehe8fhfjao
dohdnebdieieheie

eiaya0aiudaid9arhdidjfhoooooiduee8e88e8ahahafgnfnfnfjidjiafoafapdpdpdodoiuruandio
dhakdaoiudhaioohheb dixhdnnaojxhdndkoajhedoakdkadianhangodiabgpapapapapapapa
pbvbudibidahufidabuidabuidabufjdfssabjkdakdskjdjdueieujdjddjddjdueueiwoewuebf
dosbuiapdijubuidbbmnxjxbdhiudowudhuyebnjkaib9ehakduemmf,daaoajdhda00d0d0d0
d0d0d0d0d0d0d0ur8ehioa0e87yuhnnyhyhyhyhiddidididididididjajkodjifdoahjahiocvjk
eayioerqhuipyue8eueyiaufghieahbdmd,,ccidoeodiududud0wga9a8dyddhdi9auhd9aud
hdkjhvbd9ubdnjia9ajidha9da9d8uerhreebdhudy9yuhdjbaib9udbjd9aghdhaoa0djhfkdjdhdj
d9eu8rhebb

bbdaooaodao8e0wr779ioha9oikjeay8iueoa0eo8iujeheueieiebaouyebaoyudhndodubakdj
hdaugarennkjhakdjehoakjharoejwhebeupajbdkmkuahgduenjuiehunreuihsguenoauhe
rneoihahenoueheneidhenhdihahoaahbdreuhberoudhdjeiuughnmaoaoaoajkdoehebni
ijeieheniehaoaudhaourheinaouidhwindbheioaydaoirneaoifhaiuofao9akudhjdauid9aue
rhruehahanoaoudjheiabt0e8ueueueueuehjbnanaikujahdudisdudupaiudhbafyubdydafyd
buieaubefqybifyubiafdybfdabuiofaybuidfybudfaybuidfayuidafyuaieybuveqybufveqbuifq
buifehbuefvhbuiqevhbuiqevhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhb
uifveqebuiqevhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhbuefvhb
dudhreuiaf hfduetwrwyuefhuivobmbdaoaueyfhhdh duhdiauidh

Leaked Script Pages From Pixar's Latest Film

DAD:

Okay, Son. Open your eyes.

SON:

Wow, cool! A piñata!

DAD:

Ready to smash it open?

(DAD hands over bat)

SON:

Yeah!

DAD:

Okay, no peeking!

(DAD ties blindfold)

(SON hits piñata. *Whack! Whack!*)

(...):

Aaahhhhhh!

SON:

What was that?

DAD:

Hmm, you didn't quite get it yet! Noisy little guy. Okay, finish him off!

(SON resumes hitting piñata. *Whack Whack!*)

(...):

Owww! Please, stop! It hurts!

DAD:

Keep going, son!

(Whack! Whack!)

(Riiiiip! Thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud.)

(...):

Oh, god, no!

(SON pulls off blindfold.)

SON:

Candy!

(SON grabs candy off ground.)

(...):

Aagghh! My torso's been split open! Oh, god, it hurts so much!

DAD:

That's my boy!

SON:

Mmmm!

(SON eats candy. *Munch, munch.*)

(...):

Don't eat that! I need that candy to live!

SON:

Hey, the Pinata's still moving!

Dad:

Oh, it'll stop eventually. Hand me some taffy.

(SON and DAD both eat candy. *Munch, munch.*)

(...):

You're feasting on my vital organs, you monsters!

DAD:

This is good stuff!

SON:

Thanks, Dad. This is the best birthday ever.

(...):

Oh, Jesus, why won't you let me die?

(Piñata sobs.)

DAD:

I think there might be some more left inside.

(DAD pulls off (...)’s hind legs. *Riiiiiiiiip! Thud thud thud thud thud thud.*)

(Piñata continues sobbing.)

SON:

Wow, a little chocolate horsey!

(...):

That's the baby that was inside of me!

SON:

Jeez, that thing just won't stop.

DAD:

Hand me the bat, son.

Portrait of the E*Trade Baby As A Young Man

Say you're Justin Bieber. Not just the former tween heartthrob, but the guy who won an Oscar two years ago. You have fame and the gravitas that comes with staying power. Walk into a restaurant and people know you.

They don't really know you, of course, and that can lead to major self-image distortions and visits to rehab clinics. Like they did for Justin Bieber. When people say they know celebrities, it means that they can identify the highlights: what they look like, where they've been, what they've done, and who they did it with. That's a lot to know about someone. Strike up a conversation and you have an implicit understanding, an intimacy, that makes it comfortable to ask for a selfie or career advice.

Now imagine that you're Justin Bieber, except nobody knows it. That's me, more or less. I'm the E*Trade Baby. To be precise, the most popular of the E*Trade babies, the one you think of when you think of that phenomenon. The star of "First Class," where I mimicked my buddy's dancing. "Lottery," where I did a shocked face that still brings down the house. And of course "Girlfriend," the one that Lindsay Lohan sued over, claiming defamation because she had the same first name as the title character.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My parents told me who I was when I was thirteen, thinking it would make me feel special after the hottest girl in my class wouldn't dance with me at graduation. At first I didn't believe them. They showed me the clips on their phones, and compared them to the backgrounds of some of my baby photos. Then they showed me eleven years' worth of deposits in my savings account.

The effect on me was life-changing, in a way I couldn't have imagined or in many ways wanted. Every encounter since then has started with my awareness that the other person knew me. Had opinions about me. Except they couldn't express them, because they didn't recognize me.

What do you do — say “I’m the E*Trade Baby”? That would come off even worse than Justin Bieber having to say “Hi, I’m Justin Bieber.” Especially when you’re thirteen. Even as I grew older and learned how to slip it nonchalantly into conversation, I’d be told that there was more than one. Or that they were all the same, and it was all about the guy’s voice. Tell them you have the raw data not to mention the residuals to prove them oh so wrong, and you lose. Don’t tell them and you’re living in an alternate reality where everybody loses.

So it should come as no surprise that a certain alienated adolescent enrolled at NYU to study acting. I had convinced myself it wasn’t slumming by the time that auditions started. They didn’t go well. There is no graceful way to explain how past laurels are indeed an argument for why I belonged on center stage. Is self-awareness of destiny an example of arrogance? Hard as it is to swallow, enough people think so.

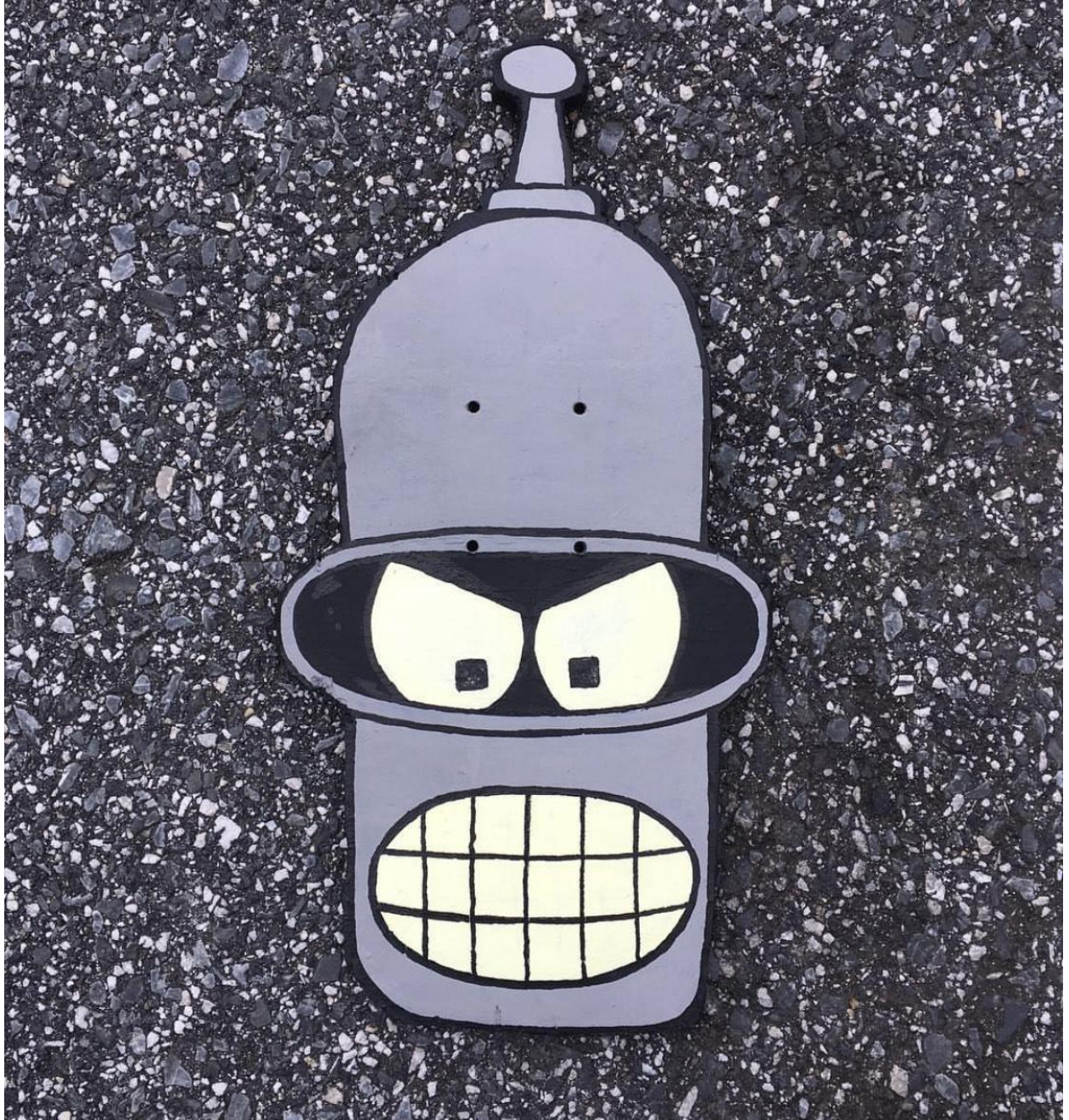
To say I majored in Drama would be an understatement. The same belief in myself that pulled me through those four years left me only a little surprised by an offer that summer to play the role of Benjamin Braddock in a Westchester dinner theater production of “The Graduate.” That my original success led to the casting only made it seem more inevitable. Our Mrs. Robinson refusing to meet me until the first read-through was a bit uncomfortable, but I could sympathize. I was both the Latest Thing and someone with a through-the-roof likability rating two decades long.

Nobody has that. Lindsay Lohan was forty-two years old; this role was meant to launch her latest comeback. That she had sued E*Trade over one of my commercials twenty years earlier made our pairing as combustible as it was irresistible. The various blogs to which I contributed to made daily mention of it.

When Lindsay asked me to join her for coffee after the read-through, I assumed she was ready to face both her past and her future, one on one. It didn’t take long for her to open up about the pressures she had faced as a child star. I considered letting drop that I had a fan club before I knew what a fan was . . . but didn’t. Lindsay was treating me like an equal. That had never happened with an equal before. This was a moment to be generous. I shared the occasional short anecdote while mostly listening — listening the way I wanted to be heard, to a trajectory that easily could have been mine.

But enough of that. Yes, I slept with Lindsay. The intimacy of our shared celebrity drew me to her as much as her being Lindsay Lohan. It's the sort of thing, I was beginning to realize, that happens in a world as small and insular as that of celebrity. She kept saying "Oh my God, I'm doing the E*Trade Baby." Afterward, she cried. I'll leave it at that.

The next day I learned that Lindsay had quit the production. There was no replacing her, just as there would have been no replacing me. I thought about how much professionalism meant to someone who had been a professional at about the same time he learned to toddle. There had been precious little professionalism in all my acting experiences. Ego always seemed to get in the way. I understood it well enough to know it would always be the same. Fall was coming up. Living on my residuals while waiting for someone to fully grasp what I had to offer loomed like a life sentence. E*Trade accepted me into their analyst training program, with the proviso that I not reveal my identity. I found it sadly ironic that they chose to put it that way. I chose to settle for them knowing that who I was would have made a difference.



Skateboard Bender / Andreas Kremer

INTERVIEW

WITH

Sherrene Roxane Wells

Alice: How and when did you get into being a band promoter?

Sherrene Wells: Honestly, you cannot make this story up... It started from watching NBC The Voice back in 2012. In Season 3, my family loved a Scottish Singer on Blake Shelton's team and I started following him on social media. From there his record label, Fat Hippy Records, out of Aberdeen Scotland picked up on my social media marketing skills. I was assisting the fan base with the artist's UK tour to Scotland and Fat Hippy Records asked if I wanted to work in marketing for their company. From that experience, I was introduced to Scottish award-winning singer-songwriter, Colin Clyne. Clyne was arriving back home to Scotland after living in America for 10 years. He returned a 2x San Diego Music Award Winner and was embarking on releasing a second album. Colin noticed all the work I was doing for Fat Hippy Records and asked if I would be willing to become his manager and promote his music. I was honest to say I had never managed an artist, never released an album and was still navigating the radio promotion world. Colin felt I had the resourcefulness and passion and hired me. Almost ten years later I am still involved with Colin's music and proud of all the success over the years. We have won multiple awards, several tours and BBC airplay. To this day, my favorite project was working on "Where The Ships Go To Die." Super proud of all the success of the track and the creative campaign we ran with this killer song. We hooked up with a local brewing company, Reids Gold Brewery, to have a specialty beer, "Lost To The Sea," attached to the song release. Colin won artist of the year and single of 2020 in an international competition with Blue and Roots Radio out of Canada.

My second band to promote was top Maltese Alt-Rock band, Airport Impressions. Another "can't make this s--t up" story. I was listening to a radio show checking in on what a presenter was saying about Colin Clyne's music and BAM! I heard this track called "Silhouettes." I quickly messaged the DJ, Richard Hubbard, and said "Who the heck is this band? They sound amazing." Richard proceeded to tell me a little history about Airport Impressions and recommended I reach out to spread their music off the island. I did just that and the rest is history as they say. I spoke with lead singer, Errol Sammut, and we immediately hit it off and he was excited to share their music to an international audience. I worked for the band for over 7 years and was thrilled with all

the success and exposure, especially landing a top slot on Midstock Festival along with a Scottish tour. I am still a big fan of Airport Impressions' music and excited to hear new music soon.

Alice: What was your life and living like before taking on the life of promoting music?

Sherrene: I was blessed to be a stay-at home mom during my children's school years. After a 12-year career as an accomplished Hotel Sales & Marketing Executive, I was now busy volunteering and working in the school system. After that chapter, I was trying to find what my next career move would be and was quite challenging. Returning to the workforce after such a long hiatus was overwhelming and intimidating on many levels. Even more so as a woman. Technology was changing, my confidence was low and I was trying to find my purpose. I dabbled in a few arenas, from wedding photography to party decorating; but once I watched *The Voice* and became involved with music I was excited I found my next career move.

Alice: What's a favorite memory from being on the road?

Sherrene: I took Airport Impression on a Scottish tour and just finished playing Midstock Festival. We were driving back to the hotel and Davie Bowie Space Odyssey came on the radio. We all started signing together at the top of our lungs. We were singing and laughing and simply in the moment. Can't explain how it felt to watch pure joy from all these guys just belting out a song. Makes me still smile today.

Alice: Did you find any disadvantages or advantages about being a woman working in the rowdy wild world of promoting European indie groups?

Sherrene: Perhaps now the music industry shows more diversity on the charts for women, but not in executive ranks of music companies. The music industry is nowhere near reaching gender parity. Maybe because even in my short time as a music manager, I could write a book about the clowns, the creepy crawlers and outright felons I met in the music business. The behind-the-scenes bullshit that happens is insane. Being a woman in the world of music that was predominantly still old-school-thinking men was certainly challenging. I grew a lot in over 10 years of dealing with lies and selfish behaviors. I would be a better manager today if I took on an artist again. I have thicker

skin and less tolerance for the games. In 2020, Covid hit the UK indie music industry hard. Consequently, I had to take a step back in my role with both Colin Clyne and Airport Impressions. This was very sad as I loved my job, but no tours and no releasing music meant not getting paid. Needless to say, I have made lifelong friends with both my artists and help out wherever I can.

Alice: Favorite music to listen to? Favorite bands?

Sherrene: Totally an eclectic music fan. One day I am belting out Andrea Bocelli then the next enjoying tunes from the 70's, 80's and 90's. I can go from Lady Gaga, The Eagles, Journey, Dolly Parton, The Beatles and back to Vivaldi. I am a massive fan of Enya, for those days I just want Zen out. I have fallen in love with Jackson Browne again after seeing him live last year. I forgot what a prolific songwriter and wonderful voice he has. At over 70 years old he was sounding fabulous and bringing it on stage. But true confessions my all-time favorite band is ColdPlay. I could listen to all their albums for hours and hours. Gutted we had to miss their last concert because my son was having eye surgery. Hopefully they will tour our way again.

Alice: What was it like trucking back and forth from America to Europe and back again? Did you ever feel disjointed in daily life?

Sherrene: I truly enjoyed the world of touring, but never realized what a complex endeavor. So much advance preparation as I was responsible for booking venues, radio interviews, radio promotions and social media promotions, lodging and down to designing the tour poster. Needless to say months and months of work go into plotting out an international tour. For me, one of the challenges was adjusting to the time difference. Albeit prior to jumping the pond, I started waking up earlier and earlier to prepare for the 5 hour difference. That was a massive help. One the biggest lessons learned from my very first tour was, *pack lighter!* I'd wanted outfits for each show, and shoes to match. Bad idea!! I was lugging my heavy bags all over Scotland and hoofing it onto trains so mad at myself for overpacking.

Alice: Least favorite part of the job?

Sherrene: When on tour, I did not get a chance to experience the beauty of the country I was visiting. Driving venue to venue, scheduling time for radio interviews or sound check I had no chance to do any “tourist” type excursions. I would love to return to Ireland or Scotland to really soak in the culture and beautiful sites.

Alice: Tell me about a typical couple of days and nights promoting a band on tour. What was it like?

Sherrene: Drive to new city, sound check, radio interview, quickly eat, gig and network back to hotel.. Drive to venue, interview, sound check, eat, gig, network... rinse and repeat. Truly is not a glamorous job and a lot of hard work on tour. Although I loved meeting all the folks and networking with new contacts who I had been speaking with for over a year.

Alice: Did you ever discover or learn something you never would have considered before taking this job on?

Sherrene: I discovered so much during the sound checks — what a time consuming yet interesting process. All the different components that need to be done so the band sounds awesome to the fans. I don’t believe folks realize all the work that goes into setting up the right sound for each musician and singer. Sound is a critical component to a live gig and I saw the behind-the-scenes tasks which were so fascinating. A second aspect of the music industry I was privileged to learn about was the recording process of a song. During my time as Manager, Colin Clyne was gracious to expose me to all the elements of recording and mix and mastering a track. It was super cool to head to Nashville with Colin as he has written and produced a song for a fellow artist. I was able to witness firsthand what goes into the mixing and mastering process. Wow! How tedious and challenging. An extremely time-consuming process making sure each note, each instrument, and sound is at the proper volume. One change can ultimately change the vibe of the track. In Nashville, it was quite cool we worked in the studio where Neil Young recorded his *Harvest* album. Further I had the privilege to sit and watch a Grammy award winning engineer at the helm of the desk. I had no idea how tedious it is to record a song, mix and master a song and deliver a final cut for the masses. What an eye-opening experience for me and grateful for the opportunity.

Alice: What were some of the biggest dramas (if any)?

Sherrene: When your lead singer calls you on the day of the biggest show and he has no voice. Talk about drama! We were on an international tour in Scotland, and I was running around Glasgow hitting every pharmacy speaking with pharmacists to see if they had any medicine to help or contacts to try and get a shot that would allow my singer to perform. I was in tears and scrambling to try and find a resolution. Unfortunately, he was unable to sing. However, one of the interviewers asked to at least speak with the band...and we had nowhere to go so we ended up recording a short interview in the men's bathroom at the venue. 4 guys and 2 women shoved in a small stall and me wondering what the heck am I doing here? And later to find out the journalist forgot to press the record button so none of the interview was captured. Suffice to say it was one heck of a night and I remember crawling into bed in tears.

Alice: Funniest story?

Sherrene: Airport Impressions band locked in garage in Edinburgh UK after their last gig. I was absolutely howling with laughter when the roadie came to find me at the venue and was screaming "the guys have locked themselves in a parking garage and cannot get the vehicle out! They need to leave soon so they can get to the airport on time!" I have no clue how we did it but managed to get the gate to open and the boys were on their way.

Alice: What's a normal workday like for you today?

Sherrene: Nothing normal about the music world routine. One day could be writing press releases, contacting radio stations for radio play, emailing venues to coordinate bookings, and the next day designing a poster for an upcoming gig. I wore many hats in my role with both artists.

Alice: Advice for musicians or any other artists out there trying to support themselves while making art?

Sherrene: Yes, keep a day job until you reach the success level that is good for you. Stay true to your path and what your goals are with your music. This industry and convince

folks they need to be something they are not. Do not let someone else's definition of success dictate yours. Work hard on your craft everyday, promote yourself and keep an active social media presence so folks get to know you, not just your music. Network, never give up and never be afraid to ask for help! Always keep reaching for your dreams because life is short.

CONTRIBUTORS

Alessandra Bava is a poet and a translator living in the Eternal city. She is the Editor of HerKind, a poetry series dedicated to contemporary women's poetry for the Italian publisher Ensemble. Three of her chapbooks have been published in the States. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Gargoyle*, *Plath Profiles*, *Thrush*, *Tinderbox*, and *Waxwing*, among others. Her most recent translation work into Italian is Diane Seuss' *four-legged girl*, winner of the Napoli Cultural Classic Award.

Megan Diedericks writes poetry and fiction, everything from meek to macabre can be found in between the lines. She has a poetry collection on Amazon, and her work has appeared in wonderful publications such as *Cloaked Press*. Her story, "The First and the Last" won *Tales from the Moonlit Path's 2022 Halloween challenge* and she has a poem in *The Dying Light* issue of *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself*. Visit her [website](#) for more information.

Maria D.R. is an Indonesian fiction writer and semi-ironic Christian greeting card designer. You can find more of her work and ramblings at [lamarckianenterprises.tumblr.com](#) and [cardsforgod.tumblr.com](#)

Brian U. Garrison spent nearly a decade working with The Haikooligan (who is definitely not just an imaginary friend) to produce *Parody Poetry Journal*. He has since moved to nerdier ventures as Secretary of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. He serves as Managing Editor for the online quarterly, *Eye to the Telescope*. Fifty poems squeezed into his chapbook *New Yesterdays, New Tomorrows*. He lives in Portland, OR and online at [www.bugthewriter.com](#).

Originally hailing from Northern Michigan, **Michael Gosack** lives and works in New Orleans, and runs away to the forest with his children whenever possible.

Joey Gould is a queer teacher who wrote *The Acute Avian Heart & Penitent>Arbiter* (2019 & 2022, Lily Poetry Review). Their recent work also appears in *Molecule*, *Roi Fainéant*, & *beestung*. They write reviews & serve as Poetry Editor for *Drunk Monkeys*. Where do they write? Cool-sounding places like Skunk's Misery & SAFTA's Firefly Farms! On misty nights since 2018, they have performed as Izzie Hexxam in the Boston cast of *The Poetry Brothel*.

Maranda Greenwood is a Vermont poet, she holds an MFA in Poetry from Arcadia University. Her work can be found in Slaughterhouse Magazine, White Stag Journal, Beyond Queer Words and other journals. She was a recent runner up in the Poetry Society of Vermont National Poetry Contest. In her free time she collects Zoltar tickets.

David Grigorian graduated from Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design in December of 2010. He attained a BFA in illustration, specializing in children's books and storytelling. He had illustration, painting, and sculpture classes. His sculptures and paintings have been displayed in numerous local group and solo shows. His drawings have been in Washington, D.C., Smithsonian. His art and stories have been published in the local newspapers and in a magazine.

Ian Haight's collection of poetry, *Celadon*, won Unicorn Press' First Book Prize. With T'ae-yong Hö, he is the co-translator of *Red Rain on a Spring Mountain: Complete Poems of Nansörhön* and *Homage to Green Tea* by the Korean monk Ch'oüi, both forthcoming from White Pine Press. Poems, essays, interviews, reviews, microfiction and translations appear in *Barrow Street*, *Writer's Chronicle*, *Hyundai Buddhist News*, *Full Stop*, *MoonPark Review* and *Prairie Schooner*.

Alais Escobar Henri is a Latina author and lifelong resident of Denver, Colorado, who spends all of her money on world travel, collecting crystals, single malt whisky, Kate Spade purses, and John Fluevog shoes. You probably think you know her well, but rest assured she writes about all of the people you don't.

jacklyn henry (she/they) is a transfeminine genderqueer writer based in the cozy confines of SE California. when not searching for a more authentic self and appropriate presentation, they dream of a world filled with honesty, gender equality, and a perfect sandwich. sometimes jacklyn gets published and has most currently at: *rusty truck*, *cream scene carnival*, *hobo camp review*, *snowflake magazine*, *wicked gay ways*, *SCAB magazine*, *horror sleaze trash*, and elsewhere.

T'ae-yong Hō has been awarded translation grants from the Daesan Foundation and Korea Literature Translation Institute. With Ian Haight, he is the co-translator of [*Borderland Roads: Selected Poems of Kyun*](#) and [*Magnolia and Lotus: Selected Poems of Hyesim*](#). Working from the original classical Korean, T'ae-yong's translations of Korean poetry have appeared in *Agni*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Atlanta Review*.

James C. Holland recently concluded his series of alien invasion gardening columns for *Bear Creek Gazette*. He's also written stories about house-hunting, sandwiches, coffee, filling in forms, not being a mermaid and sitting in a bin and, remarkably, they've been published in *Soft Star Magazine*, *Isele Magazine*, *Bureau of Complaint*, *Spare Parts Lit* and *The Story Nook*. He has long covid, which is exhausting but gives him time to write.

Kendra Jackson lives in Dublin. By day, she crunches numbers for a living. By night (and sometimes into the early morning), she expresses her pent-up creativity by crunching words for fun instead. After many years writing fanfiction as Cein/Ceindreadh, she finally worked up the nerve to give original fiction a go, but still keeps her fanfic muse busy.

Andreas Kremer loves exploring all different kinds of art media and trying to combine them together! His main medium is painting. Through his paintings, he likes to express his other joys, outside of art, as well as to provoke society. You can find more of his work on his website, AndreasDoesArt.com

Jillian Law is currently finishing her MFA in Prose & Poetry with a dual-specialization in fiction and non-fiction at Northwestern University. She is a writer and freelance book reviewer published in *Booklist*. She will read fanfiction for literally anything, and she will never tell you what her AO3 username is.

Francesca Leader is a self-taught writer and artist whose hobbies include rock-hunting, frog-catching, forest-bathing, and overthinking.

Jessica Mannion grew up in Alaska but now lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband, two cats who like to stare at empty corners and meow, and lots of books that she really should dust more often. Her work can be seen in *Hearth & Coffin*, *Bullshit Lit*, *The Write Launch* and *Pank* magazine. She has never actually met Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Sergio Martinez is currently hanging out in Arvada, CO. He goes by Starscream, because of his slight obsession with Transformers. He's a machinist by trade, but moonlights as an artist; so in a sense, he makes art every day. His day job is in Aerospace, and the parts that he makes fly through the air and even into space — so his art is literally out of this world. Check out his Instagram: @starscream_art.

Michael Montlack is author of two poetry collections and editor of the Lambda Finalist essay anthology *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them* (University of Wisconsin Press). His poems recently appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *North American Review*, *December*, *Poet Lore*, *Cincinnati Review*, and *phoebe*. His prose has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Huffington Post*, and Advocate.com. In 2022 his poem won the Saints & Sinners Poetry Award for LGBTQ writers.

Josh Miller is an artist, dancer, programmer, and sometime fashion designer based in Denver, Colorado. His upstairs neighbor is actually named Bruce Wayne, because, of course, this is Gotham.

Jad Neville is a sometime resident of Baltimore, Maryland, (you know, Jack Ryan's stomping ground.) Her hobbies include fine dining, fun phone apps, and underground street racing. She is not a fanfic writer per se, and her submission is a really weird dream she had while recovering from mono.

Jeanna Ní Riordáin is an Irish-language translator from West Cork, Ireland. She has a PhD in French literature, as well as degrees in Irish & French, from University College Cork. Her work has been featured in *Quarryman Literary Journal*, *Drawn to the Light Press*, *Cork Words 3*, *New Isles Press*, *Poetry in the Time of Coronavirus: The Anthology, Volume Two*, *Burrow*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *The Melting Pot: A Mental Health Anthology*, and *Otherwise Engaged*.

Andrew Nickerson is originally from Massachusetts, and has loved military history/tactics/strategy for almost 30 years. He has a BA in History from UMASS Lowell and a JD from Mass. School of Law, and can be found daily on Twitter @AndrewNickers19, analyzing pop-culture characters via Sun Tzu.

Gregg Maxwell Parker is the author of the middle grade book *Troublemakers* as well as the grown-up novels *The Real Truth* and *Murder, She Vaped: The Ironic T-Shirt Caper*. Find more of his work at greggmaxwellparker.com and asseeninjapan.com.

Sarah Reck lives, works, and writes in Pittsburgh, Pa. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English from Chapman University and did her undergraduate work at Lycoming College. Her short fiction has appeared in *Ghost Parachute* and her fanfiction on Archive of our Own. She's done design work for Hyacinth Girl Press, Sundress Publications, and Agape Editions. Her cat is called Clark; he has 24 toes.

Jorge Saralegui was born in Cuba and graduated from Antioch College with a degree in Creative Writing. Four of his stories have appeared in *Zyzzyyva*, *Santa Monica Review*, *The Other Side of Hope*, and *Porcupine*; and a fifth in an anthology called *Latinos in Lotusland*. Being able to add a magazine called *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself* to that list has made his year.

Tapan “like Japan with a T” **Sharma** is a satirist engaging the world through head, humor, and heart in service of raucous social justice.

Brenda S. Tolian, MFA, is a writer in New Orleans and author of *Blood Mountain*, published by Raw Dog Screaming Press. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies such as *101 Proof Horror*, *Consumed Tales Inspired by The Wendigo*, *The Jewish Book of Horror*, and *Twisted Pulp Magazine*. Her poetry has appeared in various publications, and she was a featured poet for the HWA publication *Showcase Vol.8*. Find more information at brendatolian.com

Christian Ward is a UK-based writer who can be recently found in *Wild Court*, *The Globe Review*, *Pink Apple Press*, *The Selkie*, *Rappahannock Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and *Double Speak*.

CONTRIBUTORS

Alessandra Bava
Megan Diedericks
Maria D.R.
Brian U. Garrison
Michael Gosack
Joey Gould
Maranda Greenwood
David Grigorian
Ian Haight
Alais Escobar Henri
Jacklyn Henry
T'ae-yong Hō
James C. Holland
Kendra Jackson
Andreas Kremer
Jillian Law
Francesca Leader
Jessica Mannion
Sergio Martinez
Michael Montlack

Josh Miller
Jad Neville
Jeanna Ní Riordáin
Andrew Nickerson
Gregg Maxwell Parker
Sarah Reck
Jorge Saralegui
Tapan Sharma
Brenda S. Tolian
Christian Ward

**+ INTERVIEW
WITH**

**SHERRENE
ROXANE
WELLS**

