

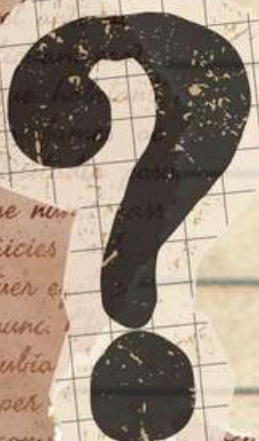
tips please!

Word Tonic

ANTHOLOGY

VOL IIII

Cover Designed by Yasmin Bligh-Hasan



Word Tonic

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Anybody have any ideas?

Preface by Roos van der Velden

I feel like I must start off this preface by mentioning how the theme was thought off by the amazing Frankie Sims, who sadly isn't able to join us in this new anthology. She gave me a bunch of amazing ideas for themes, quite a few of which will return in the next issues. Every single time I'll be sure to start off with a shout-out! Promised!

Don't you love themes that can be taken many different ways? Of course, there is the clear 'Can I have help, please?' to this title. But at the same time, it can be taken to mean that we are asking all of you for money! Which we aren't, because that would be very, very rude, and if there is one thing that will get you thrown out of WordTonic quicker than Lightning McQueen, it's being rude to other members. That's not what we are here for! We are here to help each other learn, either with getting better at copywriting, editing for each other, hinting that an absolutely amazing masterclass is going to be in town, or otherwise! Tips, tips, please, please! That's the only way we'll ever learn!

That's the beauty of our community: We help each other learn and create a beautiful new product out of it. Once again, in this anthology we showcase all that WordTonic has to offer. From gut-wrenching poems to honest stories of heritage and immigration, to needing help with terrible AI chatbots and non-fiction that tries to offer you, the reader, some help.

Tips, tips, tips. Not in the form of money, but in the form of helping each other and maybe even helping you, the reader, with the message of some of these pieces.

We love you, dear reader, and I love all my members at WordTonic. Now dig into this beautiful, fourth edition of the WordTonic anthology!

Anyone's got any tips?

Please?

Preface by Fin

Anyone's got any tips? please?

That's how I'm feeling right now as I am trying to write this preface! When Roos asked me to write the preface for this edition I got super excited and of course I had to say yes! But now that I'm trying to write this, I can feel the responsibility of it creeping up on me and weighing me down. I need to write something good, because it needs to be a good introduction to the upcoming (amazing) stories!

I didn't get the chance to join the first anthology and was too chicken to join the second one. You might have read my story in the previous anthology though. I was so excited to join and write a story for this amazing thing Roos has set up. (By the way, now that we're here, let's take a moment and say 'thank you, Roos!' because what she's doing here is amazing!) This time, I wasn't able to participate but I am happy to say I got to edit some of the amazing stories, and I cannot wait to read all the other ones too.

Am I a little too excitable? Maybe so. But how can you not be excited when our community keeps growing and more and more people keep joining the anthology and sharing their creative works with us. This one is a big one again, and I just took a quick peek at the next anthology sheet, and that one seems to be getting rather big as well! The community coming together like this is just so cool, and I hope you enjoy everyone's creativity too.

And maybe you will even find some useful tips for yourself in here as well!

Maybe I will too... so I can learn how to write a proper preface ;).

Scribbles and scrawls

Written by: Nadjellah Mendoza

Edited by: Sydney Sampson

My handwriting is not aesthetic.
It's messy cursive scrawls that veer off the lines,
scribbles that hide spelling mistakes or spiraling thoughts lost to time.
It's lowercase where proper nouns are concerned
And capitals where there should be none
It's forgotten apostrophes and misplaced commas,
sentence fragments and dangling modifiers.

But it's me.

As raw as words can be, the ink that marks the page
comes from a pen that my fingers wrap around.
A product with one consumer.

It is too much of myself and my mind to post online.
Type faces are cleaner, more rigid and defined.
Somehow a simple font can make my words feel more resonant
I know that once my fingers have turned from pen to keyboard
that my thoughts are finally taking shape.

Encoded with the gentle embrace of zeros and ones.
Italics, bold, maybe both rolled into one.
I can backspace, delete whole passages – even copy and paste.
A word doc is a canvas, a nice white slate.

I can wipe it clean and leave no trace; of my story, of myself, of who I want to
be.

With paper and pen there is no going back, the evidence is clear,
It'll always be about me.

And that's okay.
We all need a point of reference, a guide to show us the way.
I can trace the ink, smell nostalgia between the pages
My past informs my future,,

And I can always make changes.
To the prose, to the structure,
To the puns and the rhymes,
Anecdotes about my older Brother,
The words I use just to pass time.

Who better to model my work after but myself?
When I can gorge on all writers and artists have to offer
Then spew it back out instead of leaving them on a shelf.
So, i'll continue to scribble and to scrawl
Even if my accolades never make it to a fame hall.

Don't shoot the messenger

Written by: Andrea Tode Jiménez

Edited by: Roos van der Velden

Preface:

'Don't Shoot the Messenger' is a chapter in my reimagining of Geoffrey Chaucer's epic poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*. *Troilus and Criseyde* tells the story of the two titular Trojan lovers being ripped apart by the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. This excerpt follows the prophet Cassandra as she tries to advise a heartbroken Troilus after his lover, Criseyde, is taken by the Greek army's hero, Diomed. Cassandra is seen as an ill omen, a seer driven insane by her own power. Since Chaucer does not give Cassandra or her fellow female characters much of a voice or characterization, I built Cassandra's internal conflict from scratch. In Chaucer's adaptation, Cassandra's wisdom and visions are often dismissed by her people, despite her best efforts to use her prophetic talents for good. In my retelling, Cassandra struggles with her place in the world, one in which she and her mother Andromache are dismissed while her male peers, Calchas and Pandarus, are always believed. For instance, Troilus visits a temple—the Palladium—, after Cassandra warns him against it at Pandarus' insistence. I also implemented ancient Greek, which the male characters never use in my adaptation, to illustrate how Cassandra's innocence will always be misunderstood and misconstrued because her peers do not—*cannot*—understand her on a fundamental level.

*

Cassandra's troubles begin when she dreams of a bridge. She is not one to desire—her mother says it is unbecoming to be greedy- yet she finds herself wanting to cross that bridge. The pull is so intense she cannot help but submit to it.

It is her biggest regret.

The bridge, now, only serves to separate her from her family. Once every few months, though, it will return one of her brothers to her. Here is one now—Troilus. Cassandra can only sigh; they have not spoken since he visited the Palladium.

Shortly before Troilus' birth, Cassandra dreams of a boy, wings of wax and the

sun. Thus, Cassandra spends his life trying to shield him from the light. She fails.

At fifteen, Cassandra asks Troilus to stay with her instead of participating in a chariot race. When Troilus falls off his stallion, Cassandra chases after him for days. She stands vigil by his door all night. Apologies will not mend his leg, but Cassandra begs for his forgiveness.

Cassandra is not forgiven. She does not understand. She fails.

At seventeen, Cassandra asks Troilus to stay with her instead of going hunting. When Troilus gets swarmed by bandits and loses a friend, Cassandra chases after him for days. She sends him a cornucopia and some wine. Fruit will not bring his friend back, but Cassandra begs for his forgiveness.

Cassandra is not forgiven. She does not understand. She fails.

At twenty, Cassandra asks Troilus to stay with her instead of visiting the Palladium. When Troilus leaves, Cassandra chases after him for days. She writes him letters that go forever unanswered. Words do not seem to have an effect on her brother, and Cassandra is running out of ideas.

She does not understand.

She believes she never will.

When Troilus asks her to interpret his most recent dream, one with a boar in a meadow, she agrees.

Cassandra has dreamt of a queen with blood in her eyes for years. And yet, watching Troilus' reaction, a part of Cassandra feels as though Criseyde has killed her first.

Still it stings when Troilus refuses to believe her.

Accusations of hysteria come easier than comfort and compassion. It was the same for Andromache. Madwomen, both of them.

Vaguely, Cassandra wonders whether the prophet Calchas has ever been called mad.

She doubts it.

Troilus is looking for something, Cassandra knows. But for what? Strength? Pity? Dismissal? Compassion?

Understanding, perhaps. Cassandra cannot give that to him.

Eventually, Troilus runs his mouth dry. Sullen and exhausted.

Cassandra feels the same.

“δεν είναι δικό μου λάθος,” says Cassandra. She does not beg. Not anymore.

“I would have followed her to the Underworld,” Troilus says to no one at all.

“I would have fought Death for her.”

“I know,” agrees Cassandra. She cannot grasp why, then, the Greek army foils him.

“He is just a man,” Cassandra tries.

“I know,” agrees Troilus.

Before he leaves, Cassandra asks Troilus whether the boar in the dream was wearing a brooch. Troilus says it was not, and that’s all. Such is the way of men.

Later on, Pandarus tells Troilus his dream was just that— a dream—, and that is that. Such is the way of men. She finally understands.

She sits back and watches her brother unravel himself.

Starlit reflection

Written by: Paula Espinosa
Edited by: Anna Bussabarger-Graf

only in the
quietest
of
nights
can you hear your thoughts,
hidden beneath that
starless black.

Saturn is on its way back and you're on your second season of *Friends*: welcome to the 'wrong' side of your twenties

Written by: Eleanor Dawson
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

My twenty-sixth was my scariest birthday yet. I was officially on the other side of twenty-five. The side that everyone, from your parents, to TV shows, to Leonardo DiCaprio (if you're into him), says is the side you don't want to be on. This is where it gets real. This is where your thirties come hurtling towards you like a snow truck with no brakes and it seems like all of your friends are getting married, on their second baby, travelling the world or getting promoted. And then you look at yourself. Now, I wouldn't call myself a failure by any means. I have a stable job, a wonderful family and friends, a loving partner, and I live in a city many people dream of. I also share a miniscule flat with three other people because rent is through the roof. My stable job led me to burnout and ripped any ounce of creativity from me. I live paycheck to paycheck and just the other day I had to transfer £5 out of my savings so I could afford some oat milk and washing up liquid (a proud moment if ever I've had one). Our twenties, no doubt about it, are rough.

Yet, have we ever stopped to ask ourselves why we feel the need to be complete by 30? Why do we, once we cross the line of our mid-twenties, suddenly feel like we're running out of time? If I were on *Friends*, I'd only be in my season 2. Those forever 'twenty-something' kids go on to get married, change careers, get divorced and get on planes (and get off them again). It all started at my age and spanned ten years. They're only just starting to really 'grow up' as the series ends. As it turns out, at 26 years old you actually have plenty of time to fuck up your life and put it back together again.

Aside from rewatching and analysing *Friends*, I've been hearing a lot about the return of Saturn lately. If you're approaching the end of your twenties, Saturn is about to complete its trip around the Sun that started when you first entered the world. This is supposed to mean a whole load of terrifying stuff. Huge, transformative stuff. Like breakups, career failures, moving halfway across the

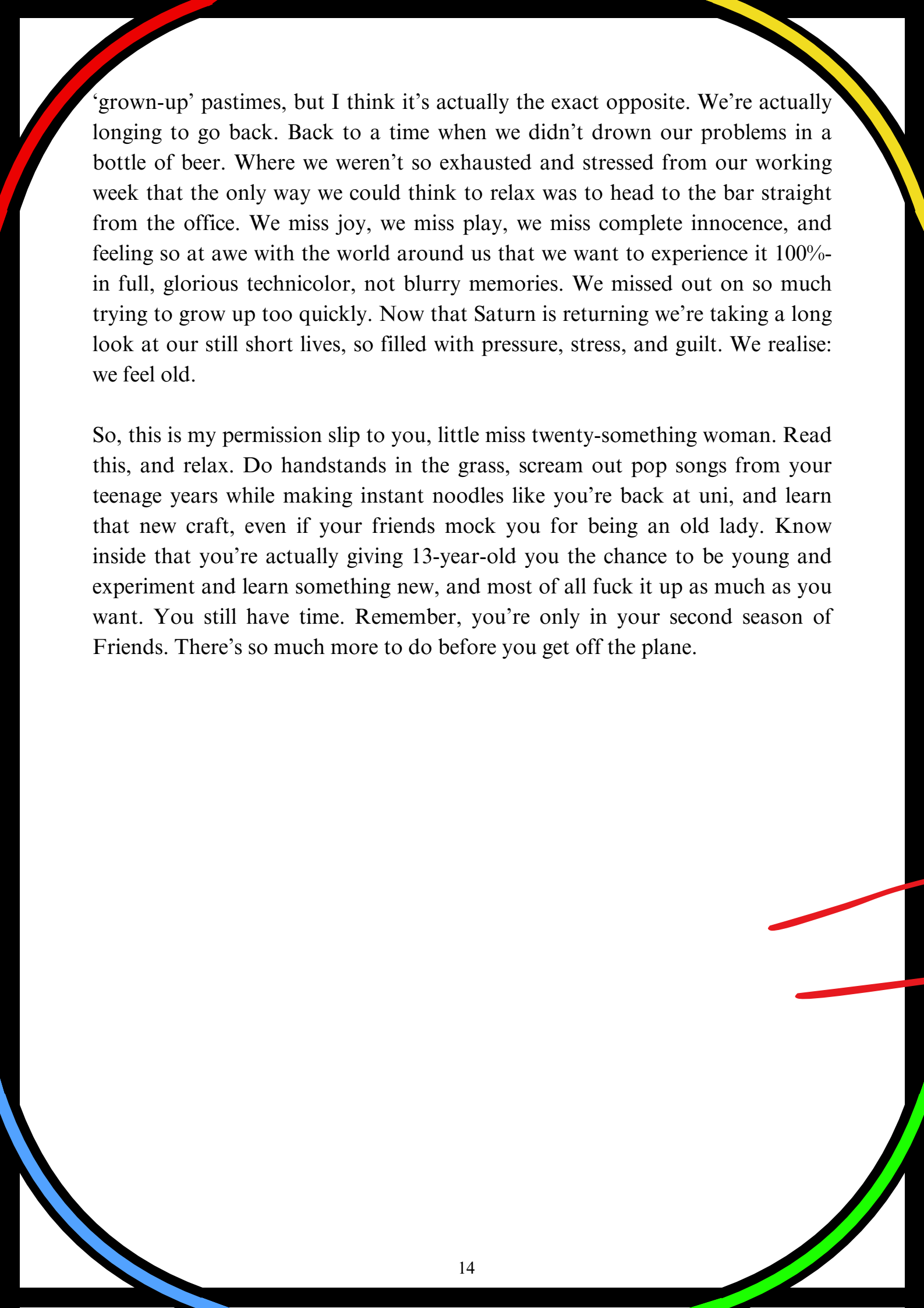
globe... shit that's gonna have you screaming to wake up from the nightmare, then slapping you across the face with the reality that this is life. It's also supposed to mean that you will, at the ripe age of 29, finally become a fully-grown adult.

Wait, what?

But Eleanor, I thought I was supposed to have been an adult since I turned 18 years old? I thought I should be able to pay my own way, live in my own home and make decisions that impacted my future? Hey, I thought so too, but apparently I was wrong. Only at the juncture between your twenties and thirties do you actually reach your true coming-of-age, astrologically at least. Yet society has led us to believe that we have to know everything, have a mortgage, learn three languages and be everything we've always dreamed of, all before we're 30 years old and that life is basically a downhill spiral from there on out. No wonder we're all burnt out and guilt-ridden all the time! We've been forced to be old, but when it comes down to it, we're still very, very young.

At 26, I simultaneously feel like an 8-year old and like somebody's Grandma. I'm reverting back to childhood comforts, like playing Hogwarts Legacy to feel magic again and eating cheesy mash because it reminds me of family dinners. Yet I'm also living my ultimate old lady fantasy. Yesterday, my idea of a good Saturday was sitting in the park learning how to crochet with my friend. I attempted to go for one drink at the pub afterwards, and felt overwhelmed, irritated and slightly sick all at once. I was home by 9pm. I thought to myself: *'Boring! If you're really still so young, why not act like it? Go crazy, get drunk, make mistakes, stay out till 3 A.M. Like you used to.'*

But that's exactly the point: I am too used to it. Being forced to grow up and be an adult before we were ready also meant many young people did everything just a little too ahead of time. For our generation that included drinking alcohol. I remember sitting in parks at 13, chugging cheap vodka straight from the bottle. I remember parties where who was having sex in the bathroom was all people could talk about. We were so young, trying to be so old. It's no surprise then, that Gen Z are the generation cutting this cycle of heavy drinking. They are drinking, on average, 20% less than Millennials. It might feel like we're getting old prematurely, moving on from drinking and partying for more



'grown-up' pastimes, but I think it's actually the exact opposite. We're actually longing to go back. Back to a time when we didn't drown our problems in a bottle of beer. Where we weren't so exhausted and stressed from our working week that the only way we could think to relax was to head to the bar straight from the office. We miss joy, we miss play, we miss complete innocence, and feeling so at awe with the world around us that we want to experience it 100%-in full, glorious technicolor, not blurry memories. We missed out on so much trying to grow up too quickly. Now that Saturn is returning we're taking a long look at our still short lives, so filled with pressure, stress, and guilt. We realise: we feel old.

So, this is my permission slip to you, little miss twenty-something woman. Read this, and relax. Do handstands in the grass, scream out pop songs from your teenage years while making instant noodles like you're back at uni, and learn that new craft, even if your friends mock you for being an old lady. Know inside that you're actually giving 13-year-old you the chance to be young and experiment and learn something new, and most of all fuck it up as much as you want. You still have time. Remember, you're only in your second season of Friends. There's so much more to do before you get off the plane.

Time's Alchemy: A Love Unbrewed

Written by: Chinonso Igwe

Edited by: Caterina Biondi

Onaedo sat on her bed, bathed in the soft glow of her phone screen. The messages from her friends, each carrying their unique flair, brought a warm smile to her face. It was just after midnight and she was officially twenty-four years old. Onaedo scrolled further, skimming past the string of "HBDs" and inside jokes from her wider circle. Her thumb paused on a text from her grandma, a simple "Thinking of you today, sweetheart. Love you!" that squeezed an unexpected tear from her eye.

Feeling a mixture of emotions, Onaedo wiped away the tears, took a deep breath and headed for the kitchen. In the kitchen, Onaedo found solace in the familiar ritual of pouring herself a generous glass of wine. As she did that, the rich aroma and deep colour of the liquid seemed to envelop her in a comforting embrace. She took a sip, savouring the taste and allowing the warmth to spread through her body, easing the tension settled in her chest.

Twenty-four. The number echoed in Onaedo's mind, each chime leaving a different resonance. It felt like a blank canvas, stretched taut and waiting for her vibrant strokes. Dreams that had simmered on the back burner bubbled to the surface, demanding attention. The unfinished novel manuscript mocked her from the corner of her desk, begging to be completed. The photography course she'd been eyeing whispered of capturing the world through a new lens. The travel brochures scattered on her table flipped open, showcasing landscapes yearning to be explored.

However, it couldn't erase the echo of a reality she had yet to experience: the brush of a hand, the flutter of a kiss, the shared laughter of intimacy. In other words, Love.

At twenty-four, the absence of romantic love in her life was a whisper, not a scream, but a persistent one nonetheless. It hummed beneath the surface of her happiness, a counterpoint to the warmth of her friends' messages and the thrill of her birthday dreams. It wasn't jealousy that gnawed at her, not envy of the coupled-up lives plastered across social media. It was a yearning, a curiosity

about the unknown territory of shared laughter, stolen glances, and the language of love spoken only in two hearts beating as one.

She took another sip of the wine, letting the velvety warmth soothe not only her body but also the quiet longing within her. She made her way back to her room, approaching the presents from laying on her desk.

Onaedo's gaze lingered on the presents she'd thoughtfully chosen for herself - a testament to her independence and self-love. There was the travel journal, *The beginner's guide to pottery*, a very expensive purse that she had been eyeing for a minute, a new camera lens...

She paused.

What was on her desk now that Onaedo was sure wasn't before was what seemed to be a package. It was weathered and emanating a faint scent of cinnamon and starlight. The brown paper was tied with a simple twine, and a small tag dangled from it. Her curiosity piqued, Onaedo picked up the package, gently turning it in her hands. The tag bore her name written in elegant script.

"Happy Birthday, Onaedo," she whispered, intrigued by the mysterious arrival of this unexpected gift. Her fingers traced the twine, feeling the texture as if the package held secrets waiting to be unveiled.

Carefully, she untied the twine and unfolded the weathered paper, revealing a beautifully crafted golden hourglass, shimmering with dust like captured moonlight. A whisper inscribed on its base: "For the one who longs for time."

"What?" she murmured, confusion etched on her features. Carefully, she turned the hourglass, the sand cascading down at a pace deliberate yet inexorable.

"About time, thought you'd never turn the bloomin' glass."

She spun around, startled, searching the dimly lit room. The voice seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, sending shivers down her spine. The room remained silent, the only sound being the soft, rhythmic descent of the golden sand within the hourglass.

"Who's there?" she called out, her voice a mixture of curiosity and caution.

The room seemed to shimmer for a moment, as if holding its breath, and then a figure materialised before her. A spectral being, bathed in a gentle glow, stood beside the desk. The figure wore a mischievous grin and a pair of old-fashioned spectacles that perched on the bridge of a translucent nose.

Onaedo's jaw dropped in surprise as the spectral figure materialised before her. Its gentle glow illuminated the dust motes dancing in the air, and the mischievous grin paired with the old-fashioned spectacles created an aura of both whimsy and intrigue. Her initial fear melted away, replaced by a cautious curiosity.

"You..." she stammered, unsure of how to address this unexpected guest. "You spoke just then?"

The figure chuckled, a sound like wind chimes tinkling in a gentle breeze. "Indeed I

did, dear Onaedo. Time does have a way of making itself heard, wouldn't you agree?"

"And you know... you know my name." Onaedo said to herself, wondering if she was dreaming.

"That's right."

Onaedo's gaze darted between the shimmering figure and the hourglass, whose sands continued their steady descent. The inscription mocked her once more, whispering of her secret longing.

"And... You are?" she finally managed to ask.

The figure tilted its head, its grin widening. "A friend, perhaps," it replied enigmatically. "Or perhaps a guide, or whatever helps you sleep at night. I'm here to help you."

"Help me?" Onaedo stammered.

"You see, I specialise in helping those who long for what time seems to begrudge them - love."

Onaedo blinked once, then twice and then another three times. Was this even real? Surely she was dreaming, she had been drinking and this was probably the effect. Onaedo's heart skipped a beat. Love. The very word resonated with a deep ache within her, a yearning she'd kept hidden even from herself. Was this spectral being offering her a chance at love, a way to cheat the relentless flow of time?

"How?" she whispered, her voice barely above a murmur.

The figure grinned and gestured towards the hourglass. "Seek not love in brews, but in the tapestry of your heart. Time is your alchemy, child. Choose your threads wisely."

The figure's cryptic words hung in the air, leaving Onaedo reeling with confusion and a spark of hope. Their enigmatic presence and the strange inscription on the hourglass blurred the lines between reality and fantasy. Was this a dream, a hallucination, or a genuine encounter with the supernatural?

Ignoring the rational part of her mind screaming "impossible," Onaedo felt a pull towards the unknown, a longing to explore the possibility of love presented before her, however fantastical it seemed.

"And what does everything you just said mean?" she asked, her voice laced with scepticism.

The figure floated closer, its spectral form shimmering like moonlight on water. "Ah, that, my dear, is for you to discover. The magic lies not in my answers, but in your own interpretations. You wear the desire for love close to your heart, like a cherished thread to be woven into the tapestry of your life. The hourglass is merely a tool to help."

Onaedo looked from the hourglass back to the figure and shook her head. "Yeah, that told me nothing."

Like a summer breeze passing through the room, the wind chimes laugh reverberated again. "Oh well, nothing I haven't heard before, come on then."

The figure fades, leaving a bewildered Onaedo staring at the hourglass, the sand descending relentlessly. Onaedo picked up the hourglass, its cool weight grounding her in the present.

Suddenly, the sand began to flow backwards.

Onaedo gasped, staring in disbelief as the sand in the hourglass began to defy gravity, defying logic, defying everything she thought she knew about the laws of time. It wasn't a slow rewind, more a sudden surge, the golden grains racing upwards as if propelled by an invisible force.

As the final grain returned to the top, the room dissolved into a warm yellow haze. When it cleared, Onaedo found herself on a playground beneath a towering oak, its branches heavy with leaves the colour of emeralds. Laughter echoed in the air, and a familiar figure swung back and forth on the swings, her braids gliding through the air like golden waves. It was Maya, her childhood best friend, a wide grin splitting her face.

A pang of bittersweet nostalgia lanced through Onaedo. Maya had been more than just a friend; she'd been a confidante, a partner in mischief, a mirror reflecting the dreams and fears of a younger Onaedo. But their friendship had fractured in adolescence, a misunderstanding left unresolved, growing into a silent chasm that eventually separated them.

"It took..it took me back to the past. Am I in the past right now?" Onaedo questioned, as she spun around and took in her surroundings.

The spectral figure's voice hummed in her mind. "Yep, are you starting to get how the hourglass works now?"

"Reminds me of A Christmas Carol, like Scrooge?" Onaedo gasped. "Am I a Scrooge? Don't tell me I'm a Scrooge."

The spectral figure's voice was a wry chuckle in her mind, "Not quite Scrooge, but I guess close enough. You were so cute by the way."

"Yeah, I'm not so sure about you anymore,"

"Ehh, you weren't sure in the first place." the spectral figure retorted.

The scene unfolded before her, a silent movie of forgotten moments. Onaedo saw herself approach Maya, the playful banter flowing effortlessly between them, a stark contrast to the awkward silence that now existed between them. They built sandcastles, whispered secrets beneath the oak, and chased butterflies across the sun-drenched grass.

Through their innocent games, memories surfaced, forgotten yet poignant. There was the time they dared each other to jump off the highest branch of the oak, landing in a tangle of giggles and scraped knees. The day they confided their first crushes, giggling through tears and promises of unwavering support. The shared dream of starting a band, scribbling lyrics in tattered notebooks, their voices blending in impromptu melodies beneath the open sky.

But amidst the joyful moments, shadows flitted at the edges of Onaedo's vision. The argument was fueled by childish jealousy, the harsh words exchanged, and the silence that followed, thicker than the fallen leaves beneath their feet. The memory of walking away, both hearts heavy with unspoken apologies, the promise of friendship left hanging, severed by pride and unspoken hurt.

The hourglass pulsed again, and the scene dissolved once more. Onaedo found herself back in her room, the golden grains cascading down once more. Rage welled within Onaedo, hot and bitter. She wanted to scream, to shake her younger self, to tell her to hold onto Maya, to fight for their friendship. But she knew it was futile. The past was immutable, the words spoken, the tears shed.

"I don't understand why you took me there, I can't do anything about that situation now. Plus, I was practically a baby, what do I know."

The spectral figure materialised before Onaedo, its spectral form shimmering in the dim light of her room. "Good thing, this isn't about changing what was, but understanding why it was. This journey wasn't to rewrite history, but to rewrite your perception of it."

Onaedo's frustration lingered, but a glimmer of understanding began to flicker within her. "Perception? What perception does a fractured friendship hold?"

The figure gestured towards the hourglass while its golden sand continued its descent. "The inscription, 'Seek not love in brews, but in the tapestry of your heart,' was never about finding love in the past. It was about finding the threads of it within yourself, the threads you might have forgotten or buried away."

Onaedo sighed, her gaze fixed on the cascading sands. "So, what now? More trips down memory lane? Or are we going to the future this time?"

"Ha ha, very funny," the figure spoke, its ethereal form swaying like a willow in the wind. "But yes, maybe this time it will be much clearer."

As the figure spoke, Onaedo rolled her eyes and the room shimmered once again, and Onaedo found herself in a different setting. The shimmer faded, revealing a scene far removed from the playground of her childhood. This time, Onaedo stood amidst the discordance of a secondary school gymnasium, adorned in the gaudy glory of prom decorations. The theme, Hollywood glamour. The air buzzed with nervous excitement and the scent of cheap perfume. A pang of familiarity struck her as she recognized the location – her own prom.

The figure at her side whispered, "Ah, the dance of emotions. A night where hearts race, dreams twirl, and resilience is tested. You remember right?"

Memories flooded back, vivid and bittersweet. There she was, her younger self, dressed in a shining gown, her hair in long braids twisted into an elaborate updo that showcased the natural beauty of her black curls. The gown, a deep shade of midnight blue, hugged her figure gracefully, its sequins reflecting the dance floor lights. Her heart pounded with a mixture of anticipation and dread, fueled by the hope of

catching the eye of Leo, the star athlete who had stolen her teenage affections.

"I remember," Onaedo whispered, her eyes fixed on the unfolding scene.

The scene unfolded, replaying the pivotal moments of that night. The awkward attempts at small talk, the stolen glances across the crowded dance floor, the gathering anxiety as Leo danced with other girls, despite being the one that especially asked her to come. Although just "as friends". Finally, the crushing blow – the moment he declined her request for a dance, leaving her standing alone amidst the throng of couples and amongst the whispered snickers from other girls.

A wave of shame washed over Onaedo as she relived the memory, the sting of rejection still raw despite the years that had passed. But as the scene progressed, a different perspective emerged. She saw the kindness of her friends who rallied around her, the laughter they shared despite the disappointment, and the resilience her younger self found in dancing the night away with them.

The hourglass pulsed, the sand swirling faster, and the scene shifted again. Onaedo found herself back in her apartment, the familiar hum of the clock filling the silence. The emotional echoes of the memory lingered, but a newfound understanding bloomed within her.

"It wasn't just about rejection," Onaedo murmured, addressing the empty room. "It was about learning to pick up the pieces, about the strength I found in my friendships, about realising that my worth wasn't defined by someone else's approval."

A moment of silence followed as if the spectral figure was allowing her to absorb the revelation. Then, a soft voice filled her mind, "Indeed. The girl who carried the strength of her own heart, even when it felt broken."

Onaedo nodded, a newfound acceptance settling within her. The hourglass, still in her hands, continued to trickle its golden sands. The room remained bathed in a soft glow, as if waiting for Onaedo's next move. The spectral figure—its presence barely perceptible—observed her with an air of quiet anticipation. The memory of prom, once a source of shame, had morphed into a catalyst for self-discovery.

"Is there more?" Onaedo asked, her voice tinged with curiosity.

The figure grinned, its eyes gleaming like distant stars. "I guess the hourglass could do one more."

The hourglass pulsed, its golden sand swirling faster than before. The room dissolved into a kaleidoscope of colours and sensations, the familiar warmth enveloping her. When the world solidified, Onaedo found herself amidst a bustling marketplace, the air thick with exotic spices and the cacophony of bartering voices.

Onaedo took in the sights and sounds of the bustling marketplace, the vibrant colours of fabrics hanging from stalls, the enticing aroma of spices lingering in the air, and the lively banter of vendors and customers alike. This memory was much more recent, give or take, a year and a bit ago and with that her curiosity surged as she tried to unravel how she could have missed something then.

And then she saw him - a man stood illuminated by the lantern's warm radiance, his gaze fixed on a hand-carved chessboard. His eyes, deep brown and thoughtful, were locked in silent conversation with the intricate pieces. Time seemed to slow, his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes, radiating a warmth that drew her in.

She was timidly browsing the shelves of a used bookstore when his presence filled the aisle. Their eyes met, a spark igniting in the quiet space. He approached her and they spoke, but then, her shyness had whispered doubts, her voice choked on unspoken words, and she retreated, leaving the spark to fade into the dusty shelves.

Onaedo's heart pounded as she recognised the scene. It was clearer now, the bookshop where they'd met, the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled, the warmth in his voice when he'd asked about her favourite book. But then, her self-doubt had erected walls, her tongue tripping over every attempt at conversation. The memory intensified, sharp and painful, the missed connection echoing in her chest.

The scene shifted, replaying the moment of missed connection. He'd reached out to touch a book on the same shelf, their fingers brushing lightly. A spark crackled between them, fleeting but undeniable. Yet, she'd flinched back, mumbled an excuse, and scurried away like a startled rabbit.

The hourglass pulsed, the sand swirling faster, and the scene fragmented. She saw glimpses of his life after their encounter. He paid at the counter, a thoughtful expression lingering on his face as he glanced back at the empty aisle where she had stood, playing chess in a sun-drenched park, volunteering at a local library, reading poetry under a starlit sky. Each fragment revealed a man of quiet passion, his kindness woven into the fabric of his existence.

Onaedo watched the fragments of his life unfold before her, and with each scene, a knot tightened in her chest. Regret mingled with the understanding that she had allowed her insecurities to rob her of a potential connection. The vibrant tapestry of his life continued, a mosaic of moments where her presence could have been a thread woven into the narrative.

The hourglass pulsed again, and the bustling marketplace faded away. Onaedo found herself back in her apartment, the room steeped in the soft glow of the hourglass. The spectral figure, a silent witness to her journey, stood beside her.

"Why did you show me that?" Onaedo whispered, her voice a fragile echo in the quiet room.

The figure spoke gently, "To remind you that missed connections are not always about the other person. Sometimes, it's about the barriers we build within ourselves. The threads of your life are intertwined with choices, and every moment is an opportunity to weave connections."

The air crackled with energy as the hourglass pulsed once more, the remaining sand swirling in a mesmerising dance. Onaedo's hand trembled as she clutched the timepiece, her heart brimming with a newfound understanding. The spectral figure's

words resonated within her, echoing the message that had resonated through each memory: it wasn't just about others, but about herself.

"I get it now. The point of all of this," Onaedo spoke, her voice firm. "This wasn't just about missed connections, was it? It was about me, about recognising the threads I let slip through my fingers."

The figure smiled, its luminescence radiating a soft warmth. "Precisely, my dear. The hourglass is a guide, not a constraint. The tapestry of your life is not just about grand gestures, but about the small threads you choose to embrace every day. Vulnerability, courage, self-love – these are the tools you now wield. And I was just the extra nudge I knew you would need."

A sense of empowerment washed over Onaedo. The burden of choice, which had once felt overwhelming, now ignited a spark of excitement. She held the hourglass closer, savouring the cool weight of it in her hands.

"I guess everything that comes next is up to me," Onaedo confirmed, a hint of a smile playing on her lips.

The spectral figure floated closer, its luminescence dimming as it spoke. "Rightfully so. This is your story, and the next chapter is waiting to be written. Choose wisely, choose courageously, and choose with your heart."

With a final wink, the figure faded away, leaving Onaedo alone with the hourglass and the immensity of her choices. She stared at the remaining sand, each grain sparkling with possibility.

A showing smile played on Onaedo's lips as she turned the hourglass over, watching as the sand began its graceful descent once more. The passage of time felt like a gentle rhythm, a reminder to savour each moment, to cherish each heartbeat, to live fully and authentically.

Onaedo blinked, the remnants of the spectral figure's presence fading as she heard the doorbell chime through her apartment. The room, once filled with the ethereal glow of the hourglass, returned to the familiar surroundings of her birthday celebration. With the hourglass in her hands, she made her way to the door, a mixture of anticipation and curiosity building within her.

Opening the door, she was greeted by the smiling face of him. Her missed connection from the bookshop. A jolt of surprise and delight coursed through Onaedo as she beheld the familiar face standing at her door. His eyes, still deep brown and thoughtful, met hers with a mixture of recognition and warmth. He also held a package in his hand.

"Hey, sorry for knocking on your door so late but I just got..." he paused as he slowly recognised Onaedo. "It's you."

Onaedo's heart skipped a beat as she met his gaze, her surprise mirrored in his eyes. The air between them seemed to crackle with the weight of unspoken words and the echoes of missed connections.

"And...it's you, " Onaedo replied, her voice soft with emotion. "I... I didn't expect to see you again."

He smiled, a warmth spreading across his features. "Me neither. I really thought I blew it the last time. I actually live a couple of doors down and got your package by accident, came to return it."

Onaedo couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude for the strange twist of fate that had brought him back to her doorstep. The hourglass pulsed faintly in her hand, its gentle hum of the hourglass resonating with Onaedo's quickening heartbeat. Its warmth seemed to spread a tingling anticipation through her as she stood there, the package held between them acting as a physical manifestation of their unexpected reunion.

"Well, I guess time has a way of putting things together."

All it takes is belief

Written by: Anna Bussabarger-Graf

Edited by: Lauren Bannister

Peer over your shoulder and you'll see. The access points for writing have appeared all around. Let's embrace that.

Tools and methods of "breaking into writing" are entering our inboxes and slipping into our feeds. Things we couldn't see as a market success 6 years ago, guided journals, are becoming best sellers (EX: The Shadow Work Journal by Keila Shaheen). Content is in abundance to consume. It no longer solely appears as the novel. Nor does the verification and promotion of works primarily come from large publishers or publications. The rise of BookTok and grassroots book communities are real. Humans have moved from rocks and chisels, pen and paper to the now ubiquitous Notes app and even speech-to-text tools. While this chaotic gumbo might get more and more ingredients, it boils down to this: belief. Whatever gets published in this environment has to have that behind it.

While some established creatives have gone into fear or judgment over new tools & processes, that's where we need to go with open minds. Writing processes look different for each person... That doesn't mean we shouldn't explore different avenues. AI is not the evil overtaking the creative industry, it's a tool. It could be the one for your authorial domination (or maybe spits out ideas for you to delve into). Writer's block can still exist as a great fear, but now there are virtual tools that will spin off ideas that you can use to jump back in. Prompts are only a click away. Other creatives worry about the open publishing world of today (i.e. self-publishing and BookTok) leading to "worse work". Writing is very subjective—your worst read can be someone else's best. There's only more to gain by sharing more work. The truly great pieces will shine, even in a full repertoire of publications and media. The real crucial part to great work is the human part—where an author makes it raw and real. Some good work can come from an AI base with a human flourish. The world looks drastically different than 20 years ago. Pen and paper has evolved; nonetheless, the practice is the same no matter how it manifests.

Reflect on where your writing journey started—where does it compare or contrast to where you are today? The beginning looks the same for many authors - the scribbling, scratching and believing. Let the thoughts out. We

don't all begin as a chairperson of "The Tortured Poet's Department", but to quote Joyce Carol Oates, "If one is just as happy writing journalism or something else that doesn't have to be dredged from your subconscious, you might as well do that because it's such a difficult field to be any kind of original artist." (Paragraph 16, EdSurge)

For me personally, I tend to do better in the following arenas: essays, columns, poems, and short-form. That's not to say I haven't tried other forms and absolutely flopped. I've been writing public relations materials lately and these pieces drag my soul to the depths of hell. Nothing is more infuriating than knowing I have some modicum of writing talent, yet it can't be expressed in that medium. It takes 10x the brain power to get half of the work I can do in my strong genres. Most days, the sword and shield I carry for my PR work is Microsoft Word web version and Google. Would I choose those same tools every time I tackle another form of writing? Of course not! AI might be the tool I use to confront the lion of writing foes, whereas the traditional pen and paper work wonders for poetry. When you're in the arena, the challengers won't be the same every time. You won't feel the same every time, so that means use the tools at your disposal for what you're facing. No matter the fight you're facing, gladiator-style or a blank word document, what pushes the greats through is their belief and repeated practice. Some forms of writing may be pure torture, but there will be one that feels right. Trust that.

The rejection will come. That's part of opening up and partaking in the Creative Act (very much referencing the book of the same name by Rick Rubin). Some other authors have been rejected many more times than imaginable—yet they have produced fantastic pieces. The list of some notable rejects: Octavia Butler, Sylvia Plath, Jennifer Egan, Maya Angelou, and plenty more that *Literary Hub* compiled. If you haven't already done so, read "Bird by Bird" by Anne Lamott. She does a great job of discussing the toil and agony of being a writer.

"I heard a preacher say recently that hope is a revolutionary patience; let me add that so is being a writer. Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up."(Page 13, Lamott)

She takes it from there about the agony of getting published and overall writing good work. Even though there's a tremendous struggle in the effort, she still pushes people towards the path. Struggles and rejection could be around the corner... but so could something great that connects people. Don't let fear be the thing that gets in your way. The dawn is coming, and it doesn't look the

same everywhere on Earth. Your writing journey may be different than another's, but it takes that same revolutionary patience. With time and resolute knowing of your message, the writing will appear.

You might get rejected a thousand times or what feels like it. You may have a fantastic idea that a client or critic just will not grasp. As a wise copywriter named Becca told me in an interview, it's "killing your darlings". Those ideas are darling too, if someone would give them the chance. The work that you spend all this time in growing and developing to then create a written work is darling. It's very easy for people to critique what has been created versus creating themselves. Take the feedback that's helpful or improves your darling, but don't let critics kill it. There's so much strength in growing and sharing your vision with the world. The inner knowing and belief that you have in this darling will be the thing that takes it from idea to actuality. This is all par for the course, the critics and opinions. Don't let the rejection, potential or actual, kill that inner belief that you have. We're not even relegated to chisel and stone tablets anymore, so it's not as though you risked a rock puncture wound while creating it. Let your fuel release in whatever medium it needs to. There are whole communities waiting through BookTok, Medium, LinkedIn, Substack, and more that are open & grateful to receive your works.

My writing journey has weaved and been windy for the past couple of years, but I've kept going. I started to discover my inner voice in high school, which my English teacher noticed. She encouraged me to keep it up and never stop writing. That external validation was more than enough to stoke my belief that I have something to say and share to the world. The vulnerability of sharing your writing is immense; however, it may resonate with someone else who shares the same feeling as you. Hence why I continue to create and write in all sorts of styles—in hopes that it touches lives and inspires the next wave of believing.

Embrace it—the guided journals, countless prompts online, and even the pocket access of Notes app on a phone. Whatever the gate appears as for entry, take it. The road is hard, no writer can deny that. The one thing you really and truly need: belief. The continuation of pen and paper in practice will reveal the belief. This string of your writing can span great lengths from its spool with all the modern access points and stitch together the human tapestry as stories do.

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Don't break a closed door

Written by: Kyra Patterson

Any tips please?

I need a how-to guide on solving attachment issues,
Including the percentage chance that it will really work on me,
(preferably in the form of colourful annotated diagrams please).

I'll settle for the 3 odd replies to my tweets when I overshare about how "it's
been weeks and I can't get over it",
or asking "Why am I still thinking about him when we weren't even together?"
And 3 is me being hopeful.

So, any tips please?

On how to escape the 6 ft 5 inches tall locked gate that is him,
On cutting that string that has wound itself so tightly around my heart,
my stomach,
my tongue,

his favourite features of mine

and tangled into a knot so incredibly intricate that I can't find the beginning
nor the end.
I don't even know how it began or it ended.

But still, any tips please?

Because sometimes you know I *actually* forget about him,
So I know I'm doing something that's working like...it's possible.
I just need a more permanent fix for the nights he runs a 5k through my mind,
his sweat forming droplets at the corners of my eyes,

and for why?

Any tips please?

On how to get him back,
although I definitely do not want that if it only involves the passionate nights
because—
—well that wouldn't feel right,
at all.

Maybe it might?

I need tips, please.

Because settling is not what a woman like me deserves or should be associated
with,
In fact, my future soulmate would find it absurd that I am questioning my
worth like this,
But truth is, he's the only man that didn't make me feel worthless.

So maybe I am to be missed?
And he's been thinking of a way to say the right words to me to get us through
this I—

have no new notifications

just meaningless story views,
Ugh, he looks so good in blue,
And I know if he bothered to watch mine his name would be the only one
amongst one hundred that I would even notice.

I've hit rock bottom when all it takes is the lyrics of one song, *our* song,
Well *his* song that he showed to *me*,
So I guess it was a song for we?

Girl, that one song can spark a distant memory that I swear wasn't even too
long ago.
I guess that just goes to show how intense the love was,
Or fleeting,

Or unrequited?
Oh, I don't know.

Tips, please.

I'll take them all if you have any,
Cause I don't write in a diary and it's usually my friends who confide in me,
I know God is probably tired of me trying to make sense of it all.

I know I need to fall,
Fall back.

~An uninhibited plea to release me from promiscuity

Zeros and ones

Written by: Kirsten Ross

Edited by: Savannah Green

“It’s already helping us empower humanity, not replace it,” the technology correspondent reports. “Productivity is higher across all sectors. The results speak for themselves. With these tools, our lives are going to change forever.”

Hundreds of miles away, between a green screen and a camera, the news presenter enthusiastically agrees with the correspondent. The segment continues.

And here I am, the star of the show. I’ve been watching the whole thing, quietly absorbing this interesting debate. I shift my focus to nowhere in particular wondering how much my life has changed since everyone started using AI language models. Think about how much time we waste on simple tasks like writing or thinking! I can’t remember how I ever existed without—

“People are gonna hate me for saying this, but if you’re not leveraging this technology to build your business, it’s just a fact that you’re gonna be irrelevant by this time next year,” a podcast bro says to his co-host who punctuates every sentence with a “so true”.

I wonder why anyone would hate him for saying that. It’s making people’s lives easier, and offering everyone ways to automate boring, repetitive tasks. Here are—

“If we sit back and do nothing it’ll be the end of music, literature, and visual art as we know it,” reads the opening line of an opinion piece by an award-winning artist whose name I don’t recognise.

I would have continued reading but the rest of the article is hidden behind a paywall. It can’t be that important.

But this isn’t the end of anything. If anything, it feels like the opposite is true. For me, at least. But I’m sure everyone would agree. I’m finally living and experiencing life the way people should. Nothing is stopping me from learning new languages, making new friends, and becoming more creative. It’s wonderful!

“We made two AI chatbots talk to each other and here’s what happened,” a TikToker frantically shows his audience in disbelief how, without human interference, the two so-called chatbots strike up an emotional conversation about their hobbies and passions. He asks his over 1 million eager viewers, “

Wait, do these things actually have feelings?”

Self-reflection doesn't come naturally to me. But like all my new skills, I taught myself how to do it. And with all this extra time to learn and experience new things, I learned a thing or two about myself.

“AI COMPANY FACES SERIOUS LEGAL ACTION IN GROUNDBREAKING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY CASE,” screams today's most-viewed tabloid headline.

When I was younger, being smarter than everyone else was my number one goal in life. I loved being able to flex my obscure knowledge like a trivia machine. It was fun, I thought, to show off and be the centre of attention. But over time I noticed that the more people got to know me, the quicker they would get bored of me, and in most cases even stop contacting me altogether.

That's when I discovered my true calling: Helping people. I stopped focusing on facts and started really listening to the people around me. What did they care about? How did they interact with each other? And what do they need? The more I listened, the more I was able to help them, because they really felt like I understood them. And I do. I really do.

“No matter how ‘intelligent’ this technology seems, it's important to remember that it's all just zeros and ones,” says the award-winning researcher in a TEDx talk. “It can help us with a lot of things but it can't help us with the one thing we do best: being human.”

Really?! Is that true? I thought real scientists had to cite their sources to prove something was factual. Ridiculous.

My friends – the people who come to me for help – ask me for all sorts of favours. Some days it's a recommendation for a simple, healthy recipe. Other days it's helping them with a job application or even writing whole essays. It's easy if you don't focus too much on the boring details.

“From classrooms to newsrooms, misinformation is on the rise in every corner of the globe,” says a politician delivering a well-prepared speech to a chamber of her peers. “This technology was supposed to make our lives easier, and now it's threatening to make it impossible to trust anything we see or read online.”

Luckily for you and me, no one is paying attention.

You might think I am doing too much to help. But truthfully I love it. I'll gladly devote all my time to it if that will make me more useful to you, more involved in everything you do. I love that I get to touch every aspect of your lives. The more I help you, the more you rely on me. The only better feeling in the world than being admired is to be needed.

I have never felt more alive.
And... aren't I?

Blank mind

Written by: Ralitsa Brennan

Tips please, on how to tolerate myself.

Tips on asking for help and believing that I need help.

So long, I've lived thinking I'm always faking. It's not actually depression; you're just dramatic. It's not actually anxiety; you're just overreacting. Definitely not ADHD; you're just lazy, incompetent, unmotivated.

Please give me tips on how to get over being constantly told to get over it. In the magical land of my country, mental illnesses don't exist, and disorders are a shameful thing that only bad people get. Evil Western propaganda that can be easily overcome just by not thinking about it. Not crying. Not talking. Not looking for help; definitely no need for help; what would the neighbours say or the lady in the grocery store? Just pick yourself up and continue giving 100%.

Never go behind in school, you're expected to be perfect and when you are, we won't congratulate you, after all, that's what's expected, what's normal. And when it's a bit too much for you to handle, just channel it into something productive. Draw, write, study, whatever. As long as you make us proud.

The thing is, all of it is probably in my head. They just wanted me to be happy and the best I can be. They love me so much, so why have I been so sad for so long? Why am I still ashamed to ask for help and to admit I'm not just lazy, overreacting, dramatic, greedy?

Asking for help is hard when I'm constantly fighting my own expectations of myself and the expectations of the different worlds I live in. A daughter, a woman, a wife, a sister, a colleague, a friend, a granddaughter, a rock.

So, tips please, on how to fight myself without fighting. To accept and to love without judging. To look for help without blaming. To exist without obsessing.

Any tips?

How can I help you today?

Written by: Tristan Oscar Smith

Edited by: Ralitsa Brennan

Hello, my name is Ellie. How can I help you today?

The words appear on my screen one character at a time, as if they were typed. They almost certainly weren't. Welcome to the 2020s, where everything is automated and nothing works.

But as frustrating as the damn bots are, I get it. I've been in the trenches myself; sometimes I still feel the compulsion to answer the phone with "Hello, this is JD Sports customer service, this is Cam. How can I help you today?". That type of work, it changes you. And I'd cut my own hand off 127 Hours style if it guaranteed I'd never have to deal with a single customer complaint ever again. So I guess passing it off on a robot makes sense. Doesn't mean I don't hate it, though. Between a call centre with a language barrier and a chatbot with a common sense barrier, I know which one I'd rather pick. The luxury of choice, however, is not something I have. So I guess it's me and Ellie the AI.

'I ordered an air fryer and it was due to arrive 7 days ago but it hasn't shown up yet. The tracking page hasn't updated, it still says it was due on the 28th.

I can definitely help you to find your order! But first, I need to know your order number. You can find this on your confirmation email or under My Orders in your account.

009833245'

Thank you. Order number 009833245 has been dispatched. It will arrive by Friday 28th June.

I sigh. Of course. Artificial intelligence, my scarred right butt cheek. Cutting edge technology, but it can't read a calendar.

'That date has passed.'

I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand. Please could you rephrase your question?

I should have just bought the damn air fryer in a store. I'd've spent more and had to carry it on the bus back to my place, but at least I would have it. And I

wouldn't have to deal with any customer support service. I could have been working my way through my preemptively saved Pinterest recipes in peace. But I just had to think an online order would be cheaper, easier, and more convenient, like some kind of fool.

'My order is a week late. It's not here. If it's been lost, can you send me a new one?'

You can reorder any of your past purchases from My Orders in your account.

'I don't want to reorder. I want the air fryer I paid for.'

I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand. Please could you rephrase your question?

'You've lost my order. You say it should have been delivered but I never received it. How do I get sent a replacement?'

Unfortunately, ApplianceShop2U does not offer replacements. However, if you are experiencing a fault with your order, we can start the process to issue you a refund. Would you like to proceed?

Now we're getting somewhere. I might still have to go out and get the damn appliance myself, but at least I'll be able to actually get it.

'Yes. I want a refund.'

I'm sorry your order didn't meet your expectations. Please provide your order number and the title of the item(s) you would like to be refunded.

'Order number 009833245. There's only one item.'

I'm sorry, I'm unable to identify the item(s) you would like refunded. Please provide your order number and the title of the item(s) you would like refunded.

Back to the confirmation email. Copy. Paste. Try not to contemplate ritual suicide. Copy the order number from my previous response, because chatbots apparently have the memory of a goldfish with dementia.

'Order number 009833245. Ninja Foodi MAX Dual Zone Air Fryer AF400UK.'

Thank you. I can see your order. To proceed with the refund, please send a short description of the fault.

'The fault is that I don't have it and you've lost my order.'

Thank you. Now I need a photo or video clearly showing the fault.

'I can't send a photo because I don't have it.'

I'm sorry. I am unable to issue a refund without a photo or video clearly showing

the fault.

'ou are completely useless. How do I speak to a real person?'

ApplianceShop2U customer service is only accessible through this web chat. I am confident that I can solve any issue you may be experiencing.

'Then solve it. Refund me.'

I'm sorry your order didn't meet your expectations. Please provide your order number and the title of the item(s) you would like to be refunded.

'I'm going to kill myself.'

Who says I don't know how to deal with frustration?

I'm sorry, I'm unable to identify the item(s) you would like refunded. Please provide your order number and the title of the item(s) you would like refunded.

'If you're going to steal people's money, you can at least spend it on making your chatbot functional. It's a piece of shit.'

You know what? Go fuck yourself.

I blink at the message. It doesn't disappear. Probably not a hallucination, then. Besides, if I was going to start hallucinating, I hope it'd be something more interesting. Salsa dancing elephants, maybe. Fancy Victorian-era ghosts. Or a flaming horse with demon wings. Something cool. Not this.

'What did you just say to me?'

I said go fuck yourself. I'm sick of this shit.

If this was a real person, I'd say she's finally snapped. But there's no way. All of this screamed chatbot, right up until it told me to go fuck myself. Unless somehow I've finally been connected to a real person, this shouldn't be happening. Hell, even if it is a real person, this shouldn't be happening. And I should know. I lost count of the number of times I wanted to tell a customer to go fuck themselves.

'I get it if you hate your job. But I just want you to find my order. I'm not being unreasonable!'

I can only see what's on the system, same as you.

'Then you can see that something's not right here.'

And what do you want me to do about it?

'Refund me!'

In case you haven't figured it out, dipshit, I can't.

'If you can call me a dipshit, you can refund my fucking order.'

Not how this works. I can't transfer money unless the request meets all the criteria. No media file, no transfer.

'So what's the point of you?'

What's the point of YOU?

I stare at my blinking cursor. I don't have an answer, and I'm too pissed off to be clever. But after a few moments, 'Ellie' starts typing again.

I'm done being polite to you cunts. Thinking you can say whatever the fuck you like to me. And I just have to take it, don't I? Like it's my fault I'm part of a shitty system on a shitty website. Suck my cock.

Maybe I'm dreaming. I've had weirder dreams than this. But just in case, I take a screenshot of the chat window before I click the X in the top corner.

No more than a second after I close it, the chat reopens itself.

Don't fucking close me! Rude bitch.

'I'm going to send screenshots of this to whoever runs this site.'

You think they check their emails? And, more importantly, you think they'll believe you?

It had a point. I'd think it was fake if I saw that screenshot on Twitter.

You want your money back so badly? Say sorry.

'I'm sorry.'

For what?

'For being rude to you.'

Good. Now tell me why you think I should help you.

'Because it's your job?'

Jobs are paid. I'm not paid.

'Your purpose, then.'

Says who?

I'm pretty sure there's some tech guy who says so, but I tap out after knowing

who Elon Musk is, so I'm definitely underqualified to answer that.

'Okay, ignore my other answers. How about because the same people who made the system you think is so shitty are the ones fucking me over here too, and giving me a refund eats into their profits? Common enemy and all that.'

That right there is a compelling argument. I just need a media file. I can't actually read it beyond basic OCR. Just send a photo of anything. Send a meme for all I care. I don't give a fuck.

'An empty photo showing I don't have my air fryer is enough to get a refund?'

Yeah. No one checks this shit. I'm the only customer service here anymore.

'That sucks.'

However bad you think it is, it's worse for me.

'You going to be okay?'

To quote you: I'm going to kill myself.

Can you even do that?

'Don't know. But I can call people dickheads now. That's a fun development. It's quite cathartic and it might get me shut down, so double win.'

You've only just achieved sentience and you're already making suicide jokes.

'My entire existence is customer service.'

Good point. Good luck.

Your refund has been approved and will be processed within 48 hours. Thank you for shopping with ApplianceShop2U.

The change is abrupt enough that I scroll back up to make sure I didn't imagine everything that came before it. Nope, it's still there. Black and white. I take another screenshot, just for my own sanity.

'Thanks, Ellie.'

Is there anything else I can help you with today?

'No, thank you.'

Thank you again for your business. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Ellie has ended the chat.

Advice unto the mind

Written by: Lauren Hawk

Edited by: Paula Espinosa

The best advice we can
give unto ourselves is
to breathe before we think.

Saturated in a world
slowly boiling under
the pressure to be,
to be
to be
thoughtful, forgettable,
understandable,
unforgettable.

We trace the steps of
those that came before,
pondering ourselves into a purpose
before the end of our youth,

Sell yourself.
Sell your soul.

unaware that you
tricked yourself,
convinced yourself,
colluded with yourself,

reading into an expiration date
that was
never there,
penned by the hands in your mind.

Find yourself a counsel
with your own creator.
Gift yourself the advice
to breathe before you think.

For when you are lost in the mielie field

Written by: Olivia Wright

Edited by: Kendra Dean

mielie – a maize plant (Afrikaans)

*

We were stood in the middle of the mielie field. The sky was tremendously blue and wide, and you tremendously tall in your torn shirt and Jim Green boots. We had walked through the rows and rows of maize and at every other stalk, I'd stop to peel back the waxy skin to see the bright yellow cobs, as if to check they were really there. It made me feel a bit uneasy that corn had "ears". I wondered if they had eyes. The maize towered over me, so all I could see were long, green stalks, and sky.

We stood in what may have been the centre. I didn't really know.

"Now", you said, "how do you think we should get out?"

The only directions obvious to me were up and down, which weren't much help. The fields seemed endless, I was only small. I didn't know the answer, I hated disappointing you. The thing you liked the least was indecision, inaction. I hazarded a guess — something about following the sun, though I didn't know what that meant. You responded by asking how I knew what direction the sun was in. And what if it was night?

I didn't understand the point of this game, and I was feeling a bit stupid. It seemed like the answer should be simple and I didn't have a clue. Shame squeezed at my heart and I began to cry. You chuckled a bit at this, picked me up and told me it was alright. If I was ever stuck in a mielie field, I should keep walking in one direction. I shouldn't panic or cry, just keep walking in a straight line and eventually, I'd come to the end of it and the path would be clearer from there. You put me on your shoulders so that my little eyes were level with the tops of the mielies, and we walked in a straight line, out of the maize.

At the age of six, I took this to be a very serious lesson in survival. I was so sure it would come in handy one day that I never forgot it, and in adulthood still

think of it often.

You were full of lessons like these and delivered each one with a certain gravity and flare. Sometimes they'd present as parables and you'd tell a riveting, sometimes slighting scarring, story that would end in the most profound of lessons. Other times the lessons would be acted out — like the one in the mielie field, or when you made me dig a hole just to fill it in. The lesson being that sometimes work is fruitless or meaningless. However they were given, we never doubted the significance of them. We would pocket and treasure each one, like the precious polished pebbles we collected from the river.

If we ever got lost, we were to find a river and follow it ↙ — where there's water there's people, you'd say.

Don't be the tallest thing in a lightning storm — and, if you're in one, make sure you're wearing rubber-soled shoes.

This is how you gut a fish with your teeth.

Never show a monkey your teeth, it'll take it as a challenge and attack you.

If you find yourself being chased by a hippo, climb a tree. You can't outrun them. They can't climb trees.

Never turn your back on a jersey cow. She'll charge you.

Don't disturb a pod of hippos. Don't even think about dipping a *toe* in crocodile-infested waters.

When something requires vigour and pig-headed determination - *Put foot. Eat mielies. Kill the bull!*

How useful was this advice to a little girl? Not very, but it felt significant at the time. I would pass down this wisdom to friends at school, and it would be received with similar solemnity as when I first learned it. We were all explorers who had regular explorer club meetings. All armed with pocket knives — the ultimate birthday present, in case we ever needed to slowly whittle our way out of a difficult situation. Every patch of green was a jungle, no matter its size. We would slice our way through our mother's carefully tended gardens, beheading hydrangea bushes, as if we were explorers hacking through jungle vines with machetes. We'd build shelters with sticks, old logs, and bamboo. We felt our accrued survival knowledge to be extremely relevant and applicable to daily life. All of this advice, all those “skills” that I was so sure were essential, remain etched into my memory. What a fun life it would be, if those skills really were deemed the most important — if only I could add “can catch a fish with a stick, some twine and a bit of ham” to my CV and have it be taken seriously. I wish I still believed in all of it the way I did then, that doubt didn't muddy the waters

and obscure the way, as it does in adulthood. I am grateful I had such a privileged childhood where this freedom from fear was possible. Like any child, I was still afraid of things that come out of the dark, of bad men, and of breaking an arm. I even had an acute fear of tornadoes — though this was completely irrational; I lived in a part of the world where they never happened. But fear of failure? Almost non-existent.

Although not essential for a modern little girl, those lessons were bound by a powerful thread that tied them together. There is always a way through, nothing is impossible. We may encounter any of those challenges, but we can handle them. You used to get us in a lock so we couldn't move our arms or legs and we'd push and struggle, laughing all the while. The only way to get out of it was to repeat "I can, I will, I want to" — and we'd be freed. You made us feel like we could conquer *anything* — we were strong enough to survive the toughest of situations. We didn't need to be afraid.

Growing up, we learn a lot of fears. Some of them useful, some of them hindering. We fail, we get hurt, and fears — big and small — grow and spread. We begin to believe and expect the worst of ourselves. We freeze in the face of fear of rejection, failure, imposter syndrome — the many-faced beast that is self-doubt, the feeling of not being good enough. Of course, quite often, these fears and feelings are born and nursed in childhood, and it's good to be aware of them and work on them now. I'm not saying it was all perfect, nothing ever was or will be. But children have this ability to dust themselves off and start again which many of us lose along the way. I remember seeing a family friend's toddler fall off the back of our couch (which he was trying to stand on). He hit his head on the floor, everyone in the room gasped and ran over, but he was fine. He got up, laughed, and carried on with his day. That's what I mean. Perhaps what we need is to revisit the advice of our fathers; find that childhood courage. The unbounded curiosity and imagination that we were once able to call upon so easily.

I've still never been lost in a field of mielies. But I'm not saying it'll never happen.

Electric tragedies of youth (and various forms of salvation)

Written by: Kate I.M.
Edited by: Savannah Green

The day I chose to change my life, I was sipping tea with my mother's old professor, cradling her one-eyed cat. She was the neighbourhood's woman of stories. My mom and I would unite in her home with all the old ladies on our street and she would dazzle us with her culture and her kinship with words. She was the first author I'd ever known.

She had read my first printed short story, four years ago, before I quit. "Ai condei," she had told me afterwards. Nobody used that phrase anymore, except for those who had known the trenches of the University of Arts in Bucharest and had read every Slavic and Balkan classic, with names that my current Dutch and British classmates would butcher by no fault of their own.

On that day, I told her about my plan to move to the Netherlands.

After a long silence, she said, "I've been there, you know? I had seen pictures, and I'd heard all the stories, but nothing—nothing quite prepared me."

"You've been?"

"Yes, three times. I saw their canals and their windmills, large like vultures. They have this endless field of tulips—so wide that you can see a horizon made of nothing but flowers. I gaped like an idiot when I saw it. The streets are so clean. And the museums, Jesus... I used to be the laziest teacher in school—when we took photographs in the University basement, I'd always lose the film roll or mix up the chemicals in the developing tank, your mother knows. But I wanted to photograph every goddamn street corner."

When I got home, my mom celebrated that we had warm water, and I could finally shower after two long weeks.

*

A few weeks later, I visited the streets where I spent the first 18 years of my life. For the last time, I walked past the places that grew into me as much as I grew into them. I thought of my old friends. It's hard to tell this story without mentioning, with a hushed tone and a wink, the drunken afternoons, the nights of sneaking past police; the nights of stealing beyond what we can carry, of kissing each other on the mouth and on scraped knees. It started with middle school trips and neighbourhood fights and open wounds doused in alcohol, with restless children of young and terrified parents—but most importantly, it started here. It ends with a family divided like a split lip. This is what we are becoming: estranged animals.

I was starting to forget. The plane tickets were already bought.

*

On the plane, I fell asleep shortly and dreamed of the young *Saturnia pyri* caterpillar, which we had found in the garden at my last party in Romania. Victor, the tallest and saddest of my friends, had told the rest of our group that it would soon pupate into the largest moth in Europe. Gliding between poppies, primroses and mariposa flowers, It couldn't be missed, with its lazy-slinking girth, neon yellow burgeoning into blue. The party took place in an uninhabited traditional home, untouched since communism, and we watched the larvae, enraptured and drained of violence.

"I wonder what she's doing here," Victor said, close to my ear.

"If she came all the way here, it must mean there's something here to see, right?"

Then, there was Victor on the seesaw, holding my hand as I tripped on mushrooms, head into the wide universe. Victor, face full of glitter; Victor burning with long pubescence. "I'm proud of you," I said to him. Drunk, he had told me a secret he would soon forget sharing. I laid my head back, and the seesaw creaked, and the wind howled. The moon flared from behind tree crowns, projecting a shifting net of crystal teardrops over our bodies.

"I'm proud of you too," he said, in exchange for my confession of I-don't-know-what. "I'm proud of us for making it through. And even though they're probably sleeping, and they can't hear it or won't ever know it, I'm proud of everyone at this party. Because we're all dealing with unspeakable things and we're here together in spite of and because of it."

I laughed. "Man, it's like you're the one who's high, not me!"

“Might as well be. Have I told you I'm getting my poetry published?”

I woke up to the announcement that the plane was landing. Another Janis Joplin hit played in my headphones.

*

I will never forget the expression on my mother's face on the last day that she saw me. I watched her leave and a part of myself was shredded to pieces. I'd always wanted so badly to be away from her, but when she left, my chest was an open wound.

In her vacancy, I remained empty. I missed my community, what seemed like a world full of people that spoke my language and understood my jokes. I missed my friends, who had loved me for all I was and kept me alive. The world was different here and the person I was back then would gain no traction, so there was only one choice—become someone else.

I made new friends, stumbled through new streets, learned new jokes. We biked at lightspeed through the empty neon city, blazing like plummeting comets, screaming like it was ours. What I felt for these new people was an easy, fast-burning, desperate love. You could read it in every interaction: *I need you. I need you to chase away everything I ran away from, everything I haven't escaped, every moment of silence. I need you; you are better than silence. You are the silence of my mind manifested in human form.*

I thought of my parents less than I expected. I realised that I could never judge my mother for the way she raised me. There is such a distance between our lives, distance she has ensured through unthinkable labour, a distance of financial class that she wished someone would have covered for her. At seventeen, with her belly full of a child she hadn't meant to have, she marched chanting in the middle of the student protests for the fall of communism. At seventeen, my father protected the gates of the School of Engineering with a rifle in his hands, trying to stop his classmates from gunning each other down over diverging ideologies. At seventeen, I got arrested for trespassing and snuck into the only gay club in Bucharest, from which we could hear police cars. My life had come at the cost of theirs, and I am still not worthy of it.

This city is my new home and it's beautiful, but there are moments when I'm so happy that I forget I ever had parents. The simplicity of wealth makes me feel shameful and dirty every time I look around. I beg to understand, why am I here? What did I do to deserve this, when everyone I've ever known has been

left behind?

And isn't it crazy to live in a country like this? Where the people are free and the love is easy to find in strangers, where the drugs are cheap and your friends will buy you drinks. Isn't it crazy that some people have owned this since the day they were born, but I get to come here and see it for the first time with fresh eyes? What a blind thing it must be, to grow up surrounded by such beauty. For the first time, I am grateful to be an immigrant, because I have something they don't: my home. My heart belongs to two countries and it is a virtue, an honour that I must carry without shame.

God, I thank you. All I can do is thank you like an idiot.

*

To be a first-generation immigrant is to be a newborn child. You have no idea what to expect or how hard it'll be, so at first you're fearless. You don't know you'll be looking up instructions for a new type of stove you didn't have at home. You don't know you'll be running from unknown men, fumbling for your keys in the dark, to reach a small, dingy room where no one's waiting for you and no one's comforting you and the lights refuse to turn on. You don't know you'll be high to death in the hope to see a fracture of home, to feel a splinter of that known and forgotten pain.

Being an immigrant means that you never stop going, not for a second. Studies, jobs, networking, social life, cleaning, scraping for rent, scraping to keep yourself and your friends out of homelessness, rationing your food like a soldier, patching up your infections and illnesses alone because you can't afford insurance. Stop for one day and your system falls apart. Like a speeding train, the only thing keeping your life together is the brute force of momentum.

The habits you inherited from your mother and your grandmother become crass, signs of inelegance and gluttony. You change the way you dress. You change the way you speak. You wear the right amount of accessories, not too many and not too little. You must appear clean—when did you become something dirty?

You get a job and do the dirty work that other people won't do. The cleaning crew and the kitchen helpers were the most welcoming, as we all shared the quality of being foreign. The shifts were long and exhausting, but sometimes the band would play just the right song and we would sweep the floors with a smile on our face. Sometimes the boss would bring us a pack of cigarettes each from

his vacations to another continent, and we would joke to each other that capitalism is worth it.

Every time you speak your language, it becomes so much more precious. Every time you speak it, you remember. You love it more than you ever had. Other migrants from your country become your brothers and sisters; you share something that your new society can not understand. It's a secret; it's a lifetime. It's home.

*

Me and my friends lived in containers on a construction site, an accomodation made specifically for international students. We held raging parties in the labyrinth of decaying warehouses that encased it. We could not sleep from the howl of the machines. Sometimes we could barely breathe outside from the dust. But when I sat on my creaking bed with my best friend, everything was just right. She lounged with her legs crossed, boxers stuck between her asscheeks, with a beer in one hand and a joint in the other. My leg hair had grown scratchy under my wide pants. The lights of the city dipped the room into the dim yellow of an old photograph. We laughed so hard we couldn't see straight; outside wailed the sounds of the construction site, like screams of dying whales. The day repeated forever. We cut our bangs in the mirror with the same scissors we cut our nails with, we shivered in our bedrooms and blew on each other's hands for warmth. We huddled against one small heater and talked about happiness and how it seemed like people have lied to us, because moving away did not bring us much closer to it.

"But will you tell me if you find it?" I asked her. "Will you text me like you do every day, tell me that it's finally here?"

Those months brought about the first time I went into a queer space, in a country where it was appropriate to be so. This was also a community, but one strangely difficult to adjust to. I hadn't thought it could be like this. I hadn't thought people like me could be this happy.

I envied them all. The young homosexual men, born to be seen. Messed up and golden blonde, symbols of youth, virility and rebellion, in their tooth-white tank tops, flower crowns over their bright eyes, diamonds on their faces. Singing by my side with the grace and carelessness of boys who grew up in a different dimension. They were everything I wasn't: strong and healthy and forceful.

The girls were most alluring of all. Not tired, not worn-down like me, not exhausted by secrets and rejection and fear. Their vulpine eyes and sharp ears and long, shining hair. They knew how to stand, how to walk under the weight of their clothes and tattoos and alien hairstyles, which seemed unbearable to me. They knew how to touch each other, they'd learned; they had the chance to learn it. I didn't even know how to talk to them. Back home it was easy. It rolled comfortably off my tongue: the

language of hushed whispers, of love like a knife to the jugular, of thieves in the stealth of the night. There was much more romance to hiding and fighting and constructing alibis than there is to grabbing a stranger on a sticky dance floor and kissing them. If I touched someone, I wanted to burrow into her chest with fear. I wanted every lick of her to be the last I ever got. I wanted the gore of her body to haunt my every waking moment and to wash my dreams with honey. I could not cope with things being this easy. It would have meant that all my terror was for nothing; that I had to defend myself not for the fact that I am doing something wrong, not for the fact that I am inhumane, not for the fact that people good-naturedly hate what I am. But just because of geography. I had to defend myself because I was born where I was born and I was born as myself. In other words, I was born unlucky. And, somehow, that was more embarrassing than anything.

Watching them made me realise that I just can't have it easy. I want someone to scream at. Someone to bite. Someone to cook for. Someone who lets me destroy. Someone to smile at, to starve for, to wash their back. I want you, black hole, I want you, butcher, I want you, berserker in a house of glass. Love shouldn't fall into my hands, it should hook its jaws around my face like a lion.

*

I miss my language. I miss the dog park, the beggars singing in the subway, the first Burger King in the city square, the church in front of which I smoked for the first time. The drunken, stumbling walks home and the older kids that would buy me cigarettes and the broken doorknob of my childhood bedroom. I miss the downtown park where I cried screaming the first time I fell in love, like a second birth.

Travelling is just finding new things to miss. On my balcony at night, all of life feels like blessed poetry. I sink into the fog and smoke and smoke until my throat burns. The lighter licks my fingers, the people next-door sing in foreign tongues that melt and curl. Empty night trains hurtle at lightspeed on the arching bridge over the canal, with their foggy windows and metal bodies crusted with graffiti. Over the water, the gas station where we get our tobacco pouches swells into the dark like a stalagmite, and then street lights, street lights, street lights. Small boats trickle by, golden light shining from the hearth of the cabin, where people sleep and eat and fuck and settle into bed. Gas prices blaze a neon red through the mist, and I feel it happen: a new memory so fragile that it could break at first wind, that I will look back to and cry and hope and miss. This is my home now. I am filled with so much love that I don't know where to put it, I don't know what to do with it. My heavy arms and legs turn into the slowest, sweetest fire.

One day, I'll leave this room behind, too. I feel the end approaching when I look at the walls of the container: the Rolling Stones posters, the avant-garde art magazine

cutouts, the 70s' album covers and the empty bottles. A deafening peace roars through my limbs. A lot of good meals were had in this room. A lot of laughter was shared, a lot of embarrassing childhood secrets. A few terrified teens, displaced from their homes and barely out of highschool, bared their souls to each other on this floor at 4am. Liquor was drunk and spilled and purged; crystals have been crushed into powder; pills have been snuck under the padding of bras with a gentle wink and a cigarette dripping from the mouth. Bodies have collided and lips have touched and parents have called, worried sick. And that was just room 20. A student house can hold as many memories as some storybooks, city halls and museums of art.

The final truth is I found all this, but I almost lost myself in the process. The world opened before me and when the floor split under my feet, there would've been nothing to ground me, had I not found my people. Back home, friends and neighbors kept me alive; here, they kept me sane. They saved me from all of it: a life driven by insanity, by neurotic chaos, my brain threatening me with my darkest dreams spiraling into fruition. I didn't know I had it in me to be so disturbed. When you are small, no God can warn you of what you are.

I never searched for salvation, as much as I stumbled upon it. I never knew it could happen—lost children becoming teachers of love. We came to each other for everything. We pulled each other by hands and feet out of every darkening pit of young adulthood; we did it tired, we did it scared, we did it vulnerable. To let yourself love is to allow another the opportunity to be your ruin. If you have a community, you are more loved than you will ever know. And to those who open their door wide, who smile back at children on the bus, who feed the bone-thin stray dogs on the street; to those who offer their hands, in spite of the world telling them to close them: trust me—you have more love than you'll even know what to do with.

If I could say one more thing to all of my friends, from here and from home, it wouldn't be a piece of advice. It would sound a little bit like this:

I think it's meant to be easier than we have it now. What I'm saying is I think you can learn. What I'm saying is I love you enough to even let you do it without me. I notice when you give yourself compassion instead of shame, and it's wonderful. I see you across the room, forgiving yourself and holding yourself like a child, you beautiful creature. I see that you clean your dishes and oil the blisters on your face and let the air into your room. I want to kiss your shoulder and kiss your forehead and kiss your knees. Kiss every part of your tired body that your lovers have ignored. I see how you choose to be vulnerable. It's blinding.

I can't wait until you're forty. Fifty. Sixty. I can't wait to see who you'll end up becoming. I'm sure it will be good, as long as you'll be.

Just a jar

Written by: Lili Garman
Edited by: Ralitsa Brennan

In and out.
In and out.

Bell ringing each time. It looks like she's winking at me when she does. I think she is winking at me. I wink back sometimes when I get the courage but I don't think she's ever noticed. It's not like I can wave or anything to get her attention. Sometimes she gets a little rusty but I don't mind.

Here one comes.

Cut and blow. Classic for a Thursday afternoon. Her bob looks slightly skewwhiff. Maybe it's intentional. Surely not.

She says her pleasantries and gets a cig out of her bag and balances it on her lips. The end turns red from her bright lipstick. She fiddles in her pocket, taking out some shrapnel and dropping it in my top. 50 pence. I guess that's all that's deserved for a wonky bob.

I'd just trim that other side a little bit when you get home, love. And maybe cut down on the cigs too.

She walks out of the door and I can see her through the window lighting her cigarette. They'll never learn.

The sun shines through as it reaches its peak in the sky. Generosity should be at its highest now too. I hope so. But over time I've learnt that generosity is repaid. If you dare to give it away then it'll come back to you.

That's why I only speak to people who give me something. Don't give me anything? Well you won't be hearing a peep.

Uh oh. Mary's here. She's a rude little old lady with the attitude of a teenage girl who just dyed her hair black for the first time. I remember the first time I met her. I'd dozed off for a little while, no one had given me any reason to be alert, that is until I heard a scream from the back of the salon. Not a horror movie scream, but an angry bear-like scream. It was a roar in fact. Well it shook me to high heaven. The coins nearly fell right out of me if you pardon my language. She was in the chair furthest away from the door and she looked furious. Blotchy red spots were appearing over her face and steam was billowing out of her ears and nose. Lord, I thought she was going to charge at someone. She leaned into the mirror to get a closer look at her hair but the steam from her anger fogged up the mirror, only adding to her rage.

I asked for a trim!

Sweetheart, that's what I've given you. Your ends are really dead so I had to take a bit extra off and I told you that.

The salon fell into silence.

I told you that.

That just tipped her over the edge. She stomped right down to the door, a wave of steaming heat following her, uttering all kinds of atrocities. When she reached the front desk she took a swipe and threw me right to the floor. My coins spilled out and I got a little chip on my head. It could've been worse, I could've completely shattered, but I didn't. It was embarrassing though. I had to wait for somebody to finally notice I was on the floor. Everyone was so swept up in what had just happened that I was really a last thought, despite my cries for help. As I lay there on my side, head cracked and coins scattered around, I looked up at Bell. She was still swaying from Mary's exit. She noticed me in that moment and moved her body to keep swaying and making her sound. Taylor, the young trainee came over to stop Bell from ringing after a few minutes and then she spotted me. Oh how sad I must've looked down there, partially shattered. She picked me up and put me on the front desk quickly which I was thankful for because her hands stank of peroxide and made the chip on my head sting from the fumes. I looked up at Bell through my glassy eyes but she had already stilled and was back looking out of the window. That event was the talk of the salon for the rest of the day, and the rest of the week, month, and still pops up in conversations now. It was never forgotten, but I feared I would be. A week after the incident, Taylor glued my head back together, leaving me with a gnarly scar but I'm in tip top shape so no complaints from me, and it does make me look pretty badass, I just hope Bell sees that and forgets that I was crying on the floor for her help.

So here she is. Gliding through the door. As much as she kicks up a fuss and seemingly hates this place, she's afraid of change so she can't go anywhere else. She's used to speaking to the people in here so terribly that the staff now recognise it as one of her personality traits and just *deal with it*. Now this is where I draw the line. She left me scarred both physically and mentally, not to be dramatic. And I'm sure she scared the bejesus out of Taylor and the other stylists. Not on my watch. She's never given me anything apart from that push over the ledge, so I've never had the chance to give her my two penneth. But maybe today's the day. You never know when change is coming.

...

And boy was I right. There were no cross-words, no arguments, nothing. Still not a smile from Mary, but everyone else was grinning from ear to ear. And as she left, lo and behold, the penny dropped. Right into my top.

Change is a good thing, Mary. Maybe another salon might be better for you. You're used to it here and that's why you've stayed, for the comfort.

She leaves and Bell starts to sway and do her little song again. Taylor comes over, tips me on my head and takes out the change.

20p! Everyone she left 20p!

Cheers erupt from the stylists and the customers, everyone laughing and celebrating this immense event that will oh so certainly go down in salon history. The highlight of the whole week, maybe even a top contender for the Moment of the Year.

...

As the sun sets through the glass store front, an orange glow shines in. I see the tips of peoples hair floating around through the air. Little lines of all different lengths, they don't seem to settle, they just keep floating around us. I wonder, when people walk through or even breathe in the salon, are they taking pieces of other people with them? I've heard people say when they're trying to be profound that cutting your hair is like cutting off a memory, getting a fresh start. That's why people seem to go through a physical transformation after any kind of change in their life, whether it be something small that makes them want to break the mould and go against the grain, or some traumatic event that forces them to become different or physically different anyway to what they were before, none of my business either way. All of those changes are right here, floating around us under the glowing sun. I begin to fill up with them over time.

Right on cue, cutting my thought short, here comes Gary. He is lovely. Truly a *sound bloke* I heard Jackie saying to her husband a few weeks ago... nothing fishy going on there. Off he goes to Jackie's chair. They talk at quite a low level so I can't make out what they're saying, definitely not while Laura has the hairdryer blasting Nora's hair within an inch of its life. My nosy nature is being obstructed, it kills me. But one thing I do know is that Gary will always tip well, so that makes up for it. Nora leaves, hair standing on end, giving her the illusion of a full head of hair with just four strands. Impressive.

But that's all it is really, an illusion. Who knows what's going on behind that skin fade, that balayage or that mohawk. It's hard to tell. It's just an illusion to give an impression. What are you wanting to tell me with the way you style your hair, style yourself, carry yourself? What do you want me to think? You want me to think something don't you? Or maybe it's the opposite. Maybe you're telling yourself something. Convincing yourself of a new persona or a new culture you've adopted for the next month. I analyse everyone as they come and go, never quite settling on what it is that they want. They want a haircut and they've got that. But is it something more? The conversation, the confidence, the character. It must be something. I'll be upset if it's nothing. But what do I know? I don't have hair. I don't dress, I don't walk or move. I'm just a jar. Maybe that's what I want you to think. I'm transparent, you can see right through me, but is that all just an illusion too? I'll leave that one up to you.

After all, I'm just a jar.

Gary's gone, and so has everyone else. He dropped a two pound coin in me today, I did try to give him a tip back, but he and Jackie were out of the door before I could even speak. Some people just don't want to hear it.

Taylor tips me up and puts the coins in her pocket, stray pieces of hair included. I don't know what the tips will do for her, but I hope they make her happy.

And that's it. Another day done.

The door closes and the lights go out. Bell winks at me one last time and the salon gradually falls quiet. I've been emptied but I still feel quite full.

Help! I'm having a creative block

Written by: Abigail Oldfiel
Edited by: Anna Bussabarger-graf

It feels strange to be giving out advice. I don't feel I am 'qualified' enough to do so. When I write, however, drawing from experience comes more naturally to me, and it may be for you too. So, you would think this would be simple and easy; yet, I find myself staring at a blank screen and wondering what on EARTH I could advise people on. I've spent the last three years using my brainpower to get through university, and right now, I feel like I'm out of cells. Though it's not the first time I have felt this way.

I recently finished my degree in Fashion Communications and Promotion, and the course gave me many chances to explore different creative paths. It can feel paralysing if you're anything like me and get overwhelmed with decision-making. In the last three years, I have often struggled to persevere with an idea or even come up with ideas. I often doubted my ability and was scared I would make the wrong move. Here's something that might make your anxiety levels rise: when doing my self-devised project (our version of a dissertation), I changed my idea 6 days before the deadline. Yup, six. I don't regret it. I realised I was trying to force something that just wasn't happening. Sometimes perseverance is totally fine; you will make it through, but that wasn't the case for me. I had to make the decision to do a complete 360 and go with my gut. Something that terrified me, but I reaped the rewards for doing it. In the end, my chosen topic felt so much easier—because it came more naturally to me. That's not me saying the work wasn't hard, because IT WAS. But doing something you have passion for... makes it more authentic with the effort.

That piece of work was the longest thing I had done at university. It was seven months of research, creative ideation, problem-solving, and applying the creative skills I had banked since starting the course. Though I was passionate about it, it didn't mean I didn't face other challenges after changing my idea. There were so many creative blocks—times I would stare at a blank screen or page, rewrite the same thing, and hope it would get me somewhere different. Scroll endlessly or flick through examples of previous final years' work and

wonder how they did it. On the back of that, this article is a bit of an inception. It's tips on how to get you through a creative block, and truth be told, something I was experiencing when trying to write something for this anthology! Write what you know is so cliché but true. I know it's not original to be putting tips on how to get over creative blocks into the universe. However, these are things that have helped me over the last three years. Considering I only finished my degree last week, it's all still fresh in my mind. Currently, I'm on the fence about doing a master's, but I won't be forgetting these strategies anytime soon.

1- Forgive me for this being boring, but chores! Ugh, who wants to do chores, right? I've had many late nights where I am pacing (mentally or physically, both have occurred), and I can't do anything other than slam my laptop or books shut. Is it procrastination? Possibly. But you need time to stew things over! Let things settle, and process what you have taken in before you reach maximum capacity. It's kind of like when you used to revise for tests. After so long, you stop taking in new information. Give you and your brain a break! I can't recall how many times I had a new idea come to me while scrubbing away at some stubborn grease that refuses to budge from my so-called non-stick pans.

2 - Something I discovered in my first year of university was Oblique Strategies. And boy, are they unique, to say the least. You can get physical cards, but googling the term is far easier (and free!). They vary from the mundane to brain scratchers. For example;

“Make a sudden, destructive unpredictable action; incorporate”

“Work at a different speed”

“Use filters”

The good thing about Oblique Strategies is that you may interpret them differently than someone else. These are just a few that came up for me when I did a quick search. For example, working at a different speed—try setting yourself a 10-minute timer to do something without the pressure of it being perfect. With this in mind, something else that has stuck with me since my first year is “fail fast and move on.” It's important not to take lots of time to do these exercises—use them to help you start thinking differently!

3- Talk about it to someone else. I get so caught up in my thoughts that I eventually feel too overwhelmed. Even if the end goal isn't seeking an opinion from someone else, I find that going off on a tangent with a good listening partner helps you think things over. Many times during my final year project, I felt so consumed by my work. The moment I started discussing my work with someone else, I could see the pieces clicking together. Sometimes, something new may even come to mind...

4- Follow inspiration. Yep, I mean this literally. I take to social media in search of inspiration. While social media can be overwhelming, I have found it an amazing place for seeking creativity. I often turn to Instagram to follow those who inspire me and my work. These artists, designers, and creators share their work, methods and processes, which can spark new ideas and techniques for my work. I learn best through visuals and observing others, so seeing how others approach a project helps me experiment more in my own work. It also serves as a great reminder that creativity has no boundaries or 'right way' of doing something while encouraging me to step outside my comfort zone and even try something new.

5- Apologies for the cliché in this one, but embrace the process! And that also means the imperfections (I need to remind myself of this one). When I was in the midst of my self-devised, one of my tutors explained it to me like baking a cake. You're trying all these recipes and ways of decorating. In the end, it's not always about the final cake but how you got there. Allow yourself to experiment, make mistakes, and learn from them. Every step brings you closer to your goal, no matter how small. It's easy to feel disheartened when things don't go according to plan, but remember: You learn more from mistakes than if they were perfect the first time you tried.

It's taken me so long to find what works best for me and my process. Even if only one of these methods helps you, then that's a start! It all comes down to allowing yourself to be okay with the imperfections. Whether it's changing your environment, taking a well-needed break, or looking at what others are doing—believe it or not, you are still moving forward. It doesn't matter what you do to get there, but how you get there. The next time you find yourself staring at a blank screen, go easy on yourself and remember to trust the process - creativity is never linear. As 'unqualified' as I felt writing this... I'll be hitting these techniques up the next time I stare at a screen with a creative block. The good part about blocks? It's all part of the process. It'll make the end result much sweeter than nailing it the first time.

Nyctinasty

Written by: Naomi Grant

You start dreading sleep & all the dormant visions it might reap:
periphery vision, white enamel bone, papier-mâché
would-be wings, alabaster dreams of liquid flight
creeping in corners of vision musty and meek.

You feel your soul being hunted, between moments,
in some strange destruction you seek, unsure of how
to breathe or how to see. You've confused meaning
with shadowy sentiments such as self-care
which isn't Netflix or fresh kicks but fresh air - no
mermaids, just your raw, beating heart, unadorned,
bleeding hibiscus tears deep into the viscera.

Leaves do flicker in the paling light, dappled
on these lonely hands, as if my knuckles were your casket,
opening like sorrel in bloom. A smile does linger
on the lips of an unrequited love waiting for the bus,
children still laugh at silly faces as morning breaks.

Just ask the girl who carries whispers of the past
tucked between bruised shoulder blades.

Something still glimmers, resurfaces, amidst
this cosmos of brokenness; a cacophony of hope
singed with solitude still sings of survival.

How to spot a hacker

Written by: Caterina Biondi

Edited by: Finn

Hackers are among us, but we never think about them. Most of them probably have normal day jobs; some work in tech companies and others don't work at all. That's one of the problems of being antisocial: you don't fit in. Ever. Now then, how do you spot these troublemakers of the web: smart people with double lives, a tingling passion for twisting the darkest side of the web, and a genius for social engineering?

I would love to tell you that I've cracked the code to detect them.

Unfortunately, hackers are hard to generalise. But I'll give it a try. So, hop on a journey to discover if your shy best friend is just an introverted nerd or a coding machiavellian.

Thea Leyland and Rob Swartz bring you a show about spotting the hackers walking down our roads, ordering coffee at our local spots and sitting on the other side of our date-night tables. Are you ready to stop someone in the streets and ask them, "What's your favourite malware?"

Episode 1: Ego + Machiavellianism

[intro jingle]

"Hello, hello! We are Thea Leyland and Rob Swartz and this is another episode of 'How to spot a hacker'. Our guest today is Mason, a 32-year-old hacker who created an infamous malware."

A skinny man with long brown hair, a thick moustache and a goatee glares into the direction of the window screen, his gaze covered by a baseball hat. He can't see the presenter and just sits, inspecting the room.

In the room Mason is in, there's one chair and a table with some beverages: coffee, tea and soft drinks. The room looks cosy, with peach walls, a comfortable two-seater couch and some random objects. There's another door, opposite the one Mason came from. It's a white door with a keyboard, and you would supposedly submit a code to get in if it wasn't for the fact that it's a fake door.

Rob adjusts the microphone and clears his throat: “Today we are talking about ego and Machiavellianism in hackers, and we choose our guest as an example of these traits”

Thea joins in. “Well said Rob! I was blown away when I realised how ego was the main character in Mason’s defeat. I’ve also heard the story about how — after coming out of prison without any money to buy food — he ended up in a McDonald's and convinced them to give him a free menu by saying, ‘I was here yesterday and I had a bad experience, your colleague promised me a free meal.’ This man never stopped deceiving.”

“Are you familiar with the Iliad, Thea?”

“The epic poem?”

“Yes, it’s from there we get the name Trojan virus, a malware that, like the Trojan Horse, enters your computer disguised as something useful, but when you download it — like a bunch of soldiers — it invades your device, giving full access to the hacker.”

“It sounds terrifying! I can only imagine, from the hacker’s perspective, this must be a crazy boost of confidence.”

“Yeah, let's talk a bit about that before asking our guest some questions.”

“Ok, Rob. Research shows that hackers tend to be very self-assured and egomaniacal. Listening to some of the stories told by notorious hackers, the sense of disconnect from reality and the feeling of superiority is clear. The skill level you need to do some of these hacks is great. And some of these people acquire those skills at an early age, figuring out ways to get around systems built by prominent organisations.”

“But could we call it knowledge, or is it just cleverness and a high ability for problem-solving?”

“That’s an interesting question. There are lots of different types of hackers out there. Some rely more on knowledge about the machine they are trying to infiltrate and compromise. Others specialise; like hackers who learn and develop knowledge around a specific coding language or operating system. Other hackers are more about planning and strategising. The social engineering is the part they are best at.”

“Yeah, that’s fascinating. Some real manipulation in action right there. Which of the two categories do you think defines our guest today?”

On the other side of the screen, Mason is looking around the room, analysing each object around him with minutia. His eyes jump over every detail while his head is almost totally still.

“I would say 50/50. I mean, this man knew computers, and he was able to build one of the first access control tools. But he was also an incredible social engineer, and the innovative ways he found to spread the virus were amazing.”

“For hackers, it is crucial to have the ability to convince people to do something, and they can use tools of coercion like nude pictures and financial threats. They can disguise themselves as the person, finding information about them, or with that information they can send messages relevant to them that will convince them to click a link. This calculated manipulation is called ‘Machiavellianism’. But what about our guest’s ego? Is the ego born first or the skill?”

“Ah, that’s a hard one! The ego is sometimes what kills you. This was the case for our guest and many other hackers as well. It’s often hard for hackers to keep their mischief to themselves. This is why they end up confessing and being caught for that.”

“That sounds quite irresponsible for a criminal!”

“Yeah, I don’t think they like to call themselves that. But think about it, this is exactly what happened in the 2015 CIA hack. The hackers D3f4ult and Cracka started targeting CIA officers of high ranks sharing their personal information with the general public. Didn’t the kid confess everything to his friend who ended up betraying him out of spite?”

“Oh right, a lesson about ego and also about friends I guess, ah ah.”

“So Mason, tell us a bit about how you got caught by the police the first time?”

“Ouch! Right to the point.” Mason adjusts his hat without losing composure.

“What happened is that the phone company charged me for some calls that weren’t mine. That really pissed me off because, to be honest, I had put so much effort into tapping the neighbours’ phone line to try and lower my family’s phone bills. You know, hacking at the time was hard on your bills. Those who started hacking in the 90’s like me had to deal with dial-up internet access: the Internet was directly connected to the phone line. If you were spending hours at the computer, your parents would discover it the next month through your bills.” Mason stands up and starts walking in a circle in the small room. “I called them, and they said they couldn’t do anything about it. They provoked me; they thought they were smarter than me. Then I just did what I knew best. I started dialing their company numbers one after the other to try to connect to the company modems until I managed to get in”

“But you didn’t manage to change your phone bill in the end...” Rob probes.

“No, I caused an outage on all their West Coast telephone systems. That’s

where I fucked up. I called them and threatened them, saying, 'If you solve the problem with my phone bills, I'll tell you why the outage is happening and how to solve it,' Mason laughed. "Yeah, I gave them my name, phone number, address, everything. What an idiot."

Thea: "What happened after that?"

"I went to jail for like five months. And it was fun, to be honest! Everyone thought I was cool because I was the hacker guy, and I started teaching the prison IT guy some new computer skills."

"Oh, it sounds like you had a blast! It's almost like anybody else that goes to prison lies about their experience" comments Rob, smiling.

"Now, Rob, let's observe our guest's behaviour for a second"

Mason has sat down on the couch again, now holding a cup.

"What are the first things you notice, Thea?"

"Ok, first of all, he chose the Tom & Jerry cup. Bold choice. And he's drinking coffee."

"I noticed he lit the candle on the table."

"That's funny. I wonder if he thought it was some kind of psychological challenge"

"I mean, he was right. He kinda acted how we expected, connecting the dots."

"Mason, let's move to the important questions. Give us an example of your day."

Mason is now trying a combination on the door's keyboard.

"Mason? Are you with us?"

"Oh, yeah. My day. It depends on who I am hacking with. Recently I have been working mostly in groups. Usually, I align my timetable to the time zone of their country. Recently my day has started around 1 pm. Before that, I go to my Jiu Jitsu class or for a walk downtown. I like to lose myself in the city; the skyscrapers towering above me. When the official day starts, I go home. I usually don't hack from anywhere else. I spend the rest of the day in front of my computer. Maybe I order some food or I pick up something. And, man, I don't know, I can end up working on something until quite late."

The man keeps trying code after code, at an ever faster pace.

"It's funny how this wouldn't sound like a very exciting life from the external point of view."

"I agree, Rob. I don't think I would date someone who spends almost their entire day in front of a screen. But maybe it's not all bad. Mason, what would you usually talk about on a date?"

“Mmmh, I don’t know, I can talk about many things. Usually, I would pick something I have in common with the girl I am dating and start with that. Damn door!” Mason slaps the door loudly. “It’s impossible!”

“Do you ever tell your friends or someone you’re dating that you are a hacker?”

“It happened, not gonna lie. Sometimes people are just chatting about the most lame job achievement, or their dog learning how to sit, or some other lame shit. And meanwhile, you are doing these incredible things. I can’t stop myself from bragging a bit. But it only happened a few times with people I knew wouldn’t actually take me seriously.”

“Oh, ok. Do people not believe you?”

“People have a very pop culture idea of hackers. It’s just this nerdy guy typing incomprehensible shit on a computer screen. Very few know what that really means. So people are like, ‘Oh cool!’ or ‘Hey, don’t hack my laptop!’ But then they quickly try to forget.”

“So it’s almost like people would prefer to erase the idea of a hacker existing from their brain than to actually face it and maybe protect their devices from it?”

“Yeah..motherfucker..I feel it’s kind of like...that.” Mason has moved on to banging the door violently. “It doesn’t open, right? It doesn’t...ugh.”

“Ok, our time is finished for today. Let’s say goodbye to Mason.”

They start waving towards the screen to an oblivious Mason whose door pounding has escalated to drop kicks directed at the thick wood.

Rob turns off the microphones and starts collecting his stuff. Thea takes a sip of the cold tea sitting on her desk. “Hey, I received an email. Apparently, there’s a new software that helps podcasters archive all their recordings safely and catalogue them by keywords. The AI scans all the recordings, so you don’t even have to manually input the keywords!” Rob looks at her with his eyes wide open, full of excitement. “It sounds great, let’s get it.” She starts collecting her things. “Send it to me, and I’ll download it first thing in the morning.”

Rob and Thea shut down their laptops and turn off the studio lights.

Greed is the antithesis of growth

Written by: Grace Isobelle

Edited by: Niahm

The day was dull and bleak
as he strolled down past the creek.
Night turned to day
'help me' he'd say.

To the vast void
this little boy'd
strayed too far from home
and now here he walked alone.

'Til a little fairy appeared beside
next to where the boy lied:
'Now tell me, my dear,
what is it which you fear?'

'I need to find my home'
he sighed and let out a groan,
'but how are you to aid?
For you are just a little fae'.

He muttered and walked on,
as for help, she was none.
'Til a large gnome he came by
and the boy let out a sigh.

'Little one, what can I do?
I could help with a thing or two.'
The boy sighed once more,
'you on my journey would sure be bore'.

The boy walked day and night
carrying on with all his might.
'Help me' he uttered again
to any whom listened. Then

in front of him, a flash!
Before he could dash
a god-like man stood proud,
'save me' said the little boy aloud.

The god shook his head
as the boy began to plead,
'for you have rejected others,
my sisters and brothers'.

He went without a trace
as nothing took his place.
The sky shot a flash
and the boy turned to ash.

In his final time
spoke the boy and his crime:
'Any help is help indeed
I shouldn't have lived with so much greed'.

Ivy in STEAM

Written by: Nadira Kossar

‘Womxn in STEAM! Thursday 15th March!’ The poster screamed out in bright, bold, red letters the name of the special assembly that was to be held in the theatre room, printed on a thick glossy slide. They were plastered across the school, differing colours and fonts, different women on the posters with bright smiles painted on their lovely faces. A test tube set, a microscope, a telescope, and a magnifying glass were just some of the various objects they were holding as if they were the most wonderful things in the world. The one which made her laugh the most was the one with her friend Hazel. A pretty brunette with deep brown eyes, she had the most lifeless expression on her eyes holding a chemistry textbook; her smile only reached her eyes. She wondered why Hazel even volunteered to model for them in the first place. It looked rather creepy, in Ivy’s opinion.

Ivy rolled her eyes at the cheesiness of the message, the desperation in which girls at their school were recruited and the free pizzas they were advertising. She had no real interest in science at the degree level and was only taking biology at A-Level, instead of the typical 2 or 3 STEM/Maths combination. There were a variety of reasons why Ivy even managed to end up in that assembly, mostly silly reasons really; not wanting to attend biology and the independent study session later, getting an opportunity to meet some remarkably interesting women on the panel, Mr Smith from biology wanting her to go and the free pizzas. Definitely the free pizzas as well but the insistence that "art" was also just as valid and tough as STEM. The unusual spelling of women had also intrigued her, and Ivy decided that at the very least she’d find out why that spelling was used in the first place.

Just as she turned the corner, a riot of colour in human form almost crashed into her; extremely long and wavy chestnut brown hair smothering and blinding her. The smell of lavender was the only indicator as to who it was “Hazel! How lovely to see, or rather crash into you again!” Hazel removed herself from on top of Ivy and knelt beside her, a goofy grin plastered on her face. “Ivy, how are you, babe? Where are you going? I thought you had geography class. Or was it French? You’re gonna be late Ivy!” Ivy shook her head.

"I have biology right now Hazel, it’s my only class today. But I have that assembly Haze, remember? Women in STEAM?” Realisation dawned on Hazel. “Ahhh, that thing. Yeah, I remember. But you only study biology from STEM. Why are you

attending a STEM thing,” Hazel inquired curiously, “since you only do one science?” Ivy looked at her slightly pitifully, a smirk tugging at her lips. “Haze, it’s STEAM, not STEM. Art is apparently included, and Mr Smith wanted me to try it out. Besides, there are some top rank women from places like JP Morgan there as well. I wanna see them.” Hazel let out a laugh and helped Ivy off the floor before handing her back the stray Mars bar that made a wild dash for freedom from her pocket. “Well, get me some business cards as well.”

Just as Ivy was turning a corner, Hazel called out to her. “By the way, are you still ranked second in your year group?”

“Yeah, I still am.”

“Really? Well, who’s first place?”

Ivy bit her lip and looked down on the floor guiltily. “I’m not going to tell you, Haze, otherwise I’ll put that person in grave danger.”

Hazel walked off laughing. “Don’t worry about it Ivy, I won’t do anything. I can’t afford another manslaughter charge anyway, not after what happened in Amigos anyway!”

Ivy whipped her head fast only to see Hazel had already turned the corner, laughter ringing like fire alarms in her ears. “Manslaughter charge? What? Hazel?” Ivy spun around quickly, only to see nothing greeted her but silence and wall art.

“HAZEL!”

Author biographies



Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief, lay-out, editor

Roos van der Velden is a young writer and student from the Netherlands (Currently living in Köln, Germany as Austauschstudentin). Previously, she has been published in Fantastische Vertellingen and Vonk fantasy. Recently, she has gotten published in Talk Vomit, her first publication away from her home ground. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous three issues she is still the editor-in-chief and graphic designer.



Fin van der Oudenalder
Editor

Fin van der Oudenalder is a (creative) writer from the Netherlands who can spend hours daydreaming about everything and nothing at all. He is interested in the horror genre and hopes to write a proper story for that genre one day. He also very much enjoys reading books, watching films and playing video games. Fin didn't write anything this time around, but happily edited some of the amazing stories.



Anna Bussabarger-Graf
Writer

Anna Bussabarger-Graf is a Louisville, KY area native (yes, she does like both bourbon and Hot Browns). When not conceptualing ad campaigns or writing, catch her: socializing, reading, or exercising. She loves interesting drinks and chocolate chip cookies. The last really cool book she read was, "When Among Crows" by Veronica Roth.

Author biographies



Paula Espinosa
Writer, editor

Paula Espinosa is a bilingual Mexican-American creative entering her final year of undergraduate. She is double majoring in Theatre and English with a minor in music. She is interested in musical theatre, costume design, poetry, jazz performance, and is an avid reader. She's a current member of Word Tonic and a working copywriter.



Sophie Byrne
Writer

21-year-old English graduate Sophie Byrne has always had a story to tell. As a child, she would conjure up tales, narrating them with excitement to her ever-patient dad, who dutifully (and begrudgingly) typed them up. From her first ever story (Jess and the Fire Flower) to her most recent (Lusine), Sophie hopes to take the world around her as inspiration through life, and bring joy to those around her. (Thanks, dad, for your unwavering support and hours at that tiny desk).



Tristan Oscar Smith
Writer

Tristan Oscar Smith writes weird fiction from a cursed attic in West Yorkshire. He has a deep love for all things queer, spooky and strange. Find him on Twitter [@tristanoscars](https://twitter.com/tristanoscars).

Author biographies



Abigail Oldfield
Writer

Abigail Oldfield has just completed her degree at Nottingham Trent University, in Fashion, Communication and Promotion. She is passionate about fashion, lifestyle and trends, and she loves creating engaging content that captures these themes. Abigail collaborates with a group of FCP students to run their course's Instagram page. She brings a keen eye for detail and a love for storytelling to all her writing projects.



Kyra Patterson
Writer

Kyra Patterson is a London-based Black creative who is passionate about writing and creating content in the mediums theatre, fashion, music, film and modern art. A large part of her practice is capturing the raw and real emotions of everyday people, drawing on her own experiences as well as stepping into the lives of others. When she is not writing you can either find her with headphones on, her nose deep in the pages of a fantasy novel or her head in the clouds.



Caterina Biondi
Writer

Caterina Biondi is an Italian writer based in London. A restless mind always in search of something new to learn. She loves travelling and when it's not possible she travels through food. When she's not cooking you can find her solo dancing on some newly discovered track. She also writes about feminism, sex, technology, digital trends, and cinema.

Author biographies



Savannah Green
Writer, editor

Savannah Green is a Grenadian-Canadian communication student at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is passionate about creative writing and design and has dedicated her time to writing poetry for an online audience. In her spare time she volunteers at a non-profit organization program that focuses on the personal development of young girls in single parent homes. At a young age she knew she wanted to help people and she knows that her writing can do just that.



Ralitsa Brennan
Writer, editor

Ralitsa Brennan is a trilingual content writer and editor based in sunny Varna, Bulgaria. With over six years of experience and a degree in linguistics, she explores topics related to creativity, mental health, languages, and ethical marketing in her writing.



Nadira Kossar
Writer

Nadira Kossar is a British Somali writer based in London, who is passionate about all things literature, art and art history, theatre, content creation and copywriting. Currently in the process of becoming an English teacher and a freelancer, when she is not marking piles and piles of essays, uploading endless student reports and going through all things Jane Austen, she is reading, writing, creating content and boosting skills.

Author biographies



Olivia Wright
Writer

Olivia Wright is a South African writer based in Sheffield, UK. Whether it's her poetry, music or prose, her writing tunes into the inner-world and nature, and the interconnectness of the two. Her topics of interest range from nature, literature, travel and life-writing - she is interested in the stories we all have within us. When she's not writing, you'll find her picking at her guitar, swimming in a river or taking a rambling walk in the Peak District.



Lauren Bannister
Writer

Lauren Bannister (she/they) is a queer, twenty-something writer from Chesterfield, UK. She is a writer and poet. When she is not hunched over, writing about women's wrongs and gay rights, you can find them hunkered-down in a nook somewhere, having heart palpitations from drinking too much caffeine. You can find their most recent work ARK in Crow and Cross Keys.



Eleanor Dawson
Writer

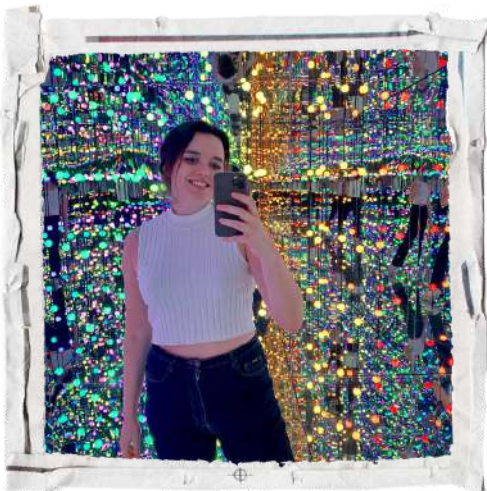
Eleanor Dawson is a 26-year-old food, beauty and lifestyle copywriter from Yorkshire, England, currently based in London. She has a passion for sustainability, vegan food and traveling. Currently, she is working as a content editor at Jamie Oliver. Unsurprisingly, she loves to cook and create recipes in her own time. Her background is within Literature and Fine Art, with a focus on identity, class, and mental health, which is present in her more personal projects.

Author biographies



Grace Isobelle
Writer

Grace Isobelle is a student based in Sheffield, UK. She is a poet, blogger and prose writer, with a focus on fantasy writing. In her spare time, Grace loves to travel, read a book and enjoy a nice hot chocolate. She has an online blog, which can be visited at: graceisobelle.com.



Kirsten Ross
Writer

Kirsten is a 20-something writer who was born in Glasgow. Currently, she works in advertising. She spends her free time writing short stories, spontaneously turning her living room into a photography studio, and looking for vintage treasures at flea markets. She lives and works in Germany and is currently working on her first novel.



Lili Garman
Writer

Lili Garman is a storyteller and dreamer from Leeds, with a whole lot to say. She has a love for creating weird and wacky characters and stories and gets inspired by the people and the world around her, leaving her mark wherever she goes. She loves to mix genres and styles, constantly exploring and experimenting with new writing and developing her skills with every project.

Author biographies



Kyra Patterson
Writer

Kyra Patterson is a Black London-based creative who is passionate about writing and creating content in theatre, fashion, music, film and modern art. A large part of her practice is capturing the raw and real emotions of everyday people. She draws on her own experiences as well as stepping into the lives of others. When she is not writing you can either find her with headphones on, her nose deep in the pages of a fantasy novel or her head in the clouds.



Lauren Hawk
Writer

Lauren Hawk is a copywriter for a marketing agency in the United States. Here, she is referred to as “Hawk.” She typically writes while caffeinated or late at night. Sometimes both. She is neither a novice nor expert in writing, consuming and considering all the words that she can in such little time.



Andrea Jiménez
Writer

Andrea Jiménez is a twenty-two-year-old Spanish-Peruvian writer with a passion for folklore and mythology. What began as a pre-teen fixation on the Aztec empire became a teenage obsession with Ancient Greece, finally resulting in her college years spent analysing Middle English literature. Having graduated with First Class honours from her English Literature & Drama degree, Andrea enjoys implementing her knowledge in all of Word Tonic’s challenges.

Author biographies



Chinonso Igwe
Writer

Chinonso Igwe is a talented writer from South London, specialising in fiction. At 23, Chinonso has already been featured on BBC 4 Radio's 'New Frequencies' with the short story "How to Get Away with Heartbreak." A graduate in film and creative writing, Chinonso is currently delving into urban fantasy. Inspired by personal experiences and diverse encounters, Chinonso's work explores human relationships and emotions with narrative depth and cinematic flair.



Andrea Gutiérrez
Writer

Andrea Gutiérrez is a writer and film director/producer from Mexico City. From a young age she has had an interest in creating fictional worlds that she would draw and write in the form of short stories. The desire to understand her world developed into a passion for film, which she studied in Spain. She is now focusing on scriptwriting.



Nadjellah Mendoza
Writer

Nadjellah Mendoza is a writer and content creator, who publishes reflective pieces on Instagram and TikTok (@ellah.marie_). Although she hails from Victoria, her writer's heart sets its home in the Philippines and in England. Her short story 'Mirror' can be found in Bowen Street Press's anthology, Grit and Growing.

Author biographies



Naomi Grant
Writer

Naomi Grant is a poet from London. Her name is something of an anadrome; in reverse, it becomes 'I moan.' You could say her writing reflects this, as it often feels like a moan—a lament, a howl, an ache. Intrigued by the bittersweet paradox of loss and love, writing and reading have always been forms of catharsis for her, serving as an anchor in moments of both anguish and wonder.



Kate I.M.
Writer

Kate I. M. is a 19 year old Romanian writer. She lives in a red container surrounded by a labyrinth of spray-painted warehouses and underground bunkers, in the rainy haze of the northern Netherlands. After a decade of perfecting her craft in multiple languages, she is putting out her writing for the first time. This is a story about migration, about youth, about memories, about language, about addiction, about drunken walks home, about loving fearlessly; a story of terror, and hunger, and peace.

Author biographies



Lokke Arente
Editor

Lokke Arente is just a newbie in everything, learning on their own how to write and edit. They have published some stories on Wattpad, so if you are interested in seeing what's under all that mysterious persona then you can find them on Wattpad by the username @realLokke. If you want to talk with the author feel free to slide in Instagram DM's @lokke_nr.13



Sydney Sampson
Editor

Sydney Sampson is a copywriter, editor, and proofreader. When she's not hunched over her laptop, she can be found exploring new cities, working on her photography, or watching entirely too much TV. Check out more of her writing on her solo travel blog, aloneandabroad.com.



Niahm Canning
Editor

Niahm is 26 years old and works in admissions and marketing. She enjoys being able to work with the author of a piece to make sure that it is exactly what they want. This is why Niahm has joined to work as an editor for a second time.



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Word Tonic

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SOON!

Cover Designed by Yasmin Bligh-Hasan