

OUR ROMANCE NOVEL

WORD TONIC ANTHOLOGY VOL IX

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Preface by The Editor-in-Chief



When I first came up with the idea of an anthology that bundled romance stories, I was sceptical. I have a special connection with romance novels myself, having done an internship at a romance publisher and writing my thesis on them, but I didn't know if others would be as enthusiastic. Obviously, romance is a very popular genre, but it also isn't really respected - which, in my eyes, is a huge shame. Actually writing a good, gripping, heart-wrenching romance isn't as easy as people think it is. The writer has to find the fine line between not taking it's reader seriously and becoming too cheesy.

And yet, a lot of amazing WordTonic writers have proven that they both love the romance genre, and that they are quite capable of writing a lovely, sexy, or heart-wrenching romantic tale!

Now, not everyone in the anthology has stuck to the definition of romance novels; the story about two people who find each other and get a happily ever after (I'll keep myself in check and won't repeat my thesis by describing Jane Radways' eight-step definition of the romance...). Some writers, for one, chose to write love poems. Others chose to write more deep stories about love and romance, while we also have people who stuck to the bodice-rippers and cheesy Hallmark-like romantic tales. There is a flavour in this anthology for everyone!

As always, I want to thank my writers, editors and illustrators, all members of WordTonic. Only with a community like this is it possible to make a wonderful magazine every few months. From writing and editing together, we learn more than we can imagine. You are all my true loves!

Feel like falling in love? Then download this anthology, huddle into your chair with your softest blanket, and enjoy!

Preface by Selma Oueddan

The Romance Novel is one of the most underrated genres in literature, and one of my favourites. Especially when there's love letters involved. I feel like it's one of the biggest fuck yous to cringe culture, which is exactly why I love it. Let me have hope against all odds, damnit! I think you can find that in even the most tragic of romances.

It's such a human thing to love, yet so often we're made to feel ashamed about it. Romance is cheapened, scoffed at. Softness is presumed a weakness. Desire a deadly thing.

But, dear reader, in my short life I've found the opposite to be true. It takes a special kind of strength to continue giving love freely in the face of a system that wishes to make it scarce.

I think the current slide towards fascism everywhere is making us all despair a little, which is very much reflected in this anthology. Love is a dark and moody thing here, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* style.

Befitting roads covered in reds and browns, and stormy nights that keep you awake reminiscing past loves.

Still, to reminisce is not to regret. Nothing lasts forever, and doesn't that make this life all the more magnificent? I hope this anthology reminds you to love audaciously.



Two Cups

Author: Aspen Greenwood

Editor: Janyne Langlois

The kettle remembers before she does,
Whistling, sharp as a bird in winter.
He steadies the cup,
China as thin as her skin,
Porcelain bloom trembling in his hand.

Milk first, he insists,
The old quarrel softened to breath,
Sugar dissolving like years,
She has lost. He stirs,
And in the small circle of the spoon,
A silence, warm as a promise.

They sit.
She asks his name again,
And he gives it,
Softly, like steam unfurling.

He does not tell her about the shadow in his lungs,
How every sip costs him.
And she does not tell him,
She once danced in red shoes,
Both secrets curl in the teapot,
One like the milk folding into tea—
For now, the truth clouds,
Just visible in the stream.

Between them —
A touch,
The faintest spark through porcelain.
History hidden, tomorrow withheld,



Yet the cup warms,
In both their hands,

The tea darkens, cools.
He lifts her cup,
Guides it to her mouth,
And for a moment she knows,
His wrinkled fingers brush hers,
Her smile breaks through,
Like sugar not quite gone,
Sweet at the bottom.

When the pot is empty,
Smile lines linger,
The smile gone,
The sweetness remains.
They look at each other as if,
It might be the first time,
Or the last.
The cups side by side.
Still warm.



Moonshine Man

Author: Priya Rohella

His charm is like no other, his style from an era now obsolete. Not a single man-made mark on his skin, or trending garment on his form, nothing apart from a white-collared shirt and button-up trousers, with a ring of gold and crimson on his index finger.

It is foolish of me to follow him, but curiosity has captured me so, and I find myself walking in his footsteps, shadowing him on his daily routine. How gracefully he walks through his garden, tending to his roses even as evening falls. How his eyes shine in the library, when his gaze chases words of Austen, Donne and Wilde. How serene he looks sipping a black tea in our local café. I sit behind him, a table away, watching him - love and obsession entangled.

“You could sit and chat with me, like a normal human,” he suddenly speaks as he sips, quietly enough for only me to hear.

I look around the café for a moment. It’s quite empty, and the others here are tucked into the cushioned booths in the corner.

“I- I’m sorry, are you talking to...me?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

He’s looking at me- not directly at me, but at the sheen of the dark glass wall in front of him. It’s funny, but his clothes almost blend into the darkness.

“Who else would I be chatting to?” He chuckles, turning around this time, facing me.

There are only a few feet between us. Being this close, I get a detailed glimpse of his brunette curls, his curved lips and deep eyes, brimming with intensity and focus. I find myself momentarily stunned, his pale features and chiselled face holding my gaze.

“Well? Are you not going to sit with me?”

His voice cuts through my hypnosis. I can’t understand why, after all this time of confidently watching him, I suddenly feel a surge of nervousness run through me at his direct approach.

“S-sure thing.”

I find my legs walking over to his table without much instruction from



my brain. Is this a good idea? Can I sit calmly in front of a man I have literally stalked? My internal struggle is silenced as I take the seat across from him, his lips curving into a smile as he puts down his cup.

“You really thought I wouldn’t notice?”

A lump catches in my throat. That’s it, he knows I’m a stalker. He probably got me this close to study my face, to know how to detail my features when filing a police report for clear harassment.

“Notice... what?” I say, mentally preparing myself for the punchline. But it never comes.

“That you and I are neighbours,” he says with a smile. “Honestly, I was wondering when we’d become formally acquainted, considering I’ve been in this town a few weeks now.”

I don’t know what to feel, what to say. But by some miracle, my behind is saved. I won’t be labelled a stalker by this man or by anyone else.

According to him, I am his oblivious neighbour, which maybe, I am.

“O-oh... well, yes we are. I’ve seen you in your garden a few times but” - I stop myself from giving too much away - “I didn’t want to bother you.”

He takes a napkin from his breast pocket and dabs his mouth as if stifling a chuckle. “Bother me? Not at all. Getting to know my neighbours is... helpful. Especially in this maze-like town.”

I don’t know how to react. I don’t even have anything on the table to calm my hands with. My posture starts to tremble; how can I tell him I didn’t approach him because I’m an introvert, or more accurately, because I prefer to spy on beauty from a distance. In the end, I follow his line of conversation, secretly wanting to drag this interaction out longer.

“Well, I suppose this town can be quite maze-like. But it’s quiet and pretty, especially on campus.”

Seeing me fidget, he calls the waiter over. Suddenly, I have no choice but to order something, with both the gaze of the waiter and the gaze of my neighbour on me. His eyes- the shine in them, somehow they remind me of the moon.

I end up ordering an Earl Grey with lots of sugar and milk, quite the opposite of his tastes. He orders himself a black coffee this time, and I wonder whether that’s because he doesn’t want me feeling awkward, or if he thinks he’ll need the extra caffeine to keep up conversation with me.

“So, you’re in university? What are you studying, if I may enquire?”

Weirdly enough, he talks like a professor, or maybe an English teacher





who's far too well-read on Victorian classics.

"I'm studying literature. I'm in my final year, actually." I try to sound smart, but maybe I come off a bit sarcastic.

"Literature? Tell me, what's your favourite book?"

He seems keener now, like the thought of having a conversation about books is the most riveting thing that's happened to him in a while.

Wondering how I got from admiration, to stalking, and now to deep conversation, I actually feel joy in being questioned.

"That's a hard choice. Hmm... I'd probably say Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, or Stoker's *Dracula*."

He chuckles suddenly, almost ironically. "A fan of tragedy and the gothic, eh? I can't say I blame you."

His eyes are full of curiosity now, but time is running out. Only a few sips remain in our cups, and once they are gone, so will our excuse for conversation. But then again, we are neighbours - I could use that to my advantage.

"I wouldn't say it's the tragedy that draws me to them, more the romance of it all. There's something... eternal about these stories, something I can't explain."

He seems to shift at my words, his smile flickering for a moment, but I can't read him the way I can read a book.

"Eternal? Like all the otherworldly creatures in the books you love?"

He drinks the last of his black coffee and stares at me with that unwavering intensity.

"Well yes... the creatures themselves make the book more interesting. Werewolves, vampires and the like."

He looks amused, that curved smile only growing, "Tell me, do you believe in such creatures? The ones romanticised in literature?"

I swirl the rest of my cold tea in my cup, a bit caught off guard.

"Well, no. Of course not. It's just fun for the imagination. Though I suppose, stories are based on some truths."

He smiles to himself. "You're opening another can of deep conversation. I do hope we'll be able to pick it up sometime."

Time runs out. He smiles at me and pays for our drinks, despite the guilt gnawing at me to refuse. He excuses himself - something about going to the antiques dealer before he closes, and I am left at the table, his table, wondering where the line between obsession and love ends.

*

It has been a few weeks since my neighbour (who, for some reason, I have code-named *Moonshine Man*) and I had our run-in at the café. Since then, we've had chance encounters at the museum, the library, and even in the park as the sun was starting to set. He seems to like his evening walks.

He invited me out to continue our riveting talk on books at *La Morsure*, a fancy place I'd never have the confidence to go to alone. The whole night felt different from before, as if he actually desired my company. I even asked if he wanted to go to the local zoo afterwards, but he said he wasn't too keen on animals – or maybe going to a five-star restaurant followed by a noisy zoo was underwhelming for him.

Just when I thought *Moonshine* had tired of me, he showed up at my doorstep, just as the sun began to set.

"I hope you don't mind me disturbing you so late, but I just had to give you this."

He held out a book, a special edition of one of Wilde's classics. I feel my cheeks rouge; he's gone through so much trouble for me.

"You really shouldn't have," I say, gesturing for him to come in, but he doesn't. He just sort of hovers in the threshold, the purple glow of the sky illuminating him.

"It was my pleasure," he replies, though somehow it sounds impatient.

"Please, come inside, won't you?"

As I say this, that familiar curved smile returns to his face and he steps inside. "So kind of you," he says, making himself at home.

*

It doesn't take long before I'm giddy from wine and joyful at having such charming company. The more time I spend with him, the more handsome he becomes, the more I lose my sanity. I find my lips pressed against his. I'm not sure how we got here, but it is far more exhilarating than stalking him. As he wraps his arms around my waist and kisses me by firelight, the moon shining through clouds that have nowhere to hide, I think I must be dreaming.

"Is this just like your romance novels?" he pants between kisses.

I can only blush harder. "You're such a charmer"-



Suddenly, I catch myself looking past his frame, at my mirror. I am there, slightly bowed and gawking, but he... he is not.

He follows my gaze to the mirror, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. He doesn't move to conceal it.

"And now you know, my dear... just how much truth there is in mere stories."

Trapped between fear and intrigue, I lie in the arms of a creature, otherworldly. His eyes like the moon, his teeth shining for what they really are. I cannot say what he will do next. I just know I cannot look away from him. *Moonshine Man.*



a lover's opus

Author: reux z. qualm

Editor: Janyne Langlois

half-light dichotomies
and dividing lines
greasy fingers gripping joints
smoke clouds surround my face
a haze lingers in my mind
i wouldn't care if i died
here, melting into you
our bodies a collective pool
of sweat and musk

touch me one last time
and i promise i won't cry
you, a river
for crossing it while high
is a demanding task
yet still i ask,
"will you love me when i
am but a withered willow?"

steady nods
synchronous with my heart
beat, beat, beat
in the triple-digit summer heat
not a word out of your pink,
pouted lips

but gleaming on your face,
twilight's hue
and i trust mother earth's
conviction, hunched over you
"so it must be true,
opposites attract."



i like the way you dance,
your limbs swaying
like tulips in the wind
(soft and delicate)
yet your roots are strong
like the hold you have on me
my brain couldn't fathom
our love as wrong

let's make our bed
in a field of roses,
lie with the petals
tickling our flesh
birdwatching,
sunbathing,
embracing one another tight
let's stay here
until the moon shares her light

collecting our memories
i hang them, framed,
in my heart
like a corporeal exhibit
i'll live in my cardiac museum
Forever.



Sun and Moon Collide

Written by: Janyne Langlois

Edited by: Priya Rohella

Orange and yellow hues poured in from the window above. The glowing rays shone down on the table in the middle of the room encrusted with the markings of glowing orange runes.

Resting on the table were three large mugs – two yellow and one blue. Bits of Blue Lotus petals floated in the mugs as flashes of orange light reflected against them.

“Good. Hold it just like that – and don't lose your focus.”

A tall, lanky man with salt and pepper hair held his pale hand out, as if to steady the person he was talking to.

Kallian Hemberlin, the greatest wizard of his time, harnessed the ability to use his powers at their strongest both during the day and at night. People from all over the world travelled high and low for his counseling and potions.

But as he got older, his need for an apprentice grew. There was his old friend, Anton, a man whose magic worked best under the light of the moon. When he passed, Kallian took in his daughter, Merissa, who grew to be his apprentice. Then she was chosen to be the new protector of the Pond of Elysia, so she couldn't work as his apprentice anymore. He searched high and low until he met a young man in the town market. Kallian stumbles upon a lot of young people, but what caught his attention was the young man asking for Blue Lotus tea.

“How long do I hold it?” The young man asked. His dark hand trembled as his palm shone orange. He used his free hand to push his glasses up his nose then nervously pulled at his coiled hair.

“Until he tells you not to, Jacob. It's a test of your strength and willpower.”

A young woman with white and ginger hair slumped in her chair, tracing the glowing blue lines on her right prosthetic forearm. She got it after her real arm got chomped off by a water beast. Fun times.

Her milky white eyes lazily bored into Jacob's dark brown ones. They shined with an orange hue, a sign that he was using his magic. But the longer he stared at Merissa, the more faded it became.

The stones fell on the table with a loud ‘clack’, startling all three of them.



Kallian groaned and narrowed his eyes at Merissa.

“Merissa, go to bed. You're distracting my apprentice.” He crossed his arms.

Merissa scoffed and rolled her eyes.

“What's so distracting about me?” Merissa questioned in offense. She tugged at her pajama shirt until it showed her shoulder and the glowing blue veins beneath her skin. “I have done nothing to warrant Jacob's distraction. Right, Jacob?”

“Huh?” Jacob blinked, gazing at Merissa. Then glancing over at Kallian, who was glaring at both of them, before he settled for looking at the ground.

“Jacob! You're supposed to be on my side, not his!” Merissa exclaimed, fixing her shirt.

“See?” Kallian motioned to Jacob. “You're distracting him.” Kallian snapped his fingers in front of Jacob's face. “Focus. And not on Merissa.”

“I-I wasn't distracted by her shoulder.” Jacob weakly defended. Though, he never denied he wasn't distracted by her at all.

Kallian deadpanned and narrowed his eyes at Jacob. “Merissa. Bed.”

Merissa groaned and dragged herself off of the chair. “I was so comfortable, too.” She took the scrunchie off her wrist and tied up her voluminous curls as best as she could.

Before Merissa made it to the door, Jacob summoned up the courage to ask her a question he'd been putting off for the last week.

“Um – Merissa?” He called out to her.

“Yeah?”

“Uh... are you – are you going to that masquerade ball today? The one in town?”

Merissa was silent for a moment as she pondered his question. The masquerade ball only happened once a year – and to Merissa? It was the best time of the year. She'd been to the masquerade ball with Kallian when she was younger. It was held in the Diré Mansion in the middle of town since it was the largest building there. Everyone in town would dress up in their most elaborate and intricate outfits and party all night. Even the kids could go around and collect chocolates and candies to bring home while the adults talked and drank wine. The first year Merissa went with Kallian, she was dressed as a fairy. She wore a flowy green princess dress with poofy sleeves and an equally poofy skirt. Kallian used his magic to give her



real fairy wings and told her not to jump off of any high places to try and fly. She did anyway.

She looked forward to the ball every year, but ever since she became the pond's protector, the prospect of going has left her mind.

"Uh... well, I'm not sure actually. Doesn't the ball happen at night?" Merissa asked.

"Well, the evening. Like six o'clock until around two in the morning. But... I know you have pond duties at night. I was just – I just wanted to ask."

Jacob softly cleared his throat, picking at his fingernails. His gaze kept flicking between the ground and Merissa's eyes. A tender smile grows on Merissa's face as her shoulders relax.

"I'll let you know, Jacob." She spoke, his name rolling like water off her tongue.

"I love you."

Is what Jacob wanted to say.

Instead, he opted for a more sane response that wouldn't get him chained down and cursed by Kallian.

"Yeah, okay."

Merissa smiled widely. She could tell he was trying his hardest to be nonchalant by the way he shoved his fidgeting hands into his pocket, but the way his eyes lit up was not helping his case.

Merissa let out a soft chuckle and waved them off, pulling open the door of the study. Jacob turned back around, avoiding Kallian's gaze like the plague, when his eyes landed on her blue mug. Didn't she need that before bed? His large hands curled around the porcelain mug.

"Uh – Merissa! You forgot your tea!"

"Oh!"

Merissa stepped into the doorway, meeting him halfway.

"Whoops. Thanks, Jacob. I dunno what I would've done if –"

The moment their fingers brushed, sparks of orange and blue wisps of magic erupted into the room.

"Woah –"

"Kallian?!"

Kallian moved quickly, flicking both of his hands and casting an orange glow over them, calming down both of their magic so they didn't destroy the study.



Jacob and Merissa both stepped away from each other as their outburst of magic disappeared.

Kallian let out an exasperated sigh and rubbed his face with his hands.

“You both are going to be the death of me...” He grumbled.

“Kallian?” Jacob called to his mentor.

“What the heck was that?” Merissa motioned to... whatever just happened.

“We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?” Kallian gently guided her to the door. He firmly gripped shoulder, silently telling her to drop it. “You need rest, you have a job. Go.”

Merissa squinted at Kallian as if she was trying to read all his secrets, but she was never good at doing it. She then glanced over his shoulder at Jacob who kept staring down at his hand.

“Goodnight, Merissa.”

Kallian closed the door, leaving her outside the study alone.

“Rude...” She huffed.

Merissa glanced down at her prosthetic hand as she walked down the hallway that would transport her to Kallian’s house. Her magic’s never acted up like that before. Sure, there were times it didn’t cooperate with her, but it never exploded like that. Maybe one of the previous protectors could help; maybe Skoll or Eimi. Though, she wasn’t sure how well she’d be able to talk to Skoll if Crius wasn’t around. She sucked at sign language and if she asked Eimi, she’d probably tell her to figure it out because she doesn’t help people for free...

Okay, maybe Eimi wasn’t the best person to ask for help with this problem, but most of the others aren’t at the underwater cathedral as often!

Neoma is always floating around and transporting to other places in the pond; Caelum used to be a farmer, so he’s usually hyper focused on the garden and shoos away anyone that interrupts his gardening; Esmeray could never be found, and Merissa was ninety percent sure she’s an assassin; and Crius is always off with Neoma, “building little houses for the sea creatures”, which Merissa was sure was code for them being together and not telling anyone.

Which only left Skoll, Eimi, and Mavros.

Skoll was easy to talk to... as long as Crius was there to bridge that language barrier. Eimi? Eimi was usually busy enchanting her clothes and hair. Merissa wouldn’t bother speaking to Mavros.



He was kind of a jerk to put it lightly.

“Ugh... I’ll figure it out when I get there...”

Merissa chugged her lukewarm tea and dropped the mug in the sink for later. She stretched and let out a heavy yawn, dragging herself up the winding stairs and into her room.

*

“Phase in already, will you? I need my room to myself, y’know.”

Merissa’s eyes snapped open. She shot up and tumbled on the cold, hard ground.

“My gosh...”

A woman with dark hair styled into a curly hime cut and piercing blue eyes stared down at Merissa.

“Not only are you here early, but you phased into my room. Didn’t Mavros teach you how to do any of this? And – take care of your hair will you? You’ve got more white streaks than my Nona.”

Merissa groaned and rubbed her arm as she stood up.

“Sorry, Eimi. Also, I can’t really control the hair thing... unless you’ve got a spell to fix it.”

“I’m not a magician you fool.”

“We use magic.”

“Still not a magician.”

Merissa opened her mouth to speak, but Eimi was already sitting in front of her vanity, applying blush on her cheeks. She cleared her throat.

“You’re still here, because...?” Eimi’s piercing gaze landed on Merissa in the mirror.

“I need help.” Merissa answered.

“With?”

“Magic – and, *I know* you’re not a magician, but this is different.”

Eimi continued applying her makeup, letting Merissa’s words hang in the air. Merissa awkwardly shifted, tugging at the mesh blue sleeves and fiddling with the blue crescent moon on the chest of her dress before Eimi spoke up again.

“Your old mentor can’t help you? Isn’t he supposed to be the most powerful wizard of his time? You know I don’t help people for free.”

“He sort of... ushered me to bed.”



Eimi put down her makeup brush and started applying lipstick. She found that strange. She didn't know Kallian personally, only heard of him through Merissa.

She was curious now.

“Elaborate.”

Merissa blinked and stared at Eimi like she'd grown a second head. This was unlike Eimi. Was there something in it for her? Eimi cleared her throat, prompting Merissa to speak.

So she did. Merissa told Eimi everything, from Jacob nervously asking her to the masquerade ball, to their magic exploding.

“And, Kallian didn't explain anything. Just sent me to bed... what do you think?” Merissa asked Eimi.

“I think you're dense.”

Oh. Wow, okay.

“Dense?! What the hell did I do?” Merissa sputtered.

“Not using your brain,” Eimi jabbed her lipstick in Merissa's direction.

“I'm not going to give you the answer. This is something you need to figure out on your own.”

Merissa groaned and rubbed her hands over her face.

“I don't even know what I'm supposed to be figuring out!”

“Because you're dense.”

“I am not!”

“Merissa.” Eimi put down her makeup and stood up, towering over Merissa. “The moon rules your powers, correct?”

“Uh, yeah. Why?”

“Amd the sun, his?”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question.”

Merissa scoffs and rolls her eyes. “Fine. Yes.”

“Mhm...” Eimi guides Merissa to the vanity and roughly sits her down. “I want you to actually use your brain and think.”

“About...?”

“Jacob.”

“Why?”

“Do you want help or not?”

Merissa grumbled, knowing this was going to cost her down the road, but she needed to understand why their magic exploded when they touched.



“Okay... fine.”

Merissa closed her eyes, letting her thoughts drift to Jacob. The first thing she thought of were his hands. They were always warm compared to hers. His large, soft hands would trace the glowing blue veins in the grooves of her prosthetic arm.

“They’re like little rivers,” he’d say. “And they all connect to you.”

“Hm.” Merissa heard Eimi hum.

“Hm, what? Am I doing something?” Merissa opened her eyes just to get smacked with the sleeve of Eimi’s kimono. “Gah – Hey!”

“Keep thinking. Don’t open your eyes until I say so.”

Merissa brushed her curls out of her face and let her thoughts drift back to Jacob. His glasses specifically. They were gold framed which complimented his dark skin perfectly. She always told him how nice they looked on him. It’s probably why he always wore them, even when he didn’t need to. Jacob wore the glasses to protect his eyes during training and potion making – he said the bright lights of the magic would hurt his eyes and that he’d have to cut the ingredients really tiny before using them. Merissa didn’t know how the clear lenses helped him so she just assumed Kallian enchanted them to fit his needs.

Then she thought of his eyes. His eyes reminded her of the soil around the pond. Dark, yet glistened like the stars in the night sky when the soil was damp.

Merissa clenched her jaw and fiddled with the fabric of her dress, trying to still her beating heart.

“You truly are dense.” Eimi scoffed and flicked Merissa’s forehead then smacked her arm with her sleeve. Eimi always did it. Merissa always complained, but Eimi did it anyway.

“Dude! You calling me dense and smacking me is *not* helping!” Merissa opened her eyes and glared up at Eimi, meeting her piercing blue ones.

“I say it because it’s true. Have you seen yourself when you think about him?” Eimi moved out of the way so Merissa could look at herself in the mirror. Spirals of blue magic swirled around her, some of them forming hearts. The veins on her prosthetic pulsed with the beat of her heart – which Merissa did not appreciate at all. How was she supposed to keep her cool when *that* happened?!

Then she looked at her face. Though she was glaring, her eyes were wide like a doe’s and sparkled like a kid learning magic for the first time. And she was blushing.





A streak of white formed in her hair from the overuse of magic.

“Nooooo...” Merissa whined and buried her face in her hands. “This was not supposed to happen! I can’t like him! That’s – That’s weird!”

“Why?”

“He’s Kallian’s apprentice!”

“You used to be his apprentice.”

“It’s different!”

“How?”

“It just is!”

Merissa stood up and paced around the room. This was wrong. She can’t like Jacob, they’re practically coworkers! They’ve both worked with Kallian! She sees him everyday! Wouldn’t it be weird if they liked each other? What if Kallian found out? What if he knows?!

Merissa chewed on her nails until they bled.

“So, you like him.” Eimi stated bluntly, guiding Merissa to the chair in front of the vanity. “Big deal. People like each other all the time. I’ve had three husbands in my lifetime, and let me tell you. The only thing I’ve regretted is not telling them my feelings sooner.”

“But you were married three times.”

“Yes, the first two died not long after. Illness. But this is not about me right now,” Eimi gave Merissa a pointed look. “You want to go to the ball with him. You can try and lie, but your eyes hold the truth.”

Merissa glanced at Eimi then looked at her reflection.

She did want to go to the ball with Jacob. She wanted to wear a ball gown so flowy it made her feel like a princess. She wanted to do her hair up nice and wear an elaborate mask that matched her dress. She wanted to slow dance with him under the moonlight and stare into his eyes lovingly while they forget about the world around them.

Merissa sighed as her shoulders slumped. “I actually hate you...” She grumbled and rubbed her eyes. “Why are you even helping me? You don’t help people unless something’s in it for you.”

Eimi rolled her eyes. “Well, Merissa, if there’s anything I love as much as beauty rituals and speaking the blunt truth, it’s matchmaking.”

Merissa furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. She wanted to question how that could’ve happened, but it was Eimi. The woman was full of secrets.

There was a beat of silence before Eimi spoke up.

“You should go to the ball,” She started. She held up a finger when

Merissa tried to protest. “I know you have your duties, but you can always make it up another day. It’s one night that you’ll never have again – and don’t say next year because we don’t know what the future holds. Trust me, you should go.”

“I have nothing to wear.” Merissa said.

Eimi knew Merissa would fight back, but she wasn’t one to back down either.

“This whole cathedral is filled with magic. If you need something, ask. Watch,” Eimi cleared her throat and closed her eyes. Blue and silver hues emitted from her palms; in a moment, silver bracelets appeared on her wrists. “See? Easy.” Eimi turned Merissa to her, giving her a hardened look. “You are going to that ball, understood?”

Merissa couldn’t help but feel like that was a threat.

*

“Do you think she’ll be here?”

Back in the study, Kallian helped Jacob fix his Victorian jabot and the gold epaulets that kept his ‘prince cape’ – as Merissa would call it – in place. Jacob constantly fidgeted with the cuffs on his sleeve and the belt on his waist – they shimmered like his eyes when he used his magic. He was never one to dress up in such extravagant clothes, but the ball was the only exception. Not to mention, he desperately hoped Merissa would come. When Kallian was done, Jacob grabbed his gold mask that resembled the flames of the sun.

“Try not to dirty that suit, alright? I have to put it back after the ball.”

Kallian told Jacob, dusting off the white suit.

“Did it cost a lot?” Jacob asked.

“Yes, it’s custom made afterall–”

“GUYS, WAIT! DON’T LEAVE WITHOUT ME!”

The sound of rushing water and heavy footsteps echoed down the hall. “Is that –” Jacob squinted his eyes and strained his ear. Was that really water he was hearing?

“My goodness...” Kallian let out an exasperated sigh and flicked his wrist, putting up a barrier around them.

The moment the door opened, pond water bursted in, drenching everything in the study.



“Oops... sorry. Didn’t know that was going to happen. I opened the door from the pond and I thought I could just walk through and – wow, it’s a mess in here now. Cleanup’s going to be hell.”

Merissa shook water off her sheer light blue sleeves. Her layered dress had water dripping down the sides and off the silver accessories.

Kallian deadpanned and let down the barrier, fixing the sleeves of his green and gold suit. “Why must you always ruin the study?”

“I don’t!” Merissa protested, fixing her hair. “I am sorry though, I didn’t know that would happen. Now look, my clothes are all ruined.”

Jacob didn’t think that. When he looked at Merissa, his head went blank but filled with her all at the same time. His body froze and he could feel every particle in his body moving. From the droplets in her hair to her milky white eyes to the red tint of her lips and the small gap in her teeth to her prosthetic arm, just everything about her made him want to admire her in silence and scream how much he loved everything about her all at the same time.

“You’re the most radiant woman I’ve met in my life, my mother would love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” Is what Jacob wanted to say. But Kallian moving towards Merissa broke him out of his thoughts.

“Your clothes are fine, Merissa. You look great, we just need to dry them off.” Kallian raised his hands, casting a warm orange glow over her to dry the water.

“Thanks...” Merissa fixed her hair as the warm buzz of magic enveloped her.

Kallian gave her a curt nod and guided Merissa out the back exit of the study with Jacob following behind.

The setting sun casted orange and pink hues over the town of Elisara. People from all over gathered together for this one night. Some wore suits, some wore dresses, and – like always – children ran around in their costumes and masks asking for candy.

“Ah, Kino!” Kallian pushed up his black wolf mask, waving to an older man across the street. “You two,” He then turned to Merissa, who was still fixing her hair, and Jacob, who kept fidgeting with his mask, using that as an excuse to sneak glances at Merissa. “Have fun. And stay safe.”

The other two’s heads snapped up to meet Kallian’s gaze.

“What?” Merissa asked, a slight frown on her face. “Where are you going?”



“You’re not staying?” Jacob looked at Kallian before stealing another glance at the woman beside him. If Kallian wasn’t staying with them, then...

“Of course not,” Kallian interrupted his train of thought, a wrinkle in his eyebrows. “Why would I do that? I have old friends to catch up with. Besides, I see the both of you every single day, I deserve peace as well, do I not?”

“No, not really,” Merissa joked, earning a deadpan look from Kallian who waved them off to walk with that old guy across the street, leaving Merissa and Jacob to themselves. Merissa turned her attention towards Jacob.

“Well... to the Dire Mansion we go?”

“Uh – yeah, sure. Ladies first,” Jacob awkwardly motioned for her to walk ahead.

“Yeah, no.” Merissa shook her head, earning a confused look from Jacob. “If I lead the way, we’re taking the scenic route and arriving fashionably late.” She clarified.

Come on, Jacob, this is your chance. Don’t lose the moment, He let out a shuddery breath and looked Merissa directly in her eyes with a nervous yet confident gaze. “I don’t mind taking the scenic route if it’s with you,” He breathed out.

Merissa froze up, her breath catching in her throat. Her heart hammered in her chest as the conversation with Eimi replayed in her head. She liked him. Way more than she probably should. Part of her wanted to say that she was joking; that they should probably go now so Kallian doesn’t worry too much – even though he gave them permission to be alone together.

But the other part of her wanted to take that scenic route. She wanted to walk slowly and savor the moment with him. She wanted to link her arm with his, maybe even hold his hands and the sun fully set and the glow of the moon shone down on them. She wanted to make it to the Dire Mansion and they both decided to stay in the garden to watch the Evening Primrose and Moonflowers bloom. She wanted them to dance to the ballroom music in the garden, just the two of them. The music was loud enough to hear from the outside, if they needed they could dance near a window.

“Merissa?” Jacob looked down at her, worried he might have been too direct. Did he scare her?

Merissa, startled out of her spiraling thoughts, shook her head and looked up at Jacob. “No!” She exclaimed quickly.



“Oh,” Jacob’s shoulders slumped slightly. “That’s alright. We can head to the Dire Mansion now—”

“What? Wait – No, Jacob, hold on!” Merissa took his warm hand in her cold ones.

“Let me start over.”

Jacob’s soft eyes widened as he stared down at her hands holding his. He gently and carefully wrapped his hand around hers, slow enough so if she wanted to pull away she could. When she didn’t, he fully wrapped his hands around hers, holding them like a newborn creature. “Yes?” He asked, his voice no louder than the whisper of the wind.

“I...” Merissa inhaled deeply, having trouble looking into his eyes. “I... would like to take the scenic route with you. And... maybe walk a bit fast so we can watch the night flowers in their garden bloom?”

Jacob couldn’t help but smile and let out a little chuckle as warmth spread all throughout his body. “You want to take the scenic route... the *slow* route... and walk fast?” He gently teased.

“I –” Merissa huffed softly and grumbled. “I didn’t plan this far, okay? I just... I... want to spend time with you. I don’t know when’s the next time I’ll be able to have a day like this,” Merissa nervously looked up at him. “I want this moment to last.”

Oh, Jacob was a fool for her. Anything she told him to do right now, he’d do it. Their hearts beat in sync, unknowing to them. Sparks of orange and blue magic blasted from their hands. Jacob flinched, about to let go when Merissa’s grip tightened on his hand.

“Wait, don’t!” Merissa gently took his other hand in hers. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.” Jacob responded with no hesitation.

Merissa thought about what Eimi told her when enchanting a dress for her to wear.

“If you two touch hands and the magic thing happens again... let it happen.”

“What?” Merissa questions. “But what if—”

“No what ifs,” Eimi interrupted. “If you two care for each other as much as I think you do, don’t let go. The magic will take care of itself. Trust me.”

Their magic swirled all around them, the wind blowing her dress and his cape all around. The combined magic shot up and exploded like a firework before falling down in a warm flurry of sparkles that fell in their hair like



snow. One larger spark of magic formed between them in the space of a heart – her half blue and his half orange – fizzling out before it hit the ground.

“Wha...” Jacob stared at Merissa, the sparkles of magic in her hair, the ones on the ground. “Merissa...”

“Woah... That was a bit on the nose,” Merissa cleared her throat nervously, staring down at their intertwined hands. “Eimi – she’s one of the previous protectors – told me that... when two people’s magic does... all of this... it’s because they have a strong connection. Bond. Feelings? She just – She just said it was a strong connection that shouldn’t be ignored!”

Really, what Eimi said was: *“That’s because you’re soulmates, you idiot. Why do you think you’re so attracted to him? Like, beyond normal attraction. Normal people’s magic doesn’t explode like that, even if they like each other. It only happens in rare cases like this... truthfully, it’s rare for soulmates to feel the same about one another. I know you, Merissa, don’t mess this up.”*

“Is... that what Kallian was afraid of? Our magic exploding like this?” Jacob wondered.

“No... he was probably more worried about the fact that this isn’t just some silly crush thing... it’s... a soulmate thing, and... soulmates are forever...” Merissa nervously bit the skin of her lips. “He’s just worried for obvious reasons. You’re his apprentice, I’m like his kid... it gets complicated if we get together, y’know?”

A beat of silence passed between them before Merissa spoke up again.

“I tried to ignore it. Pretend it wasn’t real, that I wasn’t allowed to feel these things because it would be weird... but I can’t anymore. Jacob–”

“Wait,” Jacob looked down at her, his heart nearly beating out of his chest. His hands grew warmer as an orange glow emitted from his palms. “Just... I – I didn’t think you – I thought –... can we just stay like this for a moment? Please?”

Merissa nodded softly, giving him the chance to collect himself. Jacob drew in a deep breath, his heart calming down and the pulse of his magic fading away.

“You okay?” Merissa asked.

“Yes... yeah, I’m okay, just... a bit dazed. Excited, nervous. All of it.” Jacob admitted. “I just didn’t think you’d... feel the same about me...”

Merissa’s wide eyes softened slightly. “Jacob... honestly, I was trying



really hard not to... But, eventually, my heart decided it couldn't be without you. Even then I tried to come up with reasons why we couldn't be together... but..." Merissa gently motioned to the two of them standing on the side of the street.

"Magic and fate have a funny way of bringing people together, huh?" Jacob gave a soft and awkward laugh. "So... you... y-you feel... about me... how I feel about you?"

"Well, that depends... How do you feel about me?"

"Truthfully? There aren't enough words in the world to describe how I feel..." Jacob gently lifted one of his hands towards her cheek, stopping just centimeters away. "May I...?"

When Merissa gave him the go ahead, Jacob gently placed his warm palm against her cold cheek, gently running his thumb over the blue glow of the veins under her eyes. He gently leaned in, never pressing forwards unless Merissa let him.

"You're nervous," Merissa whispered, their faces only inches apart. "Me too."

An idea came to Jacob, hopefully something that would satisfy them both. He gently pressed a kiss to the corner of her lips. Not quite her lips, not quite her cheeks. Just perfectly in between. "Was... that okay?"

Merissa stayed quiet for a moment as she stared lovingly at Jacob. "Perfect."





Maybe We Should Have Kissed Sooner

Written by: Michelle Kuria

Edited by: Priya Rohella

I suspect that by now you must have
forgotten me.

I will not pretend to be offended. Honestly,
most of the time, so do I.

But you do cross my mind, from time to
time. I wonder, what would we say to each
other if we were to meet? Would you
recognize me? Have I changed?

What would be the first thing that you would
ask me? Do you have anything to ask me?

I wonder what I would say, I wonder if I
would smile, if we would hug.

Unfortunately, ours was not unique. Two
kids who were trying, maybe one was more
hopeful. I won't say who, just to keep the
peace, if there is any.

I will admit a single regret. I wish I had kept
the photos and the texts.

I wish I could witness who I was when I was
in love.

Yes, I was in love.



I never got the chance to say it, I never got the chance to realise that.

Not at that moment, would that have changed our ending? Was that why you left?

I do believe that I knew it; it wasn't as hidden as I thought. How else would you describe a person who only dreams of another?

In realising that I loved you, I realised that we spoke different languages. I loved you because you listened; you stayed because I cared.

I wonder if we would go for coffee, maybe lunch. Perhaps it would be brief, short, and sweet, an homage to us.

Would your eyes light up? Would you smile at me? You know I could never forget that smile.

I remain hopeful even though a part of me knows. I know, even if I don't want to admit it.

Our ending may be too painful for a happy hello.

However, should you decide to smile, just know that I would smile back. Should you decide to reach out for a hug, I will be waiting with open arms.



And should you decide to have a
conversation, just know— and I'm sure you
know I will speak—but also this time, I too
will listen.



The Maw

Written By: Scout Rowan

Edited by: Priya Rohella

When Nathaniel opens his eyes, he's surrounded by dark grey. That's all it is - no form, just grey. He turns his head to what he believes to be the left, then the right. Nothing indicates change or depth. Something tense buzzes in the air, imperceptible to the ear of any living creature, wedged between his spine and diaphragm. It tells him time is short, though time doesn't feel conceptual here.

Good. That means he must be in the right place.

He takes a trepidatious step forward, not placing his full weight down for fear of falling. Would it matter if he fell? Can he lose his life in limbo? It's a peculiar concept, to pass on between worlds—one he'd rather not explore today.

A speck appears at the center of his vision. He blinks, but it does not move. When he looks elsewhere, the speck does not follow, but grows incrementally larger as he cautiously continues forward, until an oak door towers in front of him. It's the most peculiar sight, too. There are no walls or framing around the door, making it a cast-iron ornamented behemoth nested in the stratosphere.

He fixes his eyes on the iron knob, reaches, twists the handle, but it does not budge. Once more, and there's not so much as a protesting creak.

"Goddamnit..." He breathes, forehead hitting the door with a soft 'thunk'. Maybe this is all a joke, a hoax squawked by a religious quack, pilferage of nickels and dimes to add to the stack of coins in the cellar of their lie-based empire.

What is he doing? Those who are dead should be left to rest in peace; maybe this is the other's way of telling him that. "Leave things in the past," they'd likely jeer, amidst laughter and pointed fingers.

But they never looked into Lenora's bright blues on a hot summer night. Never fought the urge to cup her delicate ivory face in their hands.

He'll never forget standing under the mesquite tree, offering his handkerchief for her to dab her tears away, when he'd have much rather run his roughened thumbs across the apples of her painted cheeks.



“I’m afraid he’s going to do something this time,” she quavered with a trembling lip. “I can’t bear the thought.”

“Then run,” Nathaniel had to fight himself to keep it from sounding like an invitation, to sound more like a friend than a lover. He’d have loved nothing more than to carry her away, to hop onto a train with her on his arm. He’d use his money to get them seats in the first class—she deserves nothing less—and take her as far away as he could.

Now, something tickles the tip of his nose. He rubs it, skin turning cold where the now-smudged tear dries.

“Nora.” To say her name feels sacrilege. He couldn’t save her, after all. Yet, speaking her name brings an odd wash of comfort, and a pang of longing.

“There’s so much I want to say... things I wish I’d had the guts to say while I could look you in the eye.” He wipes another tear before inhaling shakily. *Christ*, he feels like a downright buffoon. But the chain wrapped tight around his heart begs to be loosened.

“I will spend the rest of my mortal existence without the touch of another woman, because no woman will ever hold a candle to you.”

He turns, leans back against the door, letting his head rest against the craggy, unfinished wood while he works to level himself.

“Lenora Pauline Whittaker—” He chokes as a vision of their fictive wedding flashes behind his eyelids. Knowing he’ll never slide that dainty ring he’s held onto all these years onto her slender finger.

“To rise every morning and see the sun embrace you through the kitchen window, haloing you and them wispy hairs you always complained about, would have been bliss. What I’d give to have been the recipient of your scoldings—hell you’d prolly go on about our damn dog digging up the persimmon sapling or somethin’,” He chuckles to himself, imagining their mutt that never was, mud-covered muzzle and paw prints on the floor behind it. She’d be downright livid, hands on her hips, smoke coming out of her ears.

“But to love and hold you in the mire and the mountaintops of life would have been my greatest honor.”

He lowers himself to the ground, coughing back a sob at the memory of her smile, which never reached her eyes. What beauty it would be to see her beam, so alive, unlike the battered, bruised, barely warm version he saw all too late. He hated Huck—never did right by her. It squeezed his



chest and made his blood boil, seeing the look in her eye turn to hurt with a hint of vitriol whenever he talked down to her.

“I wish I’d put that motherfucker in the ground the first time I saw him.” He drones, voice hoarse. “I’ll never forgive myself. But please, find—” A hiccup. “I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Nathaniel rests his elbows on his knees before scrubbing his face with his roughened palms. This time, when he exhales, his shoulders drop. He remains folded over himself, feeling how his body rocks with the give and take of each breathy cry. The energy, still buzzing with tension, hasn’t faltered, and the space remains eerily still.

“What am I doin’, Nora?” He groans, shifting to crane his neck backward, staring at the grey above him. Tears trickle past his temples into the well of his ear.

“I don’t even know if I’m speakin’ to you,” he sniffs, picking at the skin around his thumbnail. “But I pray to God, if you’ve heard nothin’ else, that He’ll make sure you know that I will forever love you, with everything I have and everything I do not.”

The abysmal silence feels like a boa constrictor around his skull. He closes his eyes, counting his breaths, and he waits.

In for one...two...three...

And out for four...five...six.

He loses count of his six-second intervals, and decides that’s when he should finish up.

Slowly, he pushes himself to his feet, looks at the door, then turns on his heel to walk.

Where he’s going is a mystery.

*

By Nora’s count, this is wake-up number fourteen. Fourteen times that she has opened her eyes to soiled, floral wallpaper, sun-faded from curtainless windows.

She pushes herself upright on the mattress, looks out the window, hoping once more for change, but does not find it. From the nightstand, her childhood bear stares back, like he, too, finds the lack of outside unnerving.

This wake-up, however long it is, will go like the others: rise, look out the



window, pull and push anything that resembles a way out. If all efforts fail, return to bed, where she will flail and turn until her limbs feel heavy enough for comfort.

She sleeps always, yet never feels rested. Dreamless slumber with an undertone of anticipatory grief. Waiting is exhausting; sleep is the best way to hurry up and wait for something that may never come.

Nora pads across the cold hardwood toward the door. Nothing, again. Darned thing must be cemented shut. She presses against the walls, pries fingernails between floorboards, pulls the drawers out of the desk she spent hours upon hours writing her teenage and early adulthood years away.

She tried to ignore it, tamp it down, reduce it to an iota, but now it swells: desperation, insanity, thick in the air around her as tears threaten to spill past. The feeling can't be named, and it doesn't abate the overwhelming agony that scoops her innards out with a molten pick.

Something pricks her ears, loud yet muffled, a stark contrast to the all-consuming quiet.

"Nora,"

It's too quick for her to place the voice exactly. Her cheeks warm as she wills herself still. Can one's heart slow like molasses and quicken like a jackrabbit at the same time?

"There's so much I want to say," The voice comes back, intensifying her relief and confusion.

Nora thinks back to the moment Nathaniel's presence entered her life: walking outside of the general store with Huck's iron-tight grip around her bicep, while he spat hushed venom into her ear about how women are better seen and not heard.

A group of men came barreling out of the store, not a hundred yards in front of them, bandanas tight around their noses, hats low as they made their way to their horses.

Between his black bandana—pulled over his nose—and even darker Stetson, two icy, powder blue eyes met her own.

She saw him next when she and Huck were in town again, when Huck went to the stables to drop another hundred on a stallion he'd never saddle. While he guffawed with the owner about the newest broad at the bathhouse, when Huck thought Nora was out of earshot, she tiptoed out of the barn for fresh air. It was bright for a cloudy day, the cloud cover dotted with blue gaps.



She sat on a patch of grass just outside, smoothing her skirt before setting her gaze on Main Street. The paper boy shouted from his corner, cowboys dismounted their horses and sauntered into the saloon, women in homespun dresses ooh'd and ahh'd while craning their necks to look into the boutique windows.

What fun it must be, she pondered, to have a friend who shares the same interests in clothing as you, who enjoys it not for the sexual prowess one can show but the novelty of it all, the expression of self.

"Everything alright?"

She turned, trailed her eyes above the eye-level kneecaps, and found the most striking set of blue eyes she'd ever seen, contrasted by a black Stetson and bandana around his neck. All the air left her lungs as her memories clicked into place. Was this another one of Huck's games to test her fidelity? She turned over her shoulder to check the doorway of the barn, and was greeted by an empty alley.

She looked back at him, heart quickening. Had Huck climbed into the rafters, or run somewhere else to observe from afar? Of course, this would happen the one time she slipped away. "I..."

"I mean," He said, softer, nodding his head toward the barn, where the stable owner guffawed. "Are you alright?"

She wished she were stupid.

"Lenora!"

Not a moment sooner was she to her feet, smoothing her skirt, rushing toward the barn, stopped short by Huck's barreled chest. He steadied her by holding her upper arms, hard enough to pin them to her sides.

"You had me worried. Have you been out here?" The mawkish concern in his tone rattled her spine, made her feel sick. His eyes moved over her shoulder, hardening when they fixed on the man behind her.

"No, Huck, he—"

"Who do you think you are?" Huck rounded her and strode toward this man, chest puffed and ears turning red. The outlaw stayed in place, unruffled by Huck's seething.

"I was just ensuring she was well, is all," He replies, with a gentle tip of his hat, and a polite smile that she wanted to wrap herself in.

"She is alright, aren't you, sweetheart?" Huck donned a sickly sweet tone that would have passed as affectionate any eavesdroppers, looking over his shoulder toward her. She nods, enough of a performance to convince Huck



that she's telling the truth.

"I was just ensuring she was well, is all," He replies, with a gentle tip of his hat, and a polite smile that she wanted to wrap herself in.

"She is alright, aren't you, sweetheart?" Huck donned a sickly sweet tone that would have passed as affectionate any eavesdroppers, looking over his shoulder toward her. She nods, enough of a performance to convince Huck that she's telling the truth.

The man looked between the two of them for far longer than was comfortable, only to lock his stare on her. Nora remembers feeling as though her heart was being undressed, peeled open layer by layer.

And for the first time in ages, she felt known.

"I'll be on my way then." He tipped his hat, before turning and sauntering down the road..

"Good," Huck called after him, a jeer that made heads turn, to her mortification.

The punishment she was given upon their return home was nothing short of devastating.

She presses herself to the door now, listening.

"Things I wish I'd had the guts to say to you when I could look you in the eye."

His voice is more gravelly than she remembers, lacking warmth.

"Nathaniel!" She calls, hitting the door with a closed fist. "Please, please open the door!"

She wills herself quiet, waiting for him to hear, for the click of the latch, for *anything*.

"I will spend the rest of my mortal existence without the touch of another woman, because no other woman will ever hold a candle to you."

Everything blurs. She takes a slow, shallow breath, hanging on to each muffled word.

"Lenora Pauline Whittaker,"

He says her name with poetic grace, even if her married name disgusts her; it rolls off his tongue with a groundedness that has her clutching her stomach.

"To rise every morning and see the sun embrace you through the kitchen window, haloing you and them wispy hairs you always complained about, would have been bliss."

She slides down the door, hair catching on the unfinished wood as she



goes. A tear trails down her cheek as she listens to him, smiling as he paints a picture of what life with him could have been: the phantom warmth of his arm wrapped with her own, the trail near the orchard outside of town that was always perfect for an evening stroll. A garden with persimmons and muscadine grapes, and a hound dog to run off unwanted critters.

“...But to love and hold you in the mire and the mountaintops of life would have been my greatest honor.”

Oh, to wrap her arms around him. If she could place a gentle kiss to his scalp. Her stomach squeezes when she hears his poorly concealed cry, and echoes with an uncontrollable one of her own.

“...I pray to God, if you’ve heard nothin’ else, that He’ll make sure you know that I will forever love you, with everything I have and everything I do not,” He wavers.

The devastating wail that scrapes up her throat is chilling, even to her own ears. Her body doubles over as her diaphragm pushes it out, and she sits shotgun to her faculties.

When she can control her mouth, she cries his name with the desperation of a lost child, begging and throwing fists against the door. His name spills over and over, becoming a mournful incantation of what was once so close, somehow light years away, and just out of reach all at once.

*

Nathaniel wakes bolt upright, covered in cold sweat.

“Slowly, now,” Victoria soothes, holding out a gentle hand.

He closes his eyes. Beneath him, the lumpy cot creaks. Meadowlarks and morning doves sing outside the tent. The air is cold and a bit damp; likely covering the grass with dewdrops. When he opens his eyes again, he meets Victoria’s, which are wide with curiosity.

“How’d it go?” she asks.

Great question, he thinks to himself. He shakes his head. “Just saw a door.” He breathes, wiping a bead of sweat from his upper lip.

She presses her mouth into a thin line, giving him a sympathetic look as she stands. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel... sometimes the powers that be aren’t as willing to let visitors in.”

“When can we try again?”



“Few days,” Victoria soothes, pouring him a glass of water.

“Few days?” He bites, then rights himself when her stare turns cold.

“Sorry... what if we don’t have that time?”

“It takes quite a bit to deliver a soul from the in-between,” She sits in the rocking chair beside the cot, passing the water to Nathaniel’s trembling palm before resting her hands on her lap. “Years, money... Even if she has family, friends, or next of kin also paying to visit or deliver her, it could be days or months before her eternal home is decided.”

“And once it is?”

“You won’t see her unless you go wherever she does.”

*

Stained, chipped baseboards.

That’s... odd.

Nora’s head feels stuffed with cotton as she rises, her face stamped with pressure from the flooring below.

She sits at the desk, pulls open the drawers, like she does each wake-up. They’re woefully empty, as is usual. In the mirror, her undereyes are more purple and swollen, emphasized by the reddened, puffy whites above them. Red, hardwood-embossed lines decorate her right cheek. Nora rubs, which only makes her cheek redder. Her curls, a shade of blonde that looks more like a terrible bright orange, stick up at every angle.

Them wispy hairs you always complained about.

Her gut becomes weak. Heavens, she’s tired of crying, of waiting, of the constant state of unrest. She walks to the bed, climbs under the stained covers. And stares at the ceiling.

Nathaniel’s girl. The blue-eyed bandit’s sweetheart. A real duo they would’ve been. Maybe he’d have taught her how to cook rabbit, how to shoot a gun. Hell, maybe she’d have been allowed to wear pants.

But why dream of it now?

She folds her arms over her stomach, rolls over, and closes her eyes.

*

Nathaniel opens his eyes to grey again. He blinks, once, and then begins his walk.



This is the last time, he thinks. If he doesn't see her this time, then that's that. It will mean he isn't meant to see her at all, and that he should put all hopes of closure to rest. One might say death, in and of itself, is all the closure he should get. They would be correct, but if the opportunity presents itself to rewrite the ending of their story, then he'd be a fool not to pick up the pen.

That speck is back, though it looks different this time. There's more detail to it, and it has Nathaniel walking faster, until he's panting, until his legs break into a sprint.

This has to be it.

It feels like eons before he sees the faintest glint of light amidst the speck. As it grows larger, so does its saturation. Dull greens and pinks coalesce around an amber light, with splatterings of something near white. The world narrows to the fragment of light and color.

This has to be it.

It grows, and grows, and his lungs grow weaker, and weaker, and weaker, until he's croaking to breathe. His legs burn, but he doesn't dare quit for fear that if he stops moving, he will have to start again. He doesn't know where that notion comes from, and does not care to test it.

Drawing closer, he recognizes the amber light as an oil lamp sitting atop a walnut desk, an upholstered armchair tucked underneath. Dark green and faded rose blossoms line the walls, bordered by aged baseboards and crown moulding. He pads a slow heel-to-toe on the invisible ground, craning his neck to see what lies on the other side of the room.

His heart folds in on itself.

There she is, knees to her chest, perched atop a daybed, staring out a window. She is a painting, something he could hold in her palm, but doesn't look as small as she did when he saw her in the days leading to her death. Her wavy hair falls like a curtain down her back, some over her arm. Her profile, button-nosed, angular, puts the Gibson girl to shame.

"Nora," he whispers.

Upon looking at her head on, she looks peaked, with sunken eyes and the beginnings of hollowed cheeks—a China doll without blush.

"Nathaniel?" She utters, eyes wide with disbelief, as she rises from the bed.

"Hi, darlin'," He can't help how his voice quivers, the tears in his eyes. She's crossing the room before he thinks to move.



Nora slings her arms around his neck, and he wraps his around her midriff. Her lips are frigid against his—hell, her whole body feels like ice. Nathaniel tightens his embrace, hoping to transfer warmth to her as she tilts her head. In this realm, she doesn't taste of cherries or sweets like he imagined. It is passionate and languid, all velvet tongues and chapped lips passing over each other, hands carding against scalps, arms flexing tight around torsos, tears melting together. Her mouth screws as her cries grow in volume, and Nathaniel feels her irrepressible affection.

"I'm here," he reassures with tender kisses on every inch of her face, wiping tears and smoothing her hair. "I'm here, sweetheart." Still, she weeps, her body collapsing against his. He catches her dead weight and lowers them to the floor, where she buries her face against his chest, and continues to let her body rack with each wail.

Nathaniel strokes her hair and wipes his own tears away as he tries to place himself in her shoes. He knows enough about her marriage to know that it was miserable, but the pit in his stomach grows when he thinks of all that must have happened behind closed doors, what happened leading up to when he found her. It felt good to put a bullet through that bastard's head, even if it was for reasons outside of their marriage.

Her cries dwindle to soft whines, her body settling in his lap as she becomes quiet. Nathaniel twirls a finger around a ringlet, watching as her willowy figure rises and falls in a steady rhythm with each breath. He could stay like this for eternity—the woman of his dreams within reach, safe in his arms.

He's nearly asleep when she breaks the silence.

"Hmm?" He grunts, opening his eyes.

"What you said 'bout lovin' me," She says absently. "The kitchen window, the dog...did you mean it?"

The door. He turns, looks at the passage way again, and sees it: the heavy oak door he leaned against the first time.

"Yes," He nods. "All of it. All of it, sweetheart, I loved you the moment I saw you."

Nora hums in acknowledgement as she pushes herself upright to look him in the eye. She looks exhausted and at rest all at once. Angelic.

"Then get me to Heaven."



Northumberland Street

Written by: Dimitrina Dyakova

Edited by: Aspen Greenwood

I miss you already
Your scent, your smile, your grace steady
Those other dark clouds felt heavy
But with you I feel ready

Although this November day is colder
With you, it feels like each day gets warmer
But the moment you leave my world
Those sharp cold needles swirl

And as we dreamily travel through this city
I think to myself, "What a pity"
That a soul as kind as this
Gets taken away from me with a kiss

I picture you boarding the bus
And shake the thought with a quiet curse
"He's still here," I remind myself
And put the thought on the top shelf

Hand in hand, and heart in heart
We become slowly art
As strong as ivy, our fingers intertwine
And we both deep down know why

Facing this affliction
Causes the strongest friction
But it's addiction

Shaking you off is hopeless and futile
But you know what's more brutal?



Losing this rarity
So, I have clarity

I'll keep carelessly skipping
Down Northumberland street
Our pain taking a backseat
Because the sound of our heartbeat as one
Is worth all of the pain and then some

So let's drink to today, my lover
Let our fears and pain take cover
May the soft glitter and whispers of our love hover
And one day we'll recover



If You Won't Save Me, Please Don't Waste My Time

Written by: James Llewellyn

Edited by: Emma Hanks

Swipe. Swipe. Swipe. Yes. No. Maybe. No.

I s romance dead? I wonder as soon as I open Tinder, which is like walking through an art gallery with only one exhibit: Portraits of everyone who wouldn't shag you if you were the last person on Earth.

Or at very least endangered. I think, answering my own question.

The train begins pulling away from the station, and when I stare out the window at nothing in particular, I catch my reflection. The face looking back at me is frowning, his stare vacant. Strange. Why does he look like that? He's on his way back from a date, a successful one at that, the morning after. He should be practically floating through the air like a cartoon character carried by the scent of a pie cooling on a windowsill. He should be on Cloud Nine.

But he's not. He feels nothing. Not bad, but not good either.

The more I think about it, the more annoyed I become at my own nonchalance. What's missing? The girl I'd gone out with was great; we'd had a good night. I have no regrets, but that lightning strike to the system everyone wants to feel didn't happen. Why?

I could just be fundamentally broken in the relationship department, a concept which concerns me. I don't want to chase something I can never catch. What if that's it for me? The thought stirs some dread in my gut, so I put that to one side for now.

Maybe it's the means of our meeting. Perhaps the inauthentic and manufactured nature of dating apps has put an artificial flavour on things. I figure there is a crucial element missing from online dating, something I can't quite put my finger on.

As I ruminate on an app that reduces the concept of romance to a game of Angry Birds, I look up, I realise, at the perfect time. Across from me, the eyes I meet are dark, wide and curious, framed by shoulder length brunette hair. Usually, I'd break eye contact, embarrassed and hesitant to initiate any



real connection with a stranger. But on this occasion, I feel compelled to maintain it, and instead smile.

She smiles back.

A cocktail of hope and excitement blooms in my chest, followed by relief at the knowledge that I can indeed still feel positive emotions. She tucks a lock of hair behind an ear and goes back to looking at her phone, and I too look at the suddenly fascinating pattern on the seat ahead of me.

I glance up again. She's still looking at her phone. Her mouth is puckered to one side, chewing her cheek, lost in concentration.

She's beautiful. I imagine what I'd say if I wanted to ruin the moment. The certain comfort of familiar sadness always overrules the uncertain chance of potential happiness.

She looks up again, chances a shy grin and returns to her phone.

A desire—not that kind—stirs in me, some sort of yearning. It hurts and pleases in equal measure, but soothes the gnawing in my gut. Perhaps I'm not romantically broken, just in need of some maintenance. The more I think about it, the sillier I feel for thinking such a thing. *You've never given it a fair whack to know that for sure. And why is that?*

Good question, me. The notion of truly opening up to someone is one I've always dismissed, for reasons I can't, or more likely won't, figure out. Instead I aim for the surface level like last night. I had a great time, but it didn't fulfill me like such a night would usually. Is it me? Was it her? Or is the foundation my view of dating is built on starting to erode? It feels like there's this inexplicable urge to do this, just to know that I can. Am I compelled to do this for no real tangible reason?

Nah. It's easier to believe that I am not cut out for relationships and enjoy flings as a fun distraction. But as I steal glances at the girl across from me, I start to wonder if I'm lying to myself. Maybe the 'casual' life that I am familiar with is the result of not knowing anything better. *The certain comfort of familiar sadness always overrules the uncertain chance of potential happiness.*

Averting my gaze to a suddenly very interesting piece of floor, I feel the warmth of her gaze on me momentarily, but the jury's out on whether I'm imagining it. This piece of floor is so enthralling that I barely register the chirpy voice merrily announcing our impending arrival at the next stop or the air pressure change as the carriage slows and rolls to a halt. It's not my stop.

But it's hers.



She pockets her phone and stands, smooths the creases out of her skirt, and reaches for a handrail near the doors. She doesn't look at me. I fight not to break my staring contest with a KitKat wrapper caught on a chair leg.

When the train doors slide open to a symphony of beeps, I chance a glance to see her step off the carriage onto the platform, hair fanning wildly in the wind. Through the window, a young man—handsome, well groomed—approaches her. With a magazine cover worthy smile, he pulls her into a hug and pecks her on the lips, and she reciprocates with warmth and familiarity.

The beeps chirp again and the doors thud shut. I sigh to myself, almost scoffing at my now very fatuous delusion. Oh well. Have a good life, Girl from the Train.

The carriage picks up speed again, and the girl, now walking hand-in-hand with the handsome young man, disappears from sight, the platform replaced by chain link fences and trees. I catch my reflection. The face looking back at me is now more relaxed, the frown loosened, brow unfurrowed, eyes wider, but sadder. Any real desire for introspection left the train with her, but I can't help but keep flipping this undefined feeling over in my head.

I start chewing on it again until I detect movement in my periphery. Glancing up, I meet the gaze of a girl about my age behind wide-rimmed glasses, her auburn hair tied back as she sits opposite me. I smile. She smiles back.



My Favorite Colour

Written by: Silas Baden-Myers

Edited by: Aspen Greenwood

I stand in the soft evening glow outside Elijah's house and wait for them to answer the door. I check the time on my phone and smile as their face lights up the screen. I am only three minutes late, the earliest I've been all week. Elijah has that effect on me. Despite the warm colour of the sky, a cold breeze makes me shiver. I listen through the door and try to slow my breathing as I hear footsteps approaching. When Elijah opens the door, the sound of muffled music seeps out. I feel the warmth of their hand slip into mine, and I am pulled down the hallway towards it.

The song fills the room, pouring from the CD player in the corner at just the right volume. It's something I recognise but can't remember the name of. Elijah is still holding my hand. Their eyes are crinkled in a grin. They tug on my hand and before I know it I am spinning in a butchered ballroom twirl. They spin me around until I am too dizzy to stand. Our giggles turn to belly laughs as I collapse onto the carpet, and they fall on top of me. I stop for a moment, letting the room come into focus, then crawl towards the CD player. Elijah follows me, grabbing at my feet. I writhe around at their ticklish touch and manage to wriggle out of their grasp just long enough to pick up the CD case. The outside cover is made up of fiery images arranged in geometric patterns. The album title reads "In Your Amber Eyes". I look over at Elijah to see that they are grinning at me and reaching for my feet again. I give them a stern telling off and whack them on the head with the CD case. I tell Elijah it's awfully suspicious that they are playing good music for once. They roll their eyes and stand up, holding their hand out for me. I grab it, hoisting myself up and purposefully yanking them off balance in the process. They smirk and give me a shove back. We sit down on their faded couch, and Elijah clicks onto YouTube.

They put on a Bob Ross video. He explains the names of his paints, and which ones he will use to depict the sunrise. He dips his brush in yellow ochre and crimson red, blending them on the palette and daubing them onto the canvas. The colour is bright and beautiful, and the way Elijah is watching, as if mesmerised by it, I can tell they think the same. Unaware



that my gaze has shifted to them, they sit like that until the painting is finished, and Bob Ross has said a soft goodbye to us. I poke Elijah in the ribs to get their attention, and we make our way to the kitchen.

I watch as Elijah picks an orange from the fruit bowl on the table. They inspect it carefully, turning it all the way around and squeezing it softly. I nod my approval. It's a good orange. They grin at me, toss it in the air a few times and place it gently on the chopping board. I open the cutlery drawer and find that Elijah keeps their big knives on the left side of the drawer, which is the wrong side of the drawer. I point this out as I hand the knife over, but they smirk and tell me that maybe I'm the one that's got it mixed up. I watch closely as they dissect the fruit, slicing eight segments with a determined clumsiness. Juice runs down Elijah's arm and they struggle to catch it with their tongue, frantically trying to stop it from dripping onto the floor. I steal a segment while the kitchen tap is involved in the situation and find half a pip in my piece. Elijah has sliced right through it, and I can see what it looks like on the inside, revealing that orange pips look the same all the way through. Elijah has discovered my thievery, and is watching me, eyebrows raised, and hands on their hips. I quickly shove the whole segment in my mouth, peel and all. I hold my hands up in defence. The orange is sweet, like Elijah. The peel is bitter, as orange peels tend to be. What orange, officer? I try to say, but my mouth is full, and the orange slice shoots out when I start laughing. There is orange juice coming out of my nose, and Elijah is on the floor, laughing, clutching at their sides. I splash cold tap water on my face and standing at the sink, water dripping from my chin, I feel something in my chest loosen.

I gaze at Elijah and take a deep, smiling, breath.

From now on, if anyone asks for my favourite colour, I will always tell them orange.



Postcard from a Past Life

Written by: Milly Struel

Edited by: Aspen Greenwood

the downtown bar is empty
the evening slid away
with tourists asleep
and locals finding their release.

our chair-legs entwined
patio lighting flicked off for the night,
we're an ellipsis in time
between dark and sunrise.

heads and hearts collapsed into one another,
celtia bottles drained empty
haloed in strawberry smoke from airport cigarettes,
i wish i could take a picture
to last longer than this hour,
but i'm frozen
we cannot catch light
afraid the moon might see us
she'll remind time to catch up
to these seconds we stole.
but the taxis awaiting in the distance
brake lights illuminating your face
and my lighter illuminating your hands.

you don't know me
how do you see me so clear?
i don't know you
how is my faith already stronger than my fear?

bittersweet,
the only moment i hold
that enlightens its meaning.



be wary of the wishes you whisper,
through the shadows of your eyes
i could build my home,
through the cadence of your speech
i could see my future.
i want to meet
who lives behind your mind,
but not today
not this way.

so unplanned, so professional,
like a meeting not yet in the schedule,
with every sentence spoken
are we one word closer to goodbye?
with every minute passing
are we a second closer to sunrise?
but i'd crack my ribcage open
to build you a house to live inside,
when i know all i can construct for our souls
is a place to pause
not to remain.

spoken tongue falls short,
the song is our translation,
stories of our pasts
that we can never share
but the understanding is there.
we matched up our scars
recognised the cracks in the armour around our hearts.

you are the gas
and i am the light
star shopping
under these dark street lights.
the honesty in silence
of moments undisturbed,
our souls spoke the same language



even if our mouths could not keep pace.
a dialect entrancing, enthralling, enchanting
with every period carrying the weight of each life before,
it came more natural than any mother tongue.

i pray you're not just here
to teach me a lesson,
i hope there's a world
built for us to make this work.
i cannot spend my life
missing someone i only knew in glimpses
grieving something that was never mine in more than moments.

we're worlds away
but i cannot love you from afar
when in this moment
this hidden corner of earth
i could die beside you here.
i love you now.
but back under the streetlights
i know i won't kill myself for your touch.

is it delusional
if i feel like we have a chance?
is it delusional
if i want us to be something i know we can't?
can't we rewrite the outcome?
refuse the inevitable.
i know the end is coming
but what if it isn't anywhere near?
i know the end is here
but what if we had a sequel dear?

no, i know how this story ends,
i don't need a wikipedia plot
to see the cliff we'll fall off.



but one day
if our paths cross again
what do we say?
if i saw you in a year,
what would i want to say?
will we still be angry at the world
for not giving us a chance?
will i miss you every day?
always thinking back to yesterday.
would i be glad to see you?
would you be glad to see me?
or will our impending end at this next sunrise
force us then to avoid eye contact
like strangers
feigning oblivion to each other's presence.

i won't let go of this evening
no matter how much time elapses.
so if the world never pulls us together again
i'll only sleep each night
to visit you in dreams.

but now the ashtray has overflown,
present tense becomes past tense
and the future tense is in the epilogue.
the inflection of our love altered
the syntax of our souls forgotten,
our alphabet is incomprehensible now
an ancient language left behind,
all erased so savagely
deleted so surely.
worlds lost
for there is no more words to see them.

we weren't meant to live forever,
but i'll let you forget me
if i never have to leave my favourite memories.



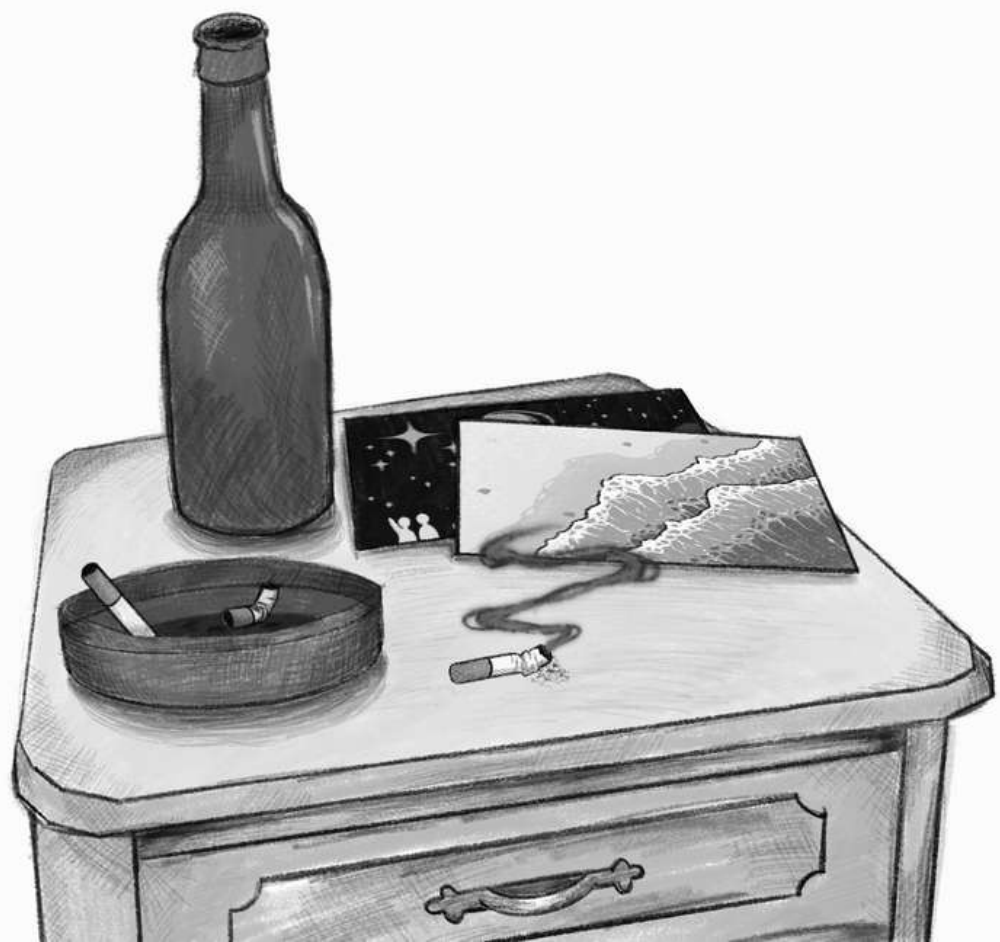
i could move on, be strong
but instead i'll just resign
to reminiscing while walking every coastline,
and hearing your laugh
behind the beat of every peep song we liked.
i'll see your shadows
in empty hotel hallways,
and in the last burning embers of dead cigarettes
i'll remember the light of your eyes,
i'll see you again in the parentheses of time.

our future may have already been written
but that moment escaped our fates.
we were never meant to last
but that time was meant to be.
the moment so perfect
and myself so foolish
i believed we could make it stay
despite knowing
the strength of the ocean
forever pulling us apart
before we ever began.

a language i will never speak again
for it'd be sacrilegious
to speak it with another.

me and you were nothing more
than a postcard from a past life
and a trailer
for the next one.





Listening to Love

Written by: Tumilara

*Our first kiss
was like travellers returning home after a trip
to distant lands.
As if our lips had met each other's acquaintance
long before we had.*

*

It's been a month since I penned that poem, and it's been looped in my mind ever since. I pull my jacket slightly tighter around me, accepting that my feet are going to get soaked. It was a rookie mistake to wear my old boots, but I was in a rush and really didn't want to be late. Besides, I quite like the rain if I'm honest. When I was younger I'd watch the raindrops racing down the window, chuffed that the drop I'd staked my bets on hit the bottom of the window first, and wishing - well, momentarily believing - that life could be that simple for me. That I could have a singularity of purpose or direction that directed me through life as powerfully as gravity exerted its power on that raindrop. I'm not so hopeful now, but I still like the rain. I guess it makes me feel nostalgic.

I quickly scan my phone to check if I'm taking this left or the next. Now I'm only a few minutes away, my lungs get a few grams heavier and my palms suddenly become convinced that they can rival the heavens at perspiration-production. Am I really going to share my poem with him? I'm no stranger to my body bearing the weight of what my mind cannot articulate, but I suddenly feel like I'm trudging through sand instead of walking on concrete. Which is new, even for me. *Breathe Asha*, I tell myself, *he's a safe space. And you already know he feels the same, even if he hasn't said it in poem form. Agh, what if I come off too strong? Maybe I shouldn't -*

Before I have a chance to worry myself out of it, I spot him. He's standing outside the coffee shop where we've agreed to meet today, enveloped in the canopy of his large umbrella and the rhythm of his own thoughts. Somehow, the very sight of him reminds the ground beneath my feet that we're in



London, not on Camber Sands Beach. His presence decongests my airways and kickstarts my deep breathing. I know my parasympathetic nervous system is starting to groove, and I am once again convinced that love is as much a physiological phenomenon as it is psychological one. I love him. And that sounds crazy, especially to me. Nothing in life has ever felt simple or straight forward for me, so why do things feel so easy with him?

I walk the last ten or so steps it takes to close the distance between us. Somewhere between step three and five, his eyes pause and come to rest in mine. The stretch in my cheeks tells me that my face is mirroring the big cheesy grin on his, which only makes me more giddy with glee.

“Hello, you,” he says, with faux seriousness and a lopsided grin, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Hello, Joe,” I quip, “Actually, now I think about it...you do have a thing for books and have moved cities an almost suspicious amount of times.”

“Nah, you’re boying it! I have much better fashion sense than Joe...and I’m not a psychopathic serial killer. There’s that too.” Seyi returns, with a wink.

We enter the shop and our banter continues at its usual tempo, our foolishness providing a strong melody to which our laughter can harmonise. Seyi secures us a table by a radiator - “no need to have damp *and* cold feet” - and goes to order our drinks. As he waits in line, I stare on in awe at the man that my heart is starting to call home. He makes me want to love out loud, instead of cowering away in fear of something going wrong. I want to feel it all. The joy, the fear, the pain, the hope, whatever may come.

Asha, you don't have to have it all figured out. You can love, fall, fail and triumph. I find myself nodding aloud to my inner pep talk. I grab my poetry notebook out of my bag as Seyi returns to the table, macchiato in one hand and iced latte in the other.

“I wanna show you something,” I say.



Dreamscapes

Written by: Chloe Whiting

Edited by: Emma Hanks and Aspen Greenwood

I have dreamed of you for as long as I can remember, of summers spent sprawled across your sheets. Golden skin, golden light; candlelit rooms and smudged lipstick. In my dream I reach out, thumb over your lips. Soft. You look at me like you miss me, even as I stand in front of you. An insatiable heart; this night is lit up with you.

I am well versed in the art of dreaming.

I feel I have loved you for longer than those two summers.

You walk in the door at quarter past one a.m., snow dusting your coat. Did you know the clock stops around you? Cheeks flushed, face cold, and eyes bright, you try not to wake me. But I'm already awake and forget, instantly, to tell you about my dream. There is an intensity you bring to a room that you are not even aware of. I was not prepared, and have never been prepared. You kiss me (this is not a dream). Sometimes I want to bottle this feeling and keep it with me, finding a way to somehow crawl inside of it and stay.

I feel: (somewhat/often/constantly?) a half second away from choking on the force of these feelings, trapped just beneath the surface of my skin, lodged somewhere in my throat. I am suspended between sleeping and waking; a dreamscape. (Am I lost? Am I found?) I forget that you are not a dream. You kneel beside me on the bed, sheets sliding over skin like silk, and I feel and feel and feel until I think I might die from it. I have long since stopped hoping to only meet you in a dream.

I hope to dream about breakfast with you in the morning, cooking you dinner on a Thursday, and hearing about your day every night. And when you wind my hair around your fingers ever-so-gently, I lose the words to name this feeling. You smile, and I think: *found*.



'What's Love Got To Do With It?': A Personal Essay

Written by: Meg Evans

Edited by: Kenn Nimaga and Aspen Greenwood

How would you usually start a piece of writing where you mention the topic of falling in love? Would you say something along the lines of 'it was love at first sight?'. Perhaps, 'I loved his presence as soon as he entered the room'. Or maybe 'she reminds me of my childhood crush, so confident and effortless?'. If you said none of the above, it's totally ok!

Romance, as we know and love it, has changed completely in the years that I have spent trying to figure it out myself.

This is the moment where I am now picturing myself as an innocent teen, arms bearing magazines and sweet treats, carefully peeling the pages to see the a4 size poster of my current favourite boyband star. I have ultimately decided at that moment that this is my new celebrity crush. He has gorgeous brown locks, twinkle in the eyes, toned arms to which I am already imagining around me. A smile that could cut through the many galaxies in the skies.

Now I need to find someone in your school class that resembles this star. When I find that person, I whisper to my friends that I fancy this person. I then pass the school corridors, giggling away without another care in the world, desperately hoping that one day, they will see you the same way that you are seeing them.

This is what I miss the most about those innocent crushes — that first fizzy version of love. The sickening type you see plastered across American movies, and romcom novels that top the charts, due to unsolicited scenes of a certain nature.

Romance in 2025 feels a world away from those much simpler times. You need to download x y and z social networking dating sites just to stand a chance of meeting 'the one'. Speaking from experience, using dating sites has ended in extreme disappointment and a craving for something real, something tender.

Nothing forced, with high expectations; just pure conversation, with



interest, that turns into passion and warmth, and a sense of security like no other.

I recently raced through a sweet but sad memoir — *Notes on Heartbreak* by Annie Lord. She puts words to exactly what I mean when I talk about love: that feeling that goes beyond first date nerves, the awkwardness, or the first kiss. It's not the excitement of telling colleagues in a local restaurant, after you have had 2 weeks of constant back and forth messaging. It isn't even just about the butterflies you feel within the first physical interaction; the brush on the side of the cheek, the locking of lips, the hand dragging through your hair. What stays with me is the ache — the waning, the debriefs, the way we turn love into language.

What I find the most frustrating about relationships now, as somebody who has had a host of experiences with different kinds of people, is that it is never the same. You still sometimes dream about the days when you were younger, and relationships didn't have to be harder than deciding what to have for dinner for the next week. It isn't about the sweet notes of a first time relationship, new to navigating how to act, and being silly together. It isn't even about sneaking your date back from a night out with your uni pals, and having to be quiet, but the act itself becoming one of your more passionate affairs.

The world just feels emptier now. Loveless, almost. My job now, sees the effects of cheating, marriage, one person loving one person, and then another the following day. I sometimes feel like I am on a reality TV show, and don't get me started on that topical debate. Even reality TV feels so plastic and fake. Nobody cares about finding real love, it's about making sure your tick list is good enough to find an average looking person.

I feel incredibly lucky though. Empowered, if you will. After years of struggling to fit societal expectations and masking to suit society's expectations of what woman I should be, I have managed to take hold of love, in full force. And let me tell you, it gets harder as you get older. As you grow, you become wiser. You learn that what you want is the most important. You need to find someone, not who will match you, but compliment you. Let's just say, two hot headed people cannot make it into a relationship.

One of you needs to be understanding in every element of understanding. You need to respect each other, and that's not who sleeps on what side of the bed. It's not about deciding which bottle of wine you will order with



dinner, or who pays the bill (and no, it will never always be the man, ladies).

It's a complicated compromise; rainbow after a storm. It is that very bitter taste you experience when you sip a coffee, before you get to the sweet syrup you wanted right at the bottom of the cup. You need to be able to handle the bad times, to enjoy the good times.

And no matter how hard you look, you will always find someone when you don't expect it (vomits in mouth). As annoying as it sounds; every time you cry to your sister about not being able to find love that has been heavily curated through a silly screen on your phone, you just need to sit back, and breathe. The harder you chase it, the harder it is to keep. Love isn't only about having a partner to love. Love is everywhere; within you. The act of romance is more than just what the magazines provide you with. Romanticising romance is the reason nobody is truly experiencing what they expect. You need to enjoy the complete and utter shambles that is the messiness of love — to *really* be in love.



A Life for a Life

Written by: Kenn Nimaga

Edited by: Meg Evans

In a kingdom whose name has long since been lost to time, of which the only memory that remains is through stories passed down across generations, there was once a princess, said to possess beauty beyond compare.

Though their subjects regarded this as a blessing from the gods, the king and queen lamented, for to them, this beauty was a curse. For in this land, there was a prophecy, which held that in a time of great suffering, only a princess possessed of fairness and pureness of heart in equal measure could cleanse the land through a sacrifice of life.

Thus, as she grew from an adolescent to a woman, as her beautiful countenance and kind heart only grew tenfold, her parents knew their time with their daughter was nearing its end.

Shortly after the princess's eighteenth birthday, a terrible blight spread across the land. The years' harvests were lost to famine; people far and wide lost to plague. And thus, the kingdom's subjects began to call for their princess to save them. Afraid for her life, the king and queen sought guidance, searching for a way to end their peoples' suffering without sacrificing their beloved daughter.

Many a scholar, sorcerer, and fortune teller came, only to reach the same conclusion: as the prophecy stated, for the kingdom's suffering to end, the princess's life must end as well.

Though the princess had long since resigned herself to her fate, her parents continued their fruitless quest. And so she herself sought the counsel of an oracle of legend, for advice on how to proceed with ending her life.

The oracle was said to be a young woman of great wisdom, travelling lands far and wide to deliver and interpret prophecies like her foremothers. Upon her arrival in the kingdom, the princess arranged to meet privately. And thus, the two women met in secret under the cover of nightfall.

The princess asked of her, "Great oracle, I beg of you; in what manner must my life end in order to save these lands?"

The oracle considered carefully. "And what does the prophecy entail?"



Speak the words to me, that I may divine meaning from them.

And so the princess recited the words that had loomed over her since birth:

“In the days of barren land, of harvests with no yield; when pestilence extends its reach, disease spread far afield; when all hope doth seem but lost, giv’n way to despair; there will come a princess true, of visage and heart so fair; bring she will and end to all, this suffering and strife; her sires must freely give way, the promise of her life.”

The oracle pondered these words. After a time, she determined that more time was needed to truly decipher its meaning. The women parted ways, vowing to meet again under the moonlight.

And thus each fortnight, they held their secret rendezvous, with only the moon and stars bearing witness. They spoke at length of what it would take for the king and queen to willingly give up their only daughter for the sake of their kingdom, for without their consent, her sacrifice would be meaningless. They mulled over possibilities—reading between the lines and analyzing every word, that there might be some indication, no matter how small, what path they should take.

The women grew closer, and with the passing of time, the oracle came to understand the plight of the king and queen. How could anyone who came to know this woman, who was pure of heart, virtuous and kind, full willing to give her own life for countless others—how could anyone wish to inflict the world with the curse of her absence in it?

Many a sleepless night was spent by the oracle, pouring over ancient texts, through every fulfilled prophecy still known to man, just to find a way to save the woman she had so dearly come to love.

The princess took note of her dear companion’s labored pains to save her life.

“Cry not for me, my dearest one,” the princess assured her at what was to be their final meeting, for she could no longer sit idly by and watch the woman she had come to care for so deeply went through such agony on her behalf. On the morrow, she was to ask her parents to finally end her life. “I do not fear death; I have known its hold on me for all my life.”

The oracle wept, lamenting, “What a great sorrow it is, that you have lived a life only for others, knowing it will end for them. Have you ever once wished to live for yourself?”

Silence passed between them for a moment. The princess took her beloved



companion into her arms, holding her in a tight embrace.

“Were I given a life of my own,” the princess began, “unburdened by this duty, I could imagine living many lives. But none of them would have been worth living, had I not met you. And for this, I am grateful to have the life I was given, even if its end is imminent. A selfish part of me yearns for freedom, to go where I wish, to do as I please; but I know that my happiness is not worth the countless lives I would be forced to sacrifice to choose my own path. All I can wish for is that my most beloved live on, with the lives granted to those saved by giving up my own.”

She placed a kiss upon the oracle’s forehead, stroking her hair, wiping tears from her face.

“In this way, I give my life to you.”

These words of love spoken by the princess she cherished so ardently planted a seed of curiosity in the mind of the oracle. When the two shared their last goodbyes, and with a kiss, they parted ways.

Unbeknownst to the princess she held most dear, the oracle had an inkling of a way to save both her beloved and the kingdom.

The next day, when the princess sought counsel with her parents, she was surprised to find them already in court with a surprise visitor. When she entered the throne room, she found to her great astonishment a familiar face—the very face she had seen each fortnight in what became a comfortable routine. Standing before her was the oracle, hair shorn, dressed in a man’s blouse and pants, kneeling before the king and queen, as she made her heartfelt plea.

“Your royal highness.” The oracle bowed her head before her princess. “I have come to propose a solution to your plight, would you hear me, that you may save your kingdom, *and* continue living.”

The princess was taken aback, but allowed her guest to speak plainly.

“As you may well know, I come from afar,” the oracle continued, “from a land with traditions that differ greatly from your own. In my homeland, there is a ritual that joins two souls as one—in matrimony. In those lands, we refer to this not simply as a union— but an exchange of lives. Though no such custom exists from whence I hail, in these lands, a marriage is sealed when a parent ‘gives away’ the bride.

“Thus, I propose to you: I will give you my life. And if you would have me, I ask if you would give me yours. I ask nothing else of you— your life will be left to you to live as you most desire. I only ask if this humble



servant may spend this life at your side.”

Overcome with tears, the princess ran to her lover, grasping her in a tight embrace. The tender love shared between them was plain to see to all who bore witness. The king and queen knew in an instant— their daughter had found a precious love, the sort that comes once in a lifetime.

And thus, they gave their blessing to the union.

Arrangements were quickly made, and the two were joined as one— a love for a love, a life for a life, a soul for a soul, ‘til death do them part.

Not long after, a breeze of healing spread across the kingdom. Flowers bloomed, fields bore fruit, and the people recovered from the illness which ailed them. The oracle’s clever plan had worked.

And the people rejoiced, declaring their dear princess a savior, the future ruler of their nation— long may she reign.

But this was not to be.

For the oracle spoke true. When they promised their lives to each other, the princess was free to choose her own path. And so, with tearful farewells, the lovers set off on their own journey; resuming the oracle’s work, that they may travel the lands to heal the sick, care for the weak and downtrodden, and help others defy the fate set before them and find happiness in the way they had.

In the centuries since, much has been forgotten. The kingdom in which this tale originated has long since fallen, as kingdoms often do. The memory of names and faces which might be attributed to those within this tale are long lost, all those who may remember long dead.

But one thing that has persisted in spite of time’s cruel appetite, spread across countless nations as two lovers touched the lives of people everywhere they roamed— the pure love they shared, the likes of which defies time, origin, and fate.



In My Chest

Written by: Molly Hayes

Edited by: Aspen Greenwood

Through the
half-asleep haze of
my morning commute,
I look out for you.

The train jolts, rattles, groans,
I sink into place,
breathing in the dry musk
left by the rat race.

You're across from me,
as usual,
slumping in your seat,
with slick locks of hair
and pale, hollow cheeks.
A sharp nose protrudes above a
coarse black beard, which
surrounds your lips
and descends
to where I can't see.

I spend the journey flustered.
I curse my blushed
cheeks,
hoping by now,
you would notice me.

Stories of sparks and
devotion fill my head,
like they did in a film
or a novel I read



There's no story yet,
no memories, no pain,
just the flutter in my
chest when you
glimpse my way.



Now I Lay Me Down

Written by: Jaie Nieves

Edited by: Aspen Greenwood

“I think I’m ready.”

The being spoke—without words, without sound. Yet she understood. He gazed over the cliff as waves crashed below them. She tried to picture the face he was making. She stepped over towards his form and took a seat. She cocked her head to the side, her face but a blur in this form. She yearned to reach out, to hold him, but she knew it was futile: they were forbidden from touching one another. They were forbidden from seeing each other, hearing each other, or being with each other. It made her ache.

“Ready for what?” she asked after a moment of silence. Her voice echoed around them, soundless.

His figure finally looked towards her own, and she would have gasped if she were able. His face had changed into that of a man, with stunning jade-colored eyes and slicked-back brown hair. She looked down, grateful that there were no eyes on her face to reveal the movement. Yet there was nothing else; that same transparent form was still there, sitting with her own. Everything else was missing, but she finally had a face for man she yearned for.

How did you do that?

He shot her a teasing smile, as if to answer her unasked question. She was certain that smile was going to kill her. He leaned towards her and whispered, in a voice that arose from *his* throat of *his* own body that was right in front of her. There was no echo, there was no reverberation.

It was pure.

He was pure.

“I’m ready for you to find me.”

*

Lydia shot out of bed and scrambled towards her bathroom. She bothered not with wiping the sweat off her forehead nor the tears from her eyes as she raced to the mirror. She stared intently at her own reflection, trying to



transform her face into the one she saw in her dream. This was the first time she had seen her partner's face, and she was shaking from excitement. He was beautiful, he was kind, he was everything she had ever dreamed of.

"I'm ready for you to find me."

She trembled at the thought of his voice, and she could not stop the new tears that began. She had longed for this moment for months, and it was finally here. And she had no idea what to do with it.

Lydia let out a scream, slamming her hands against the bathroom sink. Sobs racked her chest as she cried out to her reflection.

"Find me?!" How the *fuck* am I supposed to find someone I've only ever seen in my dreams? Do you live next door? Are you in Kansas? God *dammit*, Chase, I need more than that!"

She crumbled to the floor, every nerve in her body burning with a mix of fury and desperation, and she wondered just how tantalizing this hunt for her soulmate would be as she drifted back to sleep on the cold floor.

*

Lydia stood back at that same cliffside they had been sharing for months. Chase—the name of her mysterious partner—was nowhere to be seen. She called his name, the waves crashing in response. She sighed as she sat on the edge and stared into the water. As she focused on the crystal water below, it occurred to her that maybe this place did not only exist in her dreams...

Maybe this place was real, and maybe this was where she was meant to meet Chase.

She took a deep inhale before standing and moving a few paces back. She held her breath as she raced towards the edge and leapt into the abyssal waters, hoping the waves would give her the answers she sought.

*

As she plunged into the water, her alarm sounded, waking her up before she could acquire any answers. She was soaking wet, in a fetal position on the bathroom floor, and she shivered at the remembrance of her jump. She grabbed a towel from the rack and dried herself off before heading to her bedroom to get ready for college. Chase stood at the front of her mind, his



face etching itself permanently into her memory as she continued to ponder how she would find him. It turned out that Googling *steep cliffs that hang over bodies of water near me* did not yield many helpful results. She had also tried *how to locate a place I saw in a dream and how to find out if a place is real*, both of which also offered little insight. She hoped she would be able to ask Chase more about it tonight, and decided she should focus her energy on getting through the day instead.

Lydia opened the college building's doors and skipped over to her usual table, her four friends already gathered—waiting for her. She apologized for making them wait, but they said nothing in response as they watched her sit. Lydia knew her friends were worried, but she had yet to come up with an appropriate explanation as to why she was always missing out on her own life. She knew the truth would not cut it, and she feared it may bring about more concern than were she to continue saying nothing. So, she stuck with the latter, and reassured her friends that nothing in her life was amiss.

“Girl, you *need* to get out there.” Annabelle was the first to speak up, scooting closer to Lydia. She nudged her shoulder. “I promise you there’s more to life than studying. We get you dolled up for *one* night, and every boy in this school will be all over you in a heartbeat.” The other girls cheered in response.

I already have the guy I want, Lydia thought to herself with a sigh. “I know, Ann, I just...I’ve been really busy, yeah? This semester has sucked so far, and I’ve been, like, stupid tired every day. But...just give me, like, another week or so to catch up, and we’ll be back to girls’ nights every night, ‘kay? I *promise*,” she emphasized the last word, hoping it was genuine enough to ease her friends’ worries.

“We just wanna make sure you’re really okay, Lyd. Last time you pulled this stunt on us was after James in 8th grade. Ugh,” Annabelle rolled her eyes and mimicked a gagging response. “What a douche. You promise you’re okay?”

Lydia nodded. She hated lying to her best friends, but her current situation left her little choice. “I promise, Ann. And everyone. We’ll have a girls’ night next Saturday, ‘kay? Maybe I’ll make something special for everyone, to celebrate.”

Ann gave her best friend a tight squeeze before standing back up. “I’m not letting you back down from this one, girl. We’re breaking down your door



if you don't answer. Now get to class before they write you up again."

*

Lydia and Chase had been meeting in her dreams for months now. It began as what she believed to be a normal dream after a rough day. She sat on a cliff, next to a man she could not see, who told her that it was going to be okay and she had nothing to worry about. She thought of it as her brain's way of comforting herself, and brushed it off as a reminder to get more rest. That is, until she had another dream of him a few days after: that same figure in that same place, speaking just as naturally to her as the first time. It was as if he *knew* her, and... she knew him. She spoke back to him like he was a long-lost friend. But she *didn't* know him, and she did not believe in the supernatural. She asked him to leave her alone, to let her sleep in peace, but he would not—he *could* not—leave. She ignored him for about a month, until she couldn't any longer. He was always there, every night, on that same cliffside, waiting for her. He was patient. Kind. Eventually, she succumbed to this cruel second-world and engaged in conversation with him.

From that moment on, Lydia found she couldn't stop herself.

She told him everything she could about herself, and he reciprocated. She found herself going to bed earlier some nights just to spend more time with him. With the strange forms provided to them, they couldn't do anything but talk to each other. Lydia, however, did not mind; she felt like she could talk to this being for hours on end and still have things to say. She was obsessed with him, and eventually she couldn't keep it to herself any longer. For him, she would believe in anything unordinary.

*

It had been one week since Chase told her to find him, and she had only seen him once since then. She asked him for any more information that could aid her search, and he responded with "You'll know." Lydia was getting increasingly frustrated with these games from him, and she yearned to finally see him in person. The search for her dream boyfriend was excruciatingly slow, but she refused to give up—not for Chase. She would be with him if it was the last thing she did.



Unfortunately, her hunt would have to go on pause as she prepared for the girls' night she promised her friends. She did her best to tuck Chase into the back of her mind, and instead focused on tidying her room. She put on their favorite playlist and decided to make some cookies for the girls. As much as she wanted to go to bed and brood over Chase's hide-and-seek, she knew she needed to spend more time with her friends—and, frankly, she was excited to do just that.

A knock on the door pulled her out of her thoughts, and she yelled "Just a sec!" as she threw the cookies in the oven and dashed over to the door. "Oh, girl, we were *so* worried you were gonna bail on us," Ophelia said to Lydia as they filed into her apartment. "But we're so glad you didn't. And —oh! Do I smell cookies?"

Lydia grinned as she gave each girl a big hug. "Homemade. Told you I'd make something special for you guys."

As the girls sat down in her room, eating cookies and listening to music, Lydia imagined what these girls would say if they had met Chase. She wondered if they'd approve, or if they'd shame her. Tears welled in her eyes as she set her mug down and cleared her throat. If anyone deserved to know why she was so absent from her own life—and just how crazy that life was—it was them.

"Girls, I have something to tell you...the *real* reason I've been missing so much stuff..."

Annabelle slammed her fists into the floor. "I *knew* you were lying! It's a boy, isn't it? I told you guys it was a boy."

"Hush, Ann, let our *chica* speak," Maya nudged Annabelle. She motioned towards Lydia, who sighed.

"No, no, it's okay...Ann's kind of right, anyway...I *did* meet a boy"—this earned a dramatic gasp from Annabelle—"but I haven't really...*met* him yet. This...is gonna sound crazy, I know, but...I met him in a dream. It's been the same dream every night for months, and I barely know anything about him. Hell, I don't even know if his name is real. But...I sound insane, don't I? And

what's even more insane, I...I think I *love* him. Even with how little I know. I just...I *know* he's real, I can feel that. And he told me he wanted to see me. And I want to. But...I don't know who he is. Or where. Or anything, really. Crazy, right?" Lydia tried to smile through her story, but after saying it aloud she could barely believe it herself.



Annabelle prepared to scold Lydia for keeping such a secret, but Maya spoke first, her voice soft. “Your *alma gemela*...I thought it was just a fairy tale.” The girls all looked at Maya to continue. “*Mi tía* told me a story once: girls who dream of their true loves—*alma gemela*. They would get to speak to them, but only in dreams. They could only meet once they were ready. She said maybe one day I would meet my own, but I thought she was just being nice to this paria. But you!—you have met your other soul. It is real. You have true love. And he wants to meet you! You must, no questions.”

Lydia and her friends stared in awe at Maya’s tale, never expecting this to be a real phenomenon. She scolded herself internally for not telling these girls sooner, and promised she would never keep another secret from them.

“Well, that sure makes me feel a lot less crazy. Thanks, Maya. But...I still don’t really know how I’m going to meet him. I barely know him.”

“Where have you two been meeting? In your dreams, I mean,” Ophelia questioned. “Maybe he wants to meet you there?”

Lydia shrugged. “It’s...a cliffside, overlooking some water. There’s a lot of trees surrounding it, but I don’t know anything like that near us. We like to sit at the edge and watch the water flow. It’s peaceful. Quiet. That’s all I know.”

Her friends eyed one another, silently asking the same question. Lydia stared at them, hoping to read one of their minds for an answer. After some silence, and once they were down to their last cookies, Maya gasped, standing up.

“*El río*! That’s it! Your *amante* meets you at the river! They call it ‘Lover’s Peak.’ *Mi tía* got married there—not here, but near. Some hours away. He must be waiting there!”

As if on cue, everyone stood from the circle, their grins spreading like the plague. “Well, what the hell are you waiting for, girl?” Dianne asked, squeezing Lydia’s hands. “Go get your man!”

*

“I think we might be soulmates.”

Her partner laughed, an airy sound that echoed all around her. “I thought you didn’t believe in soulmates? Or anything supernatural?”

“I don’t. But how the hell else do we explain this? I don’t talk to anyone



else like this every night. And I *don't* believe in magic or spirits, but this is no damn coincidence. You've been here every night for the past four months; what *else* am I supposed to believe?"

Chase pondered her words for a moment before speaking. "I thought we were soulmates since the first day I fell asleep and woke to you here. I may not be able to see you, but I can *feel* you, and I've never felt anything like you before. Lyds, I've loved you from the very first day I met you. I know you may not feel the same, but I think we've been talking long enough for me to say that."

If her form was capable of crying, tears would have streamed down her face. She spoke, her voice barely above a whisper, as she placed her hand over—and ultimately *through*—Chase's. "I...I love you too, Chase. I really do."

*

Lydia raised her head, alerted, as the third bus rolled to a stop. She rubbed her eyes, trying to determine if this moment was real or another dream. Her mind filled with worry as she grounded herself, and she began to wonder if any of this was worth it. She was traveling almost nine hours away from her home, from her friends, from her entire *life*—for what, a hunch? A possibility that this *might* be the place she had been dreaming about for the past eight months? The *possibility* that the man of her dreams would be sitting there, waiting for her? She still dreamed of the same place, but she had not seen Chase since she last asked for more information. Her dreams were barren, silent, saddening. She no longer wanted to go to bed, knowing now that he would not be there to greet her.

She wondered what that meant; did it mean he was no longer sleeping? Had he been awake for the past week-and-a-half? There was no way that was possible, but she thought there was no way to *not* be there. Maybe he changed his mind and he stopped loving her. Maybe he never really loved her at all.

Anxiety ate away at Lydia as she stood from her seat, shaking, and stepped off the bus. She was scared, and it was at this moment she realized she was alone. What was she to do if Chase wasn't there? Maybe she would sit down and wait for him; maybe she would jump. She shook her head in an attempt to clear those awful thoughts. He couldn't just *stop*



loving her, not after all that time they had spent together. But...maybe he could. They had only known each other in that dream. But he said he loved her—that *had* to mean something, right? *Right?*

Lydia checked the map on her phone, the route to Lover's Peak marked in red by Maya. She was about halfway there, and the knot in her chest grew larger by the minute. She thought about all the nights she spent with Chase so far, and all the love she had for him that grew stronger every night, and all the times she wished she could lay beside him in person and watch the stars together. She had no idea if he would be there tonight, or if he would be there ever—but she loved him, and that she was certain of. She would wait at that Peak for as long as it took. Just like he waited for her.

*

"I want to kiss you."

Her voice echoed, like always. She knew Chase could not see her expression, but she hoped he could feel the desperation behind her words—the need. Chase looked towards her, tilting his head. His words indicated that he did, in fact, feel her desperation. "That all?"

Lydia gawked at her partner. "Well, no, of course not, I—why is *that* what you ask? Is me wanting to kiss you not enough?"

She felt Chase's grin melt into her soul. "Of course it's enough—more than I could ever ask for, really. I'm just curious. Y'know, if you want *more* than that." "Of course I do...Well, I don't really know what I want. I know I want *you*, but that's about it. I've never had a steady relationship. I never cared to go on dates, especially not with men I knew would leave me after the first night. Everyone is so...uninteresting. But you..."

His face remained a blue smudge, but she felt his smile widen. "Go on..." She slapped his shoulder, frowning internally when her hand once again phased through his figure. "Yeah, yeah, I think you're the bees' knees. I'm not gonna keep complimenting you if you're gonna act like that, though." "Oh, come on, you know you love it."

"I'd push you off this cliff if I had the choice."

"You *wish* it were that easy to get rid of me. I ain't goin' anywhere, Lyds. Looks like you're stuck with me for good."

Lydia smiled, and realized that she could not imagine a life without Chase. And, frankly, she didn't want to.



She rested her hand through Chase's, the awkward motion now understood by both of them. "And I wouldn't want it any other way."

*

Lydia stepped off the final bus and towards her final obstacle: the hill to Lover's Peak. She took a deep inhale and marched forward, mentally preparing herself for whatever she was about to see at the end of this journey. She hyped herself up, imagining what she would do when she finally saw the love of her life; would she scream? Cry? Would she embrace him? Would they kiss? Would they make love?

Lydia had never had sex before, but she was certain that she was willing to break that streak with Chase if he wanted her to. The more she thought of Chase, the quicker she walked, until she was sprinting up the hill towards the Peak.

When she reached the top, gasping for breath, she dropped to her knees as she searched around.

Chase was not here.

Tears welled in her eyes as her dreams crashed around her, the flames of her fantasies dying out in her mind. She sobbed, screamed, slammed her fists into the ground, cursing the gods themselves for wounding her like this. She had no idea why he would magically be here today, when she had no way of telling him when she would arrive or even what she looked like. Maybe she missed her shot; perhaps he was already here and she was too late. Or perhaps she was too early, and she was supposed to wait a little longer.

She prayed it was the latter as she crawled towards the cliffside, dangling her legs over the edge. Tears still streamed down her face, her heartbroken sobs dwindling into a silent whimper.

She would wait for him here as long as it took. And if he chose not to come, then she supposed she'd have no reason to leave.

*

Seconds of waiting turned into minutes; those minutes dreadfully turned into hours. Eventually the moon was at its peak, and Lydia was beginning to wonder if this was where she would lay herself to rest one last time. Her



eyes began to droop, and she lifted her legs off the edge so she wouldn't fall off. That was when the voice broke out from the bushes behind her. "I was really starting to worry you wouldn't show."

She stood so fast she almost *did* fall over, and she steadied herself as she turned. She eyed the surrounding forest, searching for the body of that voice—*his* voice, she was certain.

"Ch...Chase? Chase? Are you there?"

The man stepped out from behind one of the trees to her left, and new tears formed over the dried ones. The man—*Chase*—smiled. "I didn't think you'd come so early. I've been checking every night, around when we meet each other in our dreams. Would've came earlier if I had known. How long you been out here, Lyds?"

Lydia did not answer as she lunged forward, wrapping her arms around him in a fit of sobs. She was worried he may never show, and it embarrassed her to admit how grateful she was that he hadn't given up on her. She sobbed into his shirt as he stroked her back.

"Hey, hey, Lyds, it's OK; I'm right here. And I'm certainly not going anywhere now."

Lydia looked up at his face through her tears. It was exactly how she remembered it from the last—and first—time she saw it. He was beautiful, even more-so in person. She loved it, and she loved him, and without thinking she moved her hands up to his face to caress it. The second her hands touched his skin, she dragged her face towards his and pressed her lips against his. She worried she may have pressed too hard into his face, but if Chase had a problem with it he did not complain. He kissed her back, his lips soft but full of passion.

Her heart sank when they parted from the kiss, and she realized she never wanted to let go of his lips again. The tears subsided, but she continued to snifle.

"I was worried you wouldn't come. I thought I had missed you." "I was gonna keep coming, even if you never did. I would've died here if it came to it."

She smiled, her own thoughts resurfacing. "I was worried I *would* die here if you didn't show."

"Well, none of that matters now, does it? We're here, together, and I'm never gonna leave your side." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "Anything you wanted to do tonight? While we're here?"



Lydia smiled, wrapping both of her hands around one of Chases. She rubbed her thumbs against his skin as she thought about her answer. “Let’s do what we do best,” she finally whispered. “Lay out here and watch the stars.”

“I think I’m ready.”

So am I.



Falling for Fiction: an Informal Essay about Comfort Characters

Written by: Ronnie C.

Edited by: Jae K.

I. Introduction

My partner isn't real.

Well, kinda.

I do have a boyfriend who is flesh and bone. He's actually on the phone with me as I write this essay. But, as you can tell from the title, this isn't about him.

My *other* partner is a fictional character.

This concept might be unfamiliar to you. And if so, it's safe to assume you have questions. That's okay! I'd rather you be curious than cruel, especially online -- where people are extreme about what they don't understand. By sharing my experiences, I hope to clear up some confusion for you. Maybe you'll even see just how impactful fictional relationships can be!

But first, I'll need to provide some context.

Comfort characters, yumeshipping, F/Os or fictional others, fictosexuality... Internet users have many terms to describe their fictional relationships. All of them boil down to this: a special bond that a real-life person has with a fictional character. Whether that entails a platonic, romantic, or purely physical bond varies from person to person -- just like in human relationships! Studies by neuroscientists suggest our brains experience them similarly. In research conducted by Steve Fleming, a professor of cognitive neuroscience, a team of scientists found that fiction and reality work together in order to make one unique experience.[1] It's safe to assume, then, that the character in question holds legitimate, sentimental value in a person's life, regardless of its nature.

We have control to decide what that relationship looks like, how it forms.



It's a safe way to explore social dynamics and feel connected. Dr. Keith Oatley, both a professor of cognitive psychology and novelist, says that "...novels, stories and dramas can help us understand the complexities of social life." [2] That's huge. Especially for someone who has both AUDHD and relationship-OCD, like me, where it's difficult to understand social cues and form long-term connections. We use these fictional characters to strengthen our real-life social skills.

II. Swooning over Stanford

That begs the question: who is this comfort character of mine?

That would be none other than Stanford Pines from Gravity Falls. Ford is everything I could want in a character. Ingenious silver fox, self-declared unusualogist. Proud owner of twelve PhDs *and* twelve fingers. Autistic recluse gone soft, logical but no longer a pessimist. Awkward as hell and socially stunted. Three decades older than me. May or may not have a sexual attraction to geometry. Voiced by JK *motherfucking* Simmons.

Need I say more? Because I could definitely say more.

Kidding. Not kidding, though.

Three years ago, with Ford in my sights, I caught the hyper-fixation bug. He followed the same pattern all my comfort characters do: I find a new character, discover all their lore, and spark up a daydream plot or two.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Previously, mere curiosity drove this hunger for knowledge. But that all changed with Ford. I had it BAD for this man. The moment I laid eyes on him, I wanted everything I could get my hands on: ancient Tumblr posts, obscure dating sims, curated playlists, all of it. Fanfic ideas and drabbles dominated space in my notes app. I began drafting my very first multi-chapter fanfic starring him, not to mention all the solo pieces that bubbled to life. When I wasn't working on those, I was creating moodboards and headcanons. And when I wasn't working on *those*, I was daydreaming.

Obsession is the generous way to put it.

During those first few months of daydreams, I particularly enjoyed playing with different meet-cutes. Sometimes, it was bumping into him on the dancefloor of a small-town diner's monthly social. We'd sneak long glances, spurring gossip between close-knit patrons. Other times, the seafaring scientist sought shelter with a stranger, who I happened to be



roommates with. I'd come home from an evening on the boardwalk, surprised to see a rugged, six-fingered man and his twin on the couch. The options were limitless.

This gave me the freedom to workshop various social interactions and practice conversational skills -- something I struggle with as an autistic person. There's no risk of embarrassing myself in an imaginary space, after all. *Having that control through fiction lessened the burden of lacking it in reality.* And with Ford, who lacks social skills as well, it felt safe to play around with.

In addition to working on my people skills, I had a LOT of fun. Daydreaming with Ford became my go-to stress relief tactic. I replayed hundreds of different scenes with him. He outshined my other comfort characters because we had a special connection they just couldn't top. Whenever I needed the comfort of fiction, he was my first choice. After-work pick-me-up? Ford distracted me with dad-jokes and kisses. Pain flare-up? Ford burst through the door with hugs and chocolate. Those moments with him, big or small, became part of the timeline we built together. My memory may fail to remember if I drank water today -- but it captures fictional events with ease. I can still recall details from timelines I haven't touched since middle school. An AUDHD brain is fascinating when it applies itself.

And oh, how it applied itself.

What would usually be a few months' worth of the "honeymoon phase" shifted into a two-year rendezvous.

Before this, my comfort characters had a short half-life. I considered them just that, comfort characters—the terms *yumeshipping* and *fictional others* were as foreign to me as they might be to you. These characters were just actors on a stage within my brain, who'd perform with me for a few months and move on with their careers. These gigs with Ford were wildly successful, though, so we renewed our act over and over again. Something was strikingly different about the sheer volume and intensity of how I interacted with him.

I couldn't put my finger on the change, though... Probably because I was in denial about being autistic.

Yeah. I know.

Even with a therapist encouraging me to challenge my idea of what that looks like... I didn't think I was "autistic" enough to "count." Most



resources available either stigmatize or exclude AFAB people's experiences (especially those considered "low support needs"), and everything else I simply attributed to my ADHD. I failed to consider that these two neurodivergences would affect each other uniquely, rather than creating a stereotypical experience of either's symptoms. I saw the quick changes, the short-lived interests...

I saw a clear difference between this and my typical interests. This self-inflicted exclusion kept me from embracing it, though.

I knew the familiar way of having comfort characters, keeping them for a year at most. Playing down their importance was a protective measure against judgement. Starting therapy helped me begin to challenge this way of thinking. I learned to accept the fact that I'm a little weird, but still watered it down to be 'presentable.' To fit in the box I'd prescribed myself. I have characters I get attached to for a bit, then move on to the next. A force of habit, if you will.

Surely one character couldn't mean more than that to me, right?

III. Settling down

Ford was different, though. I deeply resonated with his character arc and his outlook on life. In the last letter of his research journal, he writes, "It's never too late to learn that growing old doesn't have to mean growing up." An absolute gem. On the flip side, he embraces his D&D-loving, horrid pun-making, socially awkward self. His writing captivated me — a blended tone of dignified scientist and dorky outcast. College professor vibes. The one that swears in emails and keeps in touch after graduation. He gives helpful insight, in canon and beyond, but keeps it approachable. Oh, how I'd do anything to walk around in his mind for a day...

...Reel in your info dumping, Ronnie.

In the time I accepted being autistic, he earned the title of *special interest*. Passion beyond words. Not a single day goes by that I don't think about him in some capacity. *A piece of my identity lies within him, in a life-altering way.* I have other comfort characters — ones I sometimes spend more time daydreaming about. It never mattered, though. His story changed the way I viewed myself, challenged the narrative I'd internalized. If this hopelessly clueless man can make a thousand mistakes and still find a family, so can I. Because this connection became so deep, I don't have to



rely solely on daydreams. I now have hundreds of ways to interact with him: Pinterest boards, fanfiction, books, art, playlists... Hell, he's in my profile picture on almost every platform. When I do daydream about him, though, my options are limitless.

The sheer number of AUs and plotlines I have should be illegal. There's some Marvel-level bullshittery happening up in here. Daydreams span across infinite themes: everything from sea travel to alien rest-stops to mid-century timepieces... College aged, middle aged, old as hell... Check the sign on the door that reads Headcanons Welcome. We cover all our bases here. I roll one idea around for a week or two, then move onto the next; I'll go back and forth between my favorites for months on end. Gaps in-between themes are normal; sometimes, I latch onto an entirely new comfort character and neglect my daydreams with him. But a song on the radio jogs my memory, and sweeps me right back into one of our worlds all over again.

It's funny, because in a way, we've settled in like real partners. The novelty of getting to know him wore off. I'm left with a subtler attraction, mundane but sweet. Instead of losing interest in him, his position in my life shifted. He became an anchor. Less intense, but more permanent. Other hyper-fixations come and go, with more fervor behind them but short-lived. I still have the stability of a core comfort character to depend on, though, when I need a stronger connection. That kind of flexibility works beautifully for my AUDHD brain.

There's no escaping him, but there's no smothering, either.

That sense of control is important to me. It wouldn't be healthy to have such an on-and-off relationship with my partner in real life. Nor would I enjoy dedicating all my time to one singular comfort character for years on end. I've found that this balance between fiction and reality helps me cope with stress better. I quench my thirst for both novelty and predictability. This way, I satisfy my conflicting neurodivergent needs.

With that being said, new comfort characters can be difficult to introduce emotional plot-lines to. If I need to work out a real-life stressor in fiction—or an extra-comforting hug—my dynamic with Ford can handle the weight. I don't have to spend hours writing it into existence with the new guy. A brain that processes social interactions through fiction appreciates a break from plotting. That freedom supports a level of self-care that helps me move on, where otherwise I'd be stuck ruminating and seeking a plotline to fix it.



IV. Fiction's place in reality

With the way I address a fictional character as my partner, it's understandable why you may see me as a bit delusional. I want to reassure you, though: I know Ford isn't real! I know that I'm not living it up in a fictitious town in Oregon, posted up in a tourist trap's basement with a scientist pushing 70. *God, how I wish.* But I have a real life, with a real job, and a real partner. And I'm happy to have them! Stanford as a character still has a place in my life, though, despite his cartoon status.

Experiencing true autistic joy has been life-changing for me. Sure, I've had that full-body, almost-overwhelming feeling in bursts throughout the years. It's a unique happiness that transcends the surface. To have that consistently, and with ease? I never thought it possible. All it takes is one decently drawn picture of this man, and I'm on cloud nine.

Can you recall a special toy you got for Christmas as a kid? Maybe it was a doll, or a video game console, or a pretend kitchen set. But that spark of life you felt every time you played with it? That's how I feel with Ford. Shameless, elated excitement. He's like my own imaginary doll, in a way -- one I can pamper and carry around and pull to my chest whenever I need a hug. It's an easy kind of happiness, a childlike sense of awe.

And in the face of life's many stressors, that comfort is what keeps me going.

So instead of hiding my cringe, I'm working on how to embrace it. I want to fill my life with things that make it worth living. For me, that includes writing silly fanfics, flipping through my copy of his journal, day-dreaming up conversations... being myself without a mask.

My boyfriend always supported my unmasking. From the beginning, he encouraged me to take pride in my comfort characters. He showed genuine interest in them, too! No shame, no belittling. I could share my special interests with someone and listen to them repeat details weeks later. That's unfortunately rare for me. This man commissioned detailed fanart for me on multiple occasions—referencing fanfiction and dating sims I've shown him. How freaking sweet is that? I feel so held in this relationship. My special interest strengthens our bond; we have a deeper connection because of it.

That's as romantic as it gets. Which is wild, because he's competing with four or five different fictional characters at any given time. He deserves an award, really.



V. Concluding thoughts

However people may feel about it, my fictional partner helps me live a healthy life—full of comfort, fun, and autistic joy. Daydreams help me explore my place in the real world, to prepare for whatever it may bring. My real-life partner supports my fictional partner; our relationship thrives because he accepts me as is, no shortcuts. I'm still learning to be at peace with who I am, too... all that weird, AUDHD goodness included. But I'm happy to open this new chapter of self-acceptance.

Sure, this way of living might be a little silly. Sure, I may be a little cringey. Still, you can't deny that love comes in many forms. And if it isn't causing anyone harm, who the actual hell cares? I live an authentic, bold life—and I'm the happiest I've ever been.

The beauty of love is our capability to find it anywhere. In the way a stranger flashes a smile, or the birds chirping on your morning walk, or even a shiny pebble that wishes you good luck before a meeting.

...Even in a fictional character.

Sources

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Harmony

Written by: Felix Williams

I feel the peak approaching,
alone in the world
but for you.
Each thrust is an expedition
into your body,
exploring the vessel which echoes
the intimate hymn
of our connection.

My body becomes an instrument
to carve time
into the brutish, beautiful shape
of our love.
The nurtured passion of these moments
adding up to years of devotion.
Cuffs clink as I sink further into you,
and your eyes roll back
as your soul threatens to break free.

Only by abandoning each fantasy
that flashes before my eyes
am I granted the privilege
to get lost in the woman before me.
Every whimper and moan leads a search
in your body to find myself again.
A droplet of sweat falls from lip to lip.
Breathing in, then out of sync;
moving not as one,
but in harmony.



Hallmark

Written by: Mairi Smibert

Edited by: Clay Mykietowich

She'd gone back home for Christmas, the first time in years. Her mom had passed away. They'd drifted apart, but she was still the next of kin. So she went: the big-city girl gone back to her small-town roots. High heels traded for sneakers, silk for flannel. The only cafe within walking distance serving up a steaming cocoa and a high-school flame never quite forgotten. He'd met her eyes and offered to help with the house. They'd caught up over boxes of dusty memories. When the power went out, he brought blankets and body heat. He watched her as she slept. She left before he woke up. But when she saw him chase her down in that airport lounge, she knew she could never leave. He was the one.

What a load of bullshit.

"You're still here?" A voice breaks through my thoughts.

"No, I'm a figment of your imagination." I hadn't bothered to look up; his shadow hovered over my desk, I expect for longer than I had noticed. My fingers continued thumping on the keyboard, but his silence rang louder. I held out, ignoring him with spite and determination. I was good at that. The relent of his patience came in his sigh.

"This isn't healthy."

"You a doctor now?"

"I'm not leaving, so you can knock it off." A chair clanked down beside me, and he followed suit. We sat, shoulder-to-shoulder, glaring at my monitor, that stupid logo reflecting in his glasses, "This is just more of the same, Luce."

"There's gotta be something," I opened another tab, the icon barely visible across the already compressed navigation bar.

He went analogue: rifling through the mismatched sheets of A4, all scrawled upon and out of order. He found the email - coffee-stained, crumpled, and lying out with all the dignity of an unseen prose extract discarded from an exam that had never ended. He read it over again and placed it back delicately, as though fearful it would break.

Tom had been a small-town kid, too. He'd lectured me, repeatedly, on how



I lacked the understanding to justify the outrage that I felt when Chloe had sent that email. They were trees, he'd said; though they had branched and flowered in the big city, their roots were firmly planted in where they had grown, an intricate and complex history hidden beneath the surface that was seen. I had pointed out the concept of repotting to the patronizing sap, but then we ended up debating the semantics of the metaphor. It hadn't stopped Chloe from marrying him.

Not Tom, to be clear. Colton. Colton Graham was his name.

27. 6"2". White. Shoulder-length brown hair. Blue eyes. A jawline cut from glass. Picture perfect, he had white veneers in a Cheshire grin and a body built by pulled bootstraps and self-righteous egotism. An evangelical nationalist's Jesus Christ.

When Chloe had known him, he'd been an overzealous theatre kid, charming and charismatic enough to be remembered as benign. If at all. For years, we'd worked together at *The Brief*; we'd even drunkenly compared yearbooks after the Tamplin's Association benefit. Never once did Chloe mention him. My sources had been other classmates who'd moved to the city, and all had taken a moment before an "oh yeah, him," of recognition landed.

Backwater told a different story. They spoke of a hero returned home from military service, who'd bought up the old Rothwell farm and resuscitated it with regenerative farming and a wellness spa. He'd renovated the old barn with the help of local traders and opened it up as a community space. He'd hosted dinners, and galas, and artisan workshops, and donated so much money to the town council that they were finally able to greenlight the construction of the Wildfire Memorial they'd been planning since '96. He'd provided jobs and produce with friendship and a message that inspired such pride within those who received it, that listing his achievements thereafter was done so with a tone that edged on a warning.

His farm was the main supplier to the Main Street cafe, butcher, grocer, and clothing store.

He sat on the Board of Governors for the school, the church, and the workers' association.

His hands rented their houses from him.

He only issued zero-hour contracts.

And then there was that stupid blog.

MYND. Putting a "y" instead of an "i" and thinking you were clever was



bad enough without such riveting enticements as “Unlock the Secrets for New Enlightenment” and “Superpower your Thinking”. Ostensibly, it was a self-help motivational-guru pseudo-intellectual quasi-religious pool of meaningless platitudes that enough people had decided to paddle in to make it viable, but not well-known. Its current of carefully constructed buzzwords was at least contained to the Midwest Backwater, but what it lacked in scope, it seemed to make up for in potency. And its tide had caught Chloe. I didn’t notice the first day that she missed. The second, I just assumed I had gotten her vacation dates wrong. The fifth, the email came.

It was her, but not her. Her words, her cadence, her style, her syntax, all cut in and out like a phone call in a tunnel. There was so much dead air - scripted and surface-level padding. This from the woman for whom writing was more of an exorcism than an exercise. She’d spend an hour just writing a sentence, getting it perfect down to the connotation. But here, words were tossed in with careless abandon. Pretty words. Aesthetic. Decorative. She was telling me she was staying. She was telling me she would be handing in her resignation. She was saying goodbye. And she did it with a mask.

Three weeks later, she married him. I found out after a month. She’d not written me a word. I phoned her to congratulate her. He picked up. He spoke for her. She’d not said a word.

“Nothing...” I whispered, then with growing crescendo: “Nothing, nothing, nothing!” I shouted and shoved the keyboard away to bury my face in my hands. Tom caught me before I could and pulled me to his chest. The knot of his tie dug into my forehead. The pressure was surprisingly calming. I burrowed deeper before pulling back. “I’m sorry. I’m calm. I’m cool.”

Eyebrows over specs, he eyed me skeptically. I barely even tried to smile. I knew full well he’d see straight through it. So, I closed my eyes and lifted my chin until I felt his forehead meet mine. I felt the chair beneath me, the warmth of the computer beside me, the chill of the empty office around me. I heard the whirr of the hard drive, the muffled drone of the evening traffic outside, his breathing matched with mine. I smelt old paper, freshly printed ink, and fading aftershave. I tasted stale coffee, the tang of my bitten cheek, and my hunger long ignored.

“Fact,” for the second time that evening, Tom’s voice seeped through the murkiness of my mind; light through the cracks. “Chloe Ross sent an email



to Lucy Haden on January 7th. In it, she announced her engagement and indicated she would not be returning to Excellere City.”

“Fact,” my voice followed like the gentle knock of a woodpecker in a waking world, “Chloe Ross resigned her position as reporter at the *Daily Brief* on January 8th. She had been there seven years.”

Tom continued, “Fact: Chloe Ross married Colton Graham on January 27th at the Backwater Town Council Chamber. The witnesses were Martin Sheer, the local Sheriff, and Amanda Abnett, an employee of Rothwell Farm.”

I reciprocated, “Fact: Chloe Ross’ apartment lease lapsed on February 17th. She’d not arranged anything or anyone to remove or collect her belongings.”

“Fact: Chloe Ross’ mobile number was disconnected by February 22nd.” He said it gently, but I squeezed my eyes tighter, relieving the sting, releasing the tear. “Fact: Lucy Haden attempted to contact Chloe Ross at Rothwell Farm on February 22nd. Colton Graham answered.”

Tom rested his hands on my lower thighs, gently caressing the curve of my knees with his thumbs. “Fact: all subsequent attempts to contact Chloe Ross have been unsuccessful.”

Rage felt like neat whiskey in my gut. “Inference: Chloe Ross was being isolated. Action: deep dive on Colton Graham.”

“Born in Backwater, April 20th, 1980, to Mitch and Martha Graham. Parents deceased, 1993 and 1997, respectively.”

“Educated at Backwater Junior and High. Graduated with a 3.0 GPA.”

“Military record shows Administrative Clerk at Rosenberg Barrack, Colorado, 1999-2000.”

“Returned to Backwater, Kansas, March 13th ‘03. Bought Rothwell Farm. Paid cash, upfront.”

“Bought controlling shares in the Jackson development, May 23rd, 2005.”

“Established MYND as an NGO on September 1st, 2005, and uses it to spout meaningless bullshit about human potential on a weekly basis using the five minutes he was in the military to boost credibility.” I opened my eyes, and the night came flooding back. In it, I saw Tom looking up from where his glasses had slid down his nose. I pulled back, and the moonlight hit his face. Before he had the chance, I raised my hands and slid his frames back where they belonged. He smiled.

“Inference...”



The sting returned to my eyes, the fire to my gut. “Colton Graham is dangerous. Chloe is in danger.”

He said nothing but nodded slightly.

I let my gaze drift with ambient dissociation back to my monitor, now just a black screen. “Tom, what if I’m wrong? I mean, this wasn’t an inference; it was a hypothesis. One that I’ve attacked with a fucking blind rage. I could be forcing this narrative. I could be terrorizing a perfectly normal couple just because Chloe wanted me out of her life, and I couldn’t accept it. And, no offence, but I could have steamrolled you into thinking it, too,” I looked back at him.

He removed his hands from my thighs and placed them on his own. He paused, for one moment, and then another. Then, he spoke. “I think if we took out your enthusiasm and Chloe from the equation, there’s a story here. We’re seeing themes of isolation, unusual beliefs, financial control, and a charismatic leader at the center—these are all red flags for something potentially troubling. So, I believe my drive to uncover the truth of this is as much professional as it is personal. But I realize I can’t fully separate the two, and I know how quickly our opinions can form and then challenge or even shape the facts. I’m sure there’s room for a conversation about the ethics of our involvement here, but both the journalist and the friend in me can’t just ignore this. Maybe that’s naive, or an ego trip, or it’s just my trust in your judgment winning out, but I’m unsure of the best path forward, and I feel like I should trust my gut—albeit with some hesitation.”

Careful and considered, his words reflected his soul. I really didn’t need moonlight to see him shine. “I wish I had your conviction.”

He laughed, I think quite involuntarily. “Luce, you’ve got more conviction than a pit bull on a pant leg.”

I smiled, but there was sadness in it. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

His laughter settled on a soft smile. “If you had my conviction, we’d never get anything done.” And then, almost shyly, “You compliment me.”

“Rarely,” I quipped, a well-worn habit that I wasn’t ready to let go of. He snorted and stuck out his tongue. I inclined my head to watch his amusement linger as he adjusted the strap of his watch. “But I should. You are a wonder.” Even with the darkness, I could swear I saw him blush. Leaning back in my chair, my gaze drifted again to that black screen, dormant for just a little longer. There I saw myself, a ghostly visage propped up by moonlight, surrounded by shadows. It was an image of



myself I was comfortable with, one I often looked for, one I told myself was true. But if I tilted my head - and I didn't even have to do it much - I could see that reality reflected something a little different.



Sound and Sentimentality

Written by: Chlo Gif

Edited by: Clay Mykietowich

It's a Thursday morning during the morning rush of the local coffee shop when I hear it, almost drowned out by the chatter and haste of all the strangers in that small shop. The beat flows above our heads and into our ears and the words feel barely above a whisper, it's Jeff Buckley's 'Everybody wants You', a song I hadn't heard for months. A song I hadn't heard since I'd last seen him, the last time that I'd seen him walk down my garden path into the world, to never be seen again. Never to be seen again except in memories and my mind's eye. I'm suddenly reminded of the soundtrack of our love, the music of my life and then its abrupt and jarring absence. Deep in my chest, there is a ferocious pounding, protesting against my ribcage holding in the crazed animal of the heart. The memories vibrate and hum underneath my skin like it used to when he was still here.

It's strange how much music can move you. Jeff Buckley has been dead since before I was born and yet I feel everything he says in 'Everybody here wants you'. How strange to have never walked the earth the same time as him but be so connected anyway. These artists know exactly how you feel, they can unravel your tangled emotions and put them into words in a way that knits your ribcage closed and has you clawing for air. They can also hand you a cheat sheet of how to take the tattered shreds of your psyche and craft something beautiful, something new.

The ardent longing stains everything it touches and redraws the edges of your memory, making them so much sweeter than reality.

His memory clouds my mind. He sounds like all the love songs that have ever been written and even then, they're missing something because they're not about him. He sounds like knowing where you stand with your feet on the earth, your head in the clouds and your heart in his hands. All those dark skies become blue-gold painted days. It will stop you in your tracks as suddenly a heartbeat becomes a melody, a laugh becomes a soundtrack to a life I hadn't started living. Your heavy heart feels lighter in his hands.

Now, I feel like a disciple of nostalgia, grieving in silent shame with my scripture of sound torn to shreds. I began to accept that God wasn't in the



room for him, it was just me and him alone - even if God was in the room for me, it was just him and me again. He was ritual to me, I was just routine, I became a chore. Even when eyes darkened and diatribes died in our mouths as tongues found something more favourable to do, eyes lit up with a shimmering romance; it was never the same for him as it was for me.

It's as if music makes money by marking miserable moments. It plays its mind tricks like broken records in your mind; it all feels golden, dripping in honey hues before grey skies invade. Your insides twist as if you were being killed from the inside by something beautiful. A twisting that feels like you were homesick your whole life until you walked into that room and locked eyes, suddenly your stomach settled and that cloud in your mind cleared. That pit in your stomach that could keep all the things you're too scared to say. The ringing in your ears rattling the memories of your hand in his.

It unearths relics from times gone by, a past you can't touch. It smoothes over the cracks of memories, turning you into an unreliable narrator as you desperately attempt to fill the gaps. The loving and the leaving blur into the same. The complex creature that he always was, always evading and avoiding, still intrigues and appalls you, even the part that still loves him. An insatiable desire to return to the old ways, back to the old place.

I can't go back to the old place, I'm here in this coffee shop and there is no turning back time.

The song ends, as everything does. My coffee turning cold in my hands, just as his heart did. It's time to leave this little shop, teeming with its tireless patrons and its noise. I'm lost in my head whilst he's stuck in my heart, but there's a whole world out there waiting, just like I am, to be found. A different song starts as I reach the door, an upbeat pop number by some star who will fizzle out soon enough, it's lively and carefree. It feels nice to hear a new song for a change.



I Announce Myself Smitten

Written by: Toby Timko

Bury it within me, sweet symphony, a hymn. of Beethoven or bach. or a violent whim to break it up. shatter a glass, melt a plastic cup. Slash my tire, my desire remains inflamed like a sore toe I slammed against a table misplaced. wrong me and ill visualize a list of every sound, sight, smell that reminds me of you. a glittering vortex. a void and a wormhole. a black hole and a bottomless pit and I will leave a life of luxury to fall, but it wasn't lavish, not at all. lonely. I grow livid, and it's quick. but loving is slow. ripping the band aid because I do not wish to expose a gash. so the tugging is excruciating. I refuse to grow impatient. It is worth it, an agonizing sort of ache, and a being i should hate, but i lie with a stinging wound, and i am forever thankful to clutch the bandaid at all

...

Splinter my soul-swallow it whole. Let me be the keeper of your ailments. riddle me with blisters and bruises if it means your good night sleep, something to eat-i can feed you jam, jellies, fruits. let the sweetness of the cherry fill your throat and I will gladly swallow the pit. I care not if I choke on it-you are lovely. and worth it.

gentle and kind, boy of mine. my stomach is littered and infested with butterflies oh! how I long to know every detail on your skin-like some sort of secret message only I know, only I can read with trembling fingers. I pray it calls to me, assures me your presence is not but a hallucination, a cruel trick my mind has played on me. I pray it yearns, your skin, warm like the sun protecting a field of daisies, encouraging their growth, the flowers alive with hope. whichever god can grant me solace-tell me that i have found the light, the one they claim embraces. even in death. a guiding presence full of love. I pray. and the god grants me you and now I understand the meaning of the phrase thank god

...



When i graze my hand against your skin
the shape and curves of soft flesh
engrave poetry into my finger tips
so if i happen to prick my pinky
on a needle in a haystack
full of fear of losing sight
of something so sweet
as the fog of your breath
then i can simply stamp
the puncture wound
onto a piece of parchment
then i will forever have a reminder
a precious keepsake
of every word
that gets trapped in my throat



The Sky Was Pink

Written by: Tereza R.

the sky was pink
when you and I became a thing
and there was rain on the lake
when I realized that I don't have to pretend

it's scary
love and emotions and feelings
yet it's impossible to be scared
when you are there
I can laugh
and I can cry
and you're still by my side
without knowing
day by day
you took all my insecurities away

the sky was pink
when you and I became a thing
and the night was full of stars
when I got lost in your arms

the sky was pink
and the memories keep replaying
everywhere I go
the moments we spent together follow
the sky, the lake, the grass
they don't let me pass
without reminding me
that you held me
listened to me
laughed with me
everything I do
I do while missing you



the sky was pink
when you and I became a thing
and it was late and dark and cold
when I realized that from now on
I'll always have a hand to hold



On The Notion Of Love And Corpses

Written by: Alena Vo

Edited by: Emma Hanks

They call it *shavasana*: the corpse pose. After squeezing out a few more positions with names like "happy baby" and "bridge", we transition into lying on our backs, the wind knocked out of our trembling limbs. A desperation settles into my heart and belly. My body has spent far too long screaming as I coax it into contortions it has seldom ever found itself in, and the prospect of relaxing summons the last dregs of energy remaining within me. Then the crucial moment: they instruct us to gently lower our knees, let our hands and feet fall open to the sky. They tell us to close our eyes.

Usually I am all too happy for darkness to swallow my vision, but today I don't give in completely. I fix my sight on a point near the top right edge of the ceiling tile I am under, a blank space unoccupied by detail. I stare straight into it as our instructor finishes the session with words that I can no longer recall, probably something about focusing on the breath and emptying our heads of thoughts. Like everything, her voice fades. My body, shiny with sweat, sinks further into the rubbery mat.

It's here that I think that this is how things will end.

It's here that I think of you.

I watch you at that point on the ceiling, a grainy camera playing a home video. You're lying on a bed next to me, and you twist your head around to look at my face. Your grin gives my heart butterfly wings. I watch you run through a meadow, your fingers grazing the long grass. The flowers bow in the wind, aching for your touch.

We've talked of death before, you and I. Maybe not outright, but in conversation, you were the first to allude to it. You said to me, "Ultimately, you will live the life you were meant to live." I see it now, the soil of the forest where you uttered those words, the trees and their whispering branches. The gray-brown creek bubbling through it all, where you knelt down and laid your hand down and said oh my god it's just water flowing over rocks but look at what it creates. How beautiful it is to love a universe.



In all my life, nothing had ever made more sense to me than this.

Past the ceiling I watch you grow older and littler until there you are with your hands and feet relaxed and open to the sky, your skin and hair gone white. I watch you shut your eyes forever, your family huddling around you to feel the last breaths of your warmth, your children and their children's children holding your hand as it grows cold.

It is the first time in a long time that I have thought so thoroughly of a death that wasn't mine. I realize my eyes have been staring at nothing, what we all see when we die. The ceiling rushes into view, and the instructor calls us back from the dead, telling us to wiggle life into our fingers and toes. Like willows, we bend to her wind, and I'm surprised at the sensations awakening in my hands and feet. My breath slowly returns to me under that empty ceiling.

In the image of your death, I'm not there. Maybe I already assumed my own *shavasana* somewhere, maybe I didn't follow you through that meadow. Ultimately we will live the lives we were meant to live, you and I. But when our bones return to the earth, maybe a sympathetic breeze will breathe the dust into the woods. Maybe then, we will settle on a gray-brown riverbed.



The Silence Kills

Writer: Yasmin Hattar

Gleaming lights followed after crystal chandeliers illuminated the ceiling. Chatter filled the ballroom. Chatter so loud, so annoying it was almost enough to cloud Desmond's mind. Almost. Sweat beaded down his deep bronze backlines from how stuffy his armor made him feel and all the little things people did to piss him off.

Self-absorbed aristocrats always did, from their desire to show off their assets to their incessant need to impose into other peoples spaces. Specifically Desmonds'. Despite it all, it wasn't enough to get a particular existence out of his mind. No. Not even in the slightest.

"Sir Desmond," Lady Elenora purred. Desmond's head shifted towards the woman who spoke amongst the small circle of noble ladies who had him surrounded.

"May I inquire a dance?" The chatter shrunk.

Lady Elenora gaze did not shrink though, rather sharpened as if he were a stuffed prize at a fair. Some smirked, as if they knew but didn't care to question it.

"I am in the middle of—," "Oh come now, your lady takes up a majority of you, I'm sure she won't mind if I have some of your time. After all, we all know how you feel about leaches, wouldn't you agree?" her eyes full of humor, waiting expectantly to take her up on the offer.

Desmond knew what she meant, everyone knew what she meant. It was no secret that Desmond absolutely abhorred vampires. Growing up, he heard stories regarding vampires, how they preyed upon innocent people, drank until there was nothing left. Monsters that didn't deserve to walk this world, his father would always say. Creatures that rooted prejudice deep into Desmond from a young age.

So why was he serving one?

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It was a Sunday afternoon. And it wasn't just any Sunday afternoon. The day of the yearly Combat Tournament where noble men and commoners



alike took great heart to compete in. There was an incentive of course. Winner would escort a noble's daughter chosen by the royal family themselves. It became popular amongst the sport due to the fact that every woman the royal family carefully selected was guaranteed to be beautiful. The tradition was always a romanticized one, one that everyone appeared to be pleased with.

The coliseum was packed with an audience jeering and chanting all at once. Swords clashed into each other as one of the men swiped at the other which resulted in jousting his sword towards his stomach. The crowd always cheered the loudest when blood was spilled. The round ended with one being carried out on a stretcher whilst the other limped away. Laughter fell from Desmond who watched it all in a mocking display. His eyes were colors of sandalwood, his hair a bald fade. But his manner was a mocking one, inspecting the competition.

The King and Queen both sat on their throne talking to each other, scrutinizing the contestants like every year. Desmond examined the booths filled with nobility, usually giving him an idea of the possible candidates. His eyes darkened as he glared at a suite booth placed in opposition to the sun's light. Unexpectedly, the unfortunate appearance filled him with hostility. But his pride would not let him leave.

He won the four previous tournaments and believed this year wouldn't be any different. It was the same boring fighters he concluded, but thrived off the praises for him. A contestant howled in pain and Desmond rolled his eyes. Deeming this year too to be a breeze, he made his way to fight his last match which would secure himself a night with the company of a charming maiden. His gaze shifted towards a group of women eyeing him up and down, giggling whenever he looked over. He smirked but soon his eyes landed on a short figure swathed in black from head to toe sitting not far from him.

A pair of daggers were strapped to his small frame, not a sight of skin could be seen. Desmond shared a glance and smirked too at that as he looked away, measuring that his final opponent would be no different from the other blokes. Still, he was disturbed that the stranger was wearing dark attire in this heat. The hood shifted in his general direction, but Desmond was too occupied with his thoughts on what he would do after his victory. Maybe talk up some of the paramour from earlier. The dark hood lingered for a while before turning back to the match that was about finished up.



*

The crowd went wild as the remaining participants stood on the battlefield. “Make it a good one for me, okay pipsqueak?” Desmond cracked his neck and then drew his sword. The hooded figure said nothing as the ring announcer commenced the fight. Noticing that he hadn’t moved at all, Desmond advanced within the poor bugger’s vicinity concluding that he must’ve been stilled with fear.

He went to strike but what came next wasn’t blood rather it was his blade that had stopped dead in its tracks. The sword was halted in between two gloved fingers, Desmond flinched but immediately recovered himself by pulling back causing sparks to fly. Changing tactics, Desmond gestured at his opponent signaling for him to make his move, trying to gauge his capabilities. The shadow tilted its head slowly, almost amused. Seeming to have come to a conclusion, the shadow decided to oblige him.

In a blink of an eye, the shadow was three inches away from him at eye level, dagger in hand about to swipe at his throat. Desmond barely managed to evade the sharp blade with a scratch and awkwardly ran backwards to add space between them. Huffing, he never recalled the shadow to ever move at such speed with their previous matches. He assumed he would be able to defeat him at his current level of skill.

Clearly someone was holding back.

The shadow regarded his hesitation and almost knowingly, he scoffed. The man seemed rather disappointed at him as if he got his hopes up and rested his hands on his hips. A vein bulged in Desmond’s neck as his eye twitched with vexation. Spectators quietly watched the exchange while some were beginning to sweat, panicking that their bets might have been misplaced. Losing patience, Desmond tried to recalculate his next move. Deciding it would be best, he dashed towards the figure and curiously the shadow inspected the motion. Somehow, somehow the hooded figure felt compelled to do the same.

They launched into a range of attacks, trading blows with one another and the audience was on the edge of their seats. Desmond readily swung the blade at the shadow’s feet to which he jumped, running to then slide under his wide stance slicing at his legs and appearing behind him. Desmond yelped as the figure attempted to cut his throat.

Fortunately, Desmond managed to grip the shadow’s wrist and easily flip



him in the air. Controlling the impact of the landing, the shadow summersaulted making Desmond release his grasp on him.

Going on the offensive wasn't going to be easy, Desmond deduced. Gaining ground, the shadow swiped upwards making him barely dodge. A series of lethal attacks followed and tiny cuts riddled his face trickling with blood. Sensing that his adversary was toying with him, he decided to fall back. Studying his foe, he determined the next best course of action. He dropped his sword.

Shouts of outrage came from the crowd, shouting obscenities at the man they poured their lifesavings into. Meanwhile the Queen and King watched like a hawk as to what he would do. The challenger tilted his head in curiosity once more.

"If you're a man, put up your dukes," huffing heavily, he raised both fists to eye level. To this, the shadow lifted his blades, stretching high above his head and in a rapid display threw both daggers to the ground sinking deep into the earth. Desmond readied his stance, only this time the shadow progressed first. Instantly appearing three inches away from him like last time, the shadow uppercutted his gut making him cough up liquid. Desperately, he rasped and grappled his opponent to the ground.

A grunt came from the hooded figure and for the first time struggled with his weight being toppled. "Gotcha, little mosquito," Desmond managed to get out. From this angle he could see a few features of the little assassin. Strands of black laid over red eyes, filled with frustration that he let his guard down. Grappling continued as the cries from the audience did and Desmond's heart thumped.

However, some of the adrenaline wore off and soon pain ran all over his body causing to accidentally slip his hand onto the shadows chest. Suddenly the shadow froze. Confusion riddled his face, the sensation felt quite soft to his fingertips. Barely, but it was there. The next sensation was agony in his precious family jewels, looking down he found the shadow's knee between his legs. It was Desmond's turn to howl in torment as he cupped his other leg, sucked in breaths and oohs came from the audience.

He rolled his body onto the ground and that gave room for the ball kicker to get up and dust himself off. As a last ditch effort to show that he was pissed, kicked him into his side, sending him skidding across the sediment and Desmond knew he had lost.

The ring announcer warily looked at him, not sure what to do and



managed to call the match. Members of the nobility and commoners alike ripped up pieces of paper and murmured a stew of curses. But within a moment something unexpected happened. The queen whispered into her servant's ear. The servant passed on the information to another informant until it relayed to the ring announcer, to which he appeared baffled by the news.

“APOLOGIES FOR THE MISUNDERSTANDING, THIS MATCH GOES TO THE RIGHTFUL WINNER, SIR DESMOND OF HOUSE BLACKWOOD!”

Everyone clamored in surprise, whilst the majority cheered at the thought of not losing their prospects. Dazed in discomfort, Desmond found himself to be bewildered at the sudden change of events and swiveled to the dark figure swathed in black. A glove squeezed into a tightened fist.

“He-hey wait. What’s the meaning of this?” wheezing, Desmond stuttered forward to the announcer who regarded him in defeat. The shadow, disgruntled, stalked the Porta Libertia which should have been the Porta Triumphalis. Desmond bone-tired, tried to keep up with him and successfully exited the stadium. Once again this year, he won. But did he really? Everyone who beared witness, could say otherwise but wouldn’t in order to say that their bets were right to be on him. He fell to his knees dejectedly. The shadow was nowhere to be found.

“Can I help you with something?”

Desmond paused, eyes widened, then turned to find a woman looming over his shoulder. “OHSWEETMOTHEROF—” he clutched his sword, alarmed at the undetectable presence from behind him. The woman had short black hair which slightly covered her big red eyes with dark lines under them. Lastly, two moles were placed under her right eye. She wore a bored almost aloof expression indicating her indifference to him, maybe even to the world itself. The girl sighed, unbothered even at his awkward fumbling. Her attire was the next thing to catch his eye and he froze.

“Retreating again?” The woman tilted her head to the side curiously, her ear revealed the multiple piercings of gold jewelry. She sounded cold and slightly annoyed. Desmond was rather astounded by her insolence and it made him almost forget entirely who she was. The first person to lay down his ass.

“I’m—you’re—” He started to say.

“Charmed,” in a detached voice.



Hearing her speak again, he flushed with irritation as he scrambled to get up.

“If I recall, the rules only allow for men to compete, unless you have something that I don’t know about.” He traced down to her crotch then met her scarlet eyes again, then smirked.

“It was worth a shot. Speaking of taking shots.” Her eyes trailed down his body with a knowing grin and met his cerulean eyes again. That wiped the smile from his face.

“More like a cheap shot! What is wrong with you?!” he said in exasperation. He could still feel a pang of pain in his lower half. He felt it start to go numb. But not his fury.

“What can I say? You really don’t know what to do with your hands.”

Desmond was a pomegranate. He didn’t know if he could get any more carmine.

“You litt—” “Lady Myn, your father, Master Syracuse awaits you in the suite booth,” an old man in servant attire bowed. His hair grayed, and his stature was dark. He wore a grim yet dead expression. Desmond recoiled in shock, finally registering what she was.

“Thank you Frederick,” Myn was about to walk off followed by her butler behind her leaving Desmond alone. She glanced at him.

“Unfortunately, I’ll be seeing more of you. Let’s see how well you fare,” And with that, the woman was gone.

The entire time all Desmond did was count the number of times his heart pounded.

*

Champagne glasses clinked, the sound of noble chattering blurred bit by bit until Desmond could not hear anything except the dangling of jewelry dancing with each other on a certain vampire’s ears. His eyes closed.

“Sir Desmond?” He opened his eyes to see Lady Eleanora pouting at his silence. In the far left of his peripherals, stood his date. Lady Myn wore a black charmeuse silk gown that draped beautifully over her body. Simply put, she was breathtaking. She wore an unamused expression as she leaned lazily over a pillar, glass in her right hand hovering over her blood-red lips with her left arm crossed over her stomach, whilst her wrist supported the weight of her right arm. No one approached her. He imagined she liked it that way.



“Excuse me.” Desmond bypassed Lady Eleanora and the group of ladies who groaned in disappointment. As he got closer to Lady Myn, he slowed his steps as if he was casually in the neighborhood. She didn’t acknowledge him and appeared more focused on the gold rings on her fingers. He expected to be miffed but was just as mesmerized and looked at her entirety. Black eyeshadow contrasted her pale almost ghost-like skin. Her silence was slowly killing him.

“You look as though you’ve never known the sun in your life.” Desmond internally smacked himself. He didn’t know how to start the conversation, which was new for him. It appears he was experiencing new things whenever she was involved. Desmond didn’t know if he liked it or not. The fabric of her dress pooled like a stream, it dipped in the middle of her chest and this close he could see a few moles that scattered across her skin. He wondered if there were others and Desmond quickly caught himself.

“Duly. Noted,” Rolling her eyes, she finally spoke. “Can’t help if my skin makes me look half dead.”

“One of the perks of being human. And this good looking,” gesturing to himself.

“Oh please, you humans give yourselves too much credit.”

“Oh and you vampires are not—” “You don’t have to be here you know.” Desmond ceased his cocky quips.

She lolled her head to the side as she gazed at the bubbles fizzing in her drink. Glancing at him to see his reaction.

“I’m not pretending, I’m just maintaining the title of best escort.” And God, Desmond hoped he was lying. For some reason. He didn’t know anymore. She didn’t say anything and she wasn’t given the chance as they were interrupted by his father and mother.

“Desmond, are you enjoying yourself?” Desmond’s mother, Lady Blackwood giddily asked, her hands wrapped around her husband’s arms.

“Yes mother, quite so.”

“Announcing her Majesty, Queen Valentina!” The servant bowed before a woman illuminating in a silver ballgown, a fitted corset with dangling sharp pieces of metal, like little daggers. Beautiful silver eyeshadow was coated over her bronze skin glittered around yellow-golden eyes. Lips the color of vermillion and hair were swept up in a messy bun with curls hanging on the sides of her face. Desmond noted she had never dressed so coldly in all the time she attended the ball.



Queen Valentina was the sun personified. She dressed to the colors of warmth, however it looks like she chose a different aesthetic. Myn scoffed after giving the Queen a stare down and looked away. It finally struck him, she wore that dress to send a message to Lady Myn. ‘Know your place, creature of the night.’

Everyone bowed, Myn, blasé attitude and all, defiantly shrugged. Everybody listened to her speak and resumed socializing. Desmond looked at her, confused then it hit him.

“You entered a tournament...just to avoid—”

“My, just look at how lovely Lady Eleanora looks this evening. There are many delightful ladies here tonight, have you danced with any of them?” Lady Blackwood didn’t even acknowledge Lady Myn. Desmond looked to Myn and saw that unbothered expression continuing to take a sip of her champagne.

“No, in fact I was just about to ask Lady Myn to a dance.” For once Lady Myn whipped to him in disbelief. Lady Blackwood at last took a look at the one she ignored and filled with scorn, she flapped her fan over her mouth.

“Shame. Lady Eleanora is quite stunning, wouldn’t you say Marcus?” Desmond turned to see Lady Eleanora watching and keenly nodded at them when the Blackwood’s regarded her. Lord Blackwood studied his son. The son that didn’t put up much of a fight when his father told him to escort lady Myn. The son he taught to hate vampires. The son he thought he knew. He supposed his father was starting to catch on.

“Have a good rest of your evening,” he finally exhaled and left without a word with his wife on her arm looking confused. Desmond turned to see Myn watching him in discernment. “Were you.” She said haughtily. More of a statement than a question.

“Of course. Some of the ladies already had a piece of this.”

“Whore,” she coughed.

“One that’s ready to dance for you might I add. You’re welcome.” He bowed to her waist and steadily looked up at her palm opened in invitation.

Myn looked deciding, eyeing him from head to toe then smiled and ultimately took his hand. Desmond somehow looked surprised despite being the one to ask.

“I was sure you were going to refuse,” As they walked, Myn spoke. “You read right. But luckily for me on this dull evening, I have a harlot to keep me entertained.”



She slid her hand slowly from his bicep all the way to his shoulder.

Desmond's swallowed, enraptured by the movement. Never really craving something so much you wanted it to corrupt you. The thought had him ensnared and fully believed it would ruin him if he were to keep going. It had never been like this before. Never. Noticing Myn staring back at him, "What?" he quietly asked.

"This is the part where you use your hands, I believe," she said, rolling her eyes, annoyed. Desmond's throat cleared and placed his hand at her waist waiting for the music.

"Honestly, for a man of the night you sure are inexperienced. It seems I'll just have to teach you, help you practice."

"Apologies, but I'll have you know that my hands know their way around a dance." Myn raised a brow. "A sword." Then the other one. "A bed."

"I'm walking away now," she turned to leave but a grip held her in place stopping her attempt.

She gave him a look before cocking back her head and gave a light hearted chuckle. The music started and everyone around them seemed to fade away as their bodies swayed to the rhythm, pressed up against each other.

Desmond wasn't sure what to say next. Myn hummed for a moment.

"Dancing? Maybe. Fighting? Debatable. And as for the last, well, if the last two were any indicators," she smirked. Desmond was too stunned to speak.

Desmond reddened with anger.

"Stop talking, or kill me, please. One or the other it doesn't matter, it's all the same to me." Sounding as if he couldn't take it anymore. Her silence normally turned the air tense then into awkwardness. It *killed* Desmond just thinking about it.

Myn finally tilted her head and hummed thoughtfully once more.

"Eventually, you little puffed up windbag." That last bit was unnecessary, Desmond thought.

"I don't understand. Surely even vampire nobility take part in high society," Desmond curiously spun her. Myn returned with a spin of her own and replied, "No." Gazing up at the chandelier than at a glaring Lady Eleanora and a group of ladies. "At least this one does," she referred to herself.

"Why so curious, Desi? I'd assume you fear vampires, especially House Syracuse."



Desmond flinched as if he'd been slapped. He didn't think about that. That a shut-in vampire would find out about his opinion on her species. Myn regarded him sideways and inclined her head in the general direction to three young nobles standing in the corner gossiping and snickering at passing ladies. "Three little birds told me." That seemed to answer his question.

Those men were generally who Desmond play-mated with in his school days. Desmond scrutinized them and cursed underneath his breath, only he could understand why they did. Like his father, he would often go into rants about the abominable vampires. Thinking back, Desmond came to the realization or perhaps hope that it was all just fear mongering that his father spouted. Oh, how he hoped.

But why would he? For who? What changed? No. Nothing had changed. He was being erratic. Yes, that had to be it. Perhaps he was just attracted to her. Yet felt it was so wrong to do so and figured this minor distraction would fade and wear off once this night was over. Later, Desmond would soon come to understand that that would not be the case.

"I have no response for that."

"Yeah?" Myn deadpanned.

"Unfortunately."

"Yes, quite."

He was spiraling. He had to stop. There were too many thoughts appearing in his brain. Desmond sighed, uncomfortable. "I admit, there is some disdain I hold for vampires but I can assure you, my tongue and I are going to be on their best behavior tonight."

Myn clicked her tongue at that, "Shame."

"What can I say? I need to hold the title for best escort after all."

"Maybe when you're dancing. Can't say the same for your mouth."

Low blow he thought. As he smiled, he couldn't help the corners that twitched in response. Then his mind wandered to something else.

Something that's been gnawing in the back of his mind.

"If I may ask, why did the Queen choose you? It does not seem that she likes you very much." She never really cared much about vampires or revealed her opinion, maybe due to the peace treaty her ancestors made and preventing public wrath. However their faces gave away their thoughts whenever an envoy of their kind arrived in the kingdom. As did Desmonds'.



The words that came next shook Desmond to the core. “She found me raiding her daughter’s closet. But not for clothes I can assure you. Dear gods no. I don’t exactly find little miss shriek’s sense of fashion appealing.” She appeared appalled as if that were the pressing issue.

“What were you doing in her closet?” Desmond huffed out a laugh. Myn’s smile shrunk slowly till it disappeared and cleared her throat. At that, he awkwardly looked away, almost catching himself, tongue protruding the inside of his cheek.

Choosing his next words carefully, “I believe I owe you an apology. Since we met, I’ve been nothing but disrespectful to you. I looked down on you because of my pride and mostly due to my stigma of vampires. It grew me to become condescending, even to you. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Myn held his stare, she could feel his sincerity and regret.

“You are pretty arrogant.”

He drooped. And for a moment, she didn’t say anything and the silence was starting to get to him.

“I forgive you.”

Desmond exhaled slightly at that. Myn moved closer, bodies grazing each other and their faces were so close they could feel each other’s breath. The air got knocked out of his lungs and innocently had her hand on his left pec and slowly skimmed down to his lower abdomen. Keeping it there, Myn spoke in an apologetic tone but there was no trace of it in her eyes.

“I’m sorry too. I hit it pretty hard there, didn’t I? What can I do to alleviate your pain?”

Myn stroked his stomach up and down, making him swallow. His heart and mind could only be described in one word.

Pandemonium.

“You are quite the enigma, Lady Syracuse.”

Her hand on him stilled, heat pooled in his gut, alight with discovery, her expression changed as if coming to a decision.

“It seems we should end this night early, wouldn’t you agree?”

“...Um.”

Her eyes glowed and tattoos suddenly appeared, spreading and forming itself like watercolor. As tulips and flowers he didn’t recognize started to bloom across her neck and chest. Diamonds overlapped on the blossoming, suddenly the candlelights from the chandelier went out as well as the lamps



which chose to violently shatter instead.

Pitch black was all anyone could see, some woman screamed who turned out to be Lady Eleanora in the distance. Panic was the only thing that could be seen in the room. But all Desmond could see were two glowing spheres in front of him now turned to crescents. Without warning, he was swept away with such speed he didn't know what happened.

Outside, he felt wind gusts throughout his entire being. Arms smaller but no doubt stronger than his carried him like a babe. He looked to the ground but all he could see was the castle in its entirety, shrinking and shrinking. Finally, he glanced to the side to see the neck of the person he had tightened arms around.

Tensing at the sight, Desmond almost screamed. Leather-felt wings in the form of a bat had taken to the sky. The moon lit up the clouds which were usually cloaked by the darkness. Myn gave a small, fangs threatening to peak out her mouth. Not knowing whether to be terrified or awed, "Where are you taking me?!"

"Back to my place."

Time flew by as well as her. Desmond eventually passed out too tired to deal with his dilemma and woke up to find himself in bed.

The room he found to be was small, nothing that said this was a noble's house. Starting to think he was kidnapped by criminals, Desmond scrambled to get out the door.

"Hello, sleepyhead."

He felt a throb in his head.

"Did you knock me out?"

"No. But the bird that crashed into you did."

"A BIRD—where am I?!"

"My place, or more specifically my bed."

Desmond looked around and saw that the layout resembled an apartment. Not a mansion. A thought struck him.

"WAIT, ARE YOU SECRETLY POOR?!"

Myn blinked then chuckled.

"Ya know, even nobility prefer to branch out," she drawled.

"Who does that?"

"Dunno."

Exasperated, he got up and she held a platter of roasted chicken, buttery toast and eggs. Coffee steamed at the corner of the tray along with small jars of sugar and milk.





*

“Sustenance?”

He continued but saw her encouraging demeanor. He sighed then sat back down.

“So.”

“So.”

“Mind telling me why you kidnapped me?”

“My, kidnapped you say? I prefer the term ‘escort.’”

That ticked Desmond off but suddenly a shadow covered half her face.

“I’m going to eat you.”

Gulped with his fear, Myn burst out a laugh, gesturing to his reaction.

“Find this humorous do you?”

“I am quite bored these days, so yes,” she smiled.

“Why’d you do it?” asking once again.

She gazed at him thoughtfully, deciding what to respond with. Then finally she spoke. Something Desmond did not expect she’d say.

“Because you were uncomfortable there. Weren’t you?”

Gaped, his jaw went slack. He didn’t think she’d notice. He tried to recover a denial.

“Haven’t a clue as to what you’re talking about.”

A smart recourse. Myn’s grin never left her face, fangs threatened to creep to the surface of her mouth.

“And even if I was, what should you care?”

Her smile vanished. Her expression seemed puzzled, almost staring into the abyss. Desmond didn’t know what to make of it.

“I—” said speechlessly. That was a first for him and from the sound of it seems to be a first for her too.

“I don’t know.”

*

Silence followed for the next few months from Myn Syracuse. Desmond appeared baffled. His family noticed. His ‘friends’ noticed. And even the ladies noticed.

In his home, at training, at the pub. Everywhere he went, he seemed to be plagued with thoughts of her. Her silence threatened his peace. If silence could kill. The silence did kill.

As he sat at the counter waiting for the barkeep to pour his drink, the doorbells chimed. Boots creaked on the wooden floorboard, and Desmond felt a presence plop right next to him. Turning, his eyes widened at the figure. Myn Syracuse had her elbow prop her face up whilst her other hand finger-tapped the counter. For a while she didn't say anything, only staring at him.

Just when he thought she was a figment of his imagination, she gave him the reprieve he was searching for.

“Hello, Desi.”



Author Biographies



Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden is a young writer and student from the Netherlands, currently writing her thesis about romance novels. Previously, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen* and *Vonk fantasy*. Recently, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit* and *Sinister Wisdom*. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous issues she is still the editor-in-chief.



Selma Oueddan
Special guest

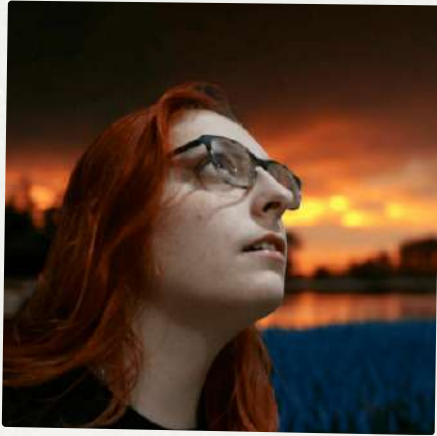
Selma Oueddan (they/them) just started med school again and was the first community manager for Word Tonic. They've been writing and performing since they discovered the stage at 14 years old. Like any writer, they love a good book. Their favourite romance novel is *You made a fool of death with your beauty* by Akwaeke Emezi.



Tereza R.
Author and cover designer

Tereza R. is a free spirit for whom the world is sometimes too much and never quite enough. She writes whatever comes to mind — from fantasy stories to poetry to letters meant only for herself — and dreams of one day becoming a published author. She loves reading and creating visual art, from drawing to photography. If you'd like to see more of Tereza's feelings expressed through poetry, you can find her on Instagram @diaryinverses_.

Author Biographies



Aspen Greenwood
Author and editor

Aspen Greenwood is a writer, editor, swimming teacher, and playworker. Their work, on the page and off, is a form of everyday activism. Greenwood is committed to writing and editing that centres honesty, resilience, and the politics of the personal.



Priya Rohella
Author and Editor

Priya Rohella is a multi-genre author who loves weaving fantasies, mysteries, and horrors. When she's not writing books, she's crafting short story collections, painting canvases, or diving into the latest survival horror games. Her story, "Moonshine Man", tells of a fated meeting, an unsettling romance that's as fascinating as it is frightening, exploring the timeless allure of supernatural love between humans and creatures of fiction.



reux z. qualm
Author

reux z. qualm (@marshfaerie) is an empathic and versatile artist who writes with a quirky but poignant tone emblematic of a DIY basement venue fantasia. under [redacted], they've published some blog posts and shared zines with friends & community members in their local music scene. reux has worked as an educator, organized with local coalitions to further justice for marginalized folks, and is currently pursuing their second master's degree in english rhetoric.

Author Biographies



Janyne Langlois
Author, editor and illustrator

Janyne Langlois is a Florida-based writer known for art, literature and having an enormous imagination that runs on overdrive. Her creativity stems from watching films like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, and *Sailor Moon*. Her love of writing was fostered by her college English professor, who always encouraged her to keep going. When she isn't writing she's watching anime, listening to cinematic music, or screaming with her friends about characters they love.



Michelle Kuria
Author

Michelle Kuria (she/her) is an up-and-coming poet, playwright, and writer. She dedicates her time to honing her passion for the Arts, watching movies, and reading books. “Maybe we should have kissed sooner” is a ‘what if?’ in the form of a poem; a little bit of longing, a lot of reminiscing, but finally growth, the kind of growth you get from retrospectively approaching and unpacking your past.



Scout Rowan
Author

Scout Rowan resides in the Pacific Northwest, in the United States, with her family. She is working on two novels with aspirations of becoming a full-time, published author. When she is not writing, you will find her connecting with nature, listening to music, and spending time with loved ones. If you'd like to reach out to her, you can find her on Instagram @scoutrowanwrites, or email her at scoutrowanwrites@gmail.com.

Author Biographies



Dimitrina Dyakova
Author

Dimitrina Dyakova (@daringwithdimi) is a writer and editor with a lifelong fascination for storytelling and the English language (even though it isn't her native tongue). Having moved to the UK years ago, she began sharing her voice through her blog and now works as a sub-editor. She also enjoys letting her creativity flow through copywriting and poetry. When she's not writing, she enjoys baking, reading, stargazing and long walks in nature.



James Llewellyn
Author

James Llewellyn is a writer, filmmaker, and sometimes bartender who lives in the South West of England. Finally deciding to give a career in writing an actual go, you can often find him writing screenplays or for his substack (<https://ramblingsonthewall.substack.com>) when he remembers he has one.



Silas Baden-Myers
Author

Silas Baden-Myers is a twenty-two year old writer and avid reader from Aotearoa. He works with children, and hopes to one day put his BA degree in Creative Writing to use and publish a YA fantasy novel for them to read.

Author Biographies



Milly Struel
Author and illustrator

Milly Struel is a writer, professional horse rider and aspiring copywriter who found her love of literature after realising English was the only class she'd consistently attend in school. If she's not writing or riding, you'll probably find her in a mosh pit.



Tumilara
Author

Tumilara is a spoken word poet and keen reader with dreams of one day authoring a novel. You can often find her contemplating life and its meaning; some of her ponderings have made it onto her blog tumilaraswindow.wordpress.com.



Chloe Whiting
Author

Chloe Whiting is a London-based writer and Creative Writing Master's student, specialising in prose, poetry and screenwriting. Her published work includes poetry featured in Eunoia Review, and fiction contributions to literary anthologies. Her creative work explores the intersection of memory, grief, recovery and expression, and is currently developing a body of research around community building through storytelling. Connect with her on social media @/faeriewords.

Author Biographies



Meg Evans
Author and editor

Meg Evans is a part-time writer and a full-time Disney cast member, with a constant suitcase that's never quite unpacked. When she's not weaving stories for the happiest place on earth, she's chasing new adventures across the globe—collecting moments, mishaps, and a little bit of chaos along the way. Her writing blends wanderlust with honesty, drawing from the beautiful messiness of real life.



Kenn Nimaga
Author and editor

Kenn Nimaga is a former scientist and current author and librarian located in the American Midwest. While she waits for science funding in the US to return, she fills the academic void writing fiction rather than research papers. When not writing, she can often be found with her beloved corgi.



Molly Hayes
Author

Molly Hayes is from Kent and enjoys writing short stories and poetry. She has also previously written reviews and articles for publications such as The Live Review. When she's not writing, she can be found travelling abroad, at a gig, or enjoying time with her family and friends.

Author Biographies



Jaie Nieves
Author

Jaie Nieves is an undergrad student who is almost finished with their Bachelor of Science in Psychology. When they're not working or attending college, you can find them drawing, writing, or playing games in their free time. Above all else, Jaie values reminding others that they're not alone in their struggles, and writing is one of their favorite ways to get that message across.



Ronnie C.
Author

Ronnie C. is a 21-year-old, queer and neurodivergent, jack-of-all-trades writer – who currently enjoys fanfiction, self-help books, scriptwriting, and poetry. She weaves its special interests, fashion and fictional characters, into everything it writes – and hopes to inspire others to do the same! Through her vulnerability, it aims to foster a space where marginalized communities and social outcasts belong.



Felix Williams
Author

Felix Williams is a copywriter by day and a creative writer/dirty, filthy, sex-fiend amateur poet by night. Some writers have creative inspiration which strikes in the shower, and some eschew pillow talk in favour of scribbling in the nearest notebook. He is the latter. Through the eyes of a lover, Harmony depicts an erotic scene where passionate actions reveal intimate knowledge and devotion.

Author Biographies



Mairi Smibert
Author

Mairi Smibert is a purveyor of silliness and a writer for fun. She has a history degree, which she can (and will) tell you about at length. She is particularly fascinated with folklore, belief systems and the conceptualisation of the supernatural. Often armed with a coffee cup and an eclectic playlist, she dwells most naturally in local coffee shops with her laptop and an idea upon which to mull.



Chlo Gif
Author

Chlo Gif (@chlogif) is a 24 year old working class writer from Northern England, currently based in Leeds. On top of running her Substack, she often works with small zines and publications where alongside managing social media accounts, she experiments with prose and poetry, tackling love and politics or whatever else takes her fancy. When she's not writing, she can be found playing chess (badly), enjoying a good book or live music.



Toby Timko
Author

My name is Toby Timko, originally from Pennsylvania. I am immensely inspired by vivid poetry and surrealist portrayals of life itself. I am currently working on a novel and exploring a future career in writing, whether it be writing a book, writing for tv, or copywriting.

Author Biographies



Alena Vo
Author

Alena Vo is an editor and writer who specializes in poetry and prose about moments in time. When she's not obsessing about language, she's usually cooking or playing with neighborhood cats. You can find her writing on Substack, @alenvocado.



Yasmin Hattar
Author

Yasmin Hattar (@mina_shmeana) is an aspiring writer and copywriter currently living in California. She loves to draw, swim, write and most of all, reading. When she's not doing those things, she spends her time binging shows and movies whilst cooking (She's quite the multitasker!), taking long walks with her mom and doomscrolling. Five years from now, she hopes to become a bestselling author in fiction while traveling the world, continuing to write more stories.



Emma Hanks
Editor

Emma Hanks is a Canadian author, editor, and poet. She is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Counselling Psychology, and hopes to integrate this knowledge into future writing to create authentic and vulnerable pieces that resonate with others. When not in class or typing away on her computer, Hanks enjoys drawing, crocheting, and spending time with her adorable feline menace, Peeky.

Author Biographies



Jae K.
Editor

Jae K. is an aspiring writer/editor that does art on the side, mostly character art but dabbles in environmental art on the occasion. From writing short stories in highschool to distinction-level essays about games in college, Jae wants to continue learning and writing all about it. Jae can be found under selkirot on IG and Substack.



Clay Mykietowich
Editor

Clay Mykietowich is a queer/trans Métis writer, editor, and artist born and raised in Treaty One Territory on Turtle Island. This past October, Clay graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Rhetoric, Writing and Communications and hopes to begin a masters program next fall. Clay is a huge nerd at heart and promises he is very normal about Pokémon.

THANKS FOR READING

See you next time...



cover designed by Tereza R

Word Tonic
Gen-2 Copywriting community