

# Talking Leaves



2014 - 2015  
Volume 17



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Volume 17

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# Talking Leaves

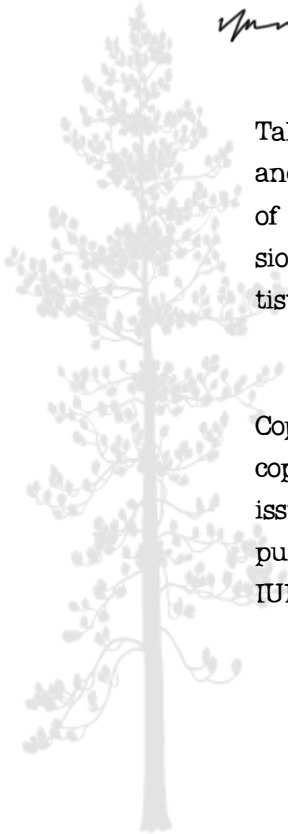
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## Policy and Purpose

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Talking Leaves accepts original works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, art, and photography from students at Indiana University-Purdue University of Columbus. Each anonymous submission is reviewed by the IUPUC Division of Liberal Arts Talking Leaves Design Team and judged solely on artistic merit.

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# Letter from the Managing Editor

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I am so excited to present IUPUC's 2014-15 edition of Talking Leaves. I need to start by thanking my wonderful team! Kimber Gaddis is a design goddess and she has my unending gratitude for her dedication to this edition. Kimber was able to perfectly execute our vision with patience and grace, and we all love her for it. Michaela Wischmeier volunteered for this project as a copy editor, but became so much more by remaining a beacon of light, laughter, and positivity for our group and I thank her for it more than she knows. Zech Rarey was an invaluable resource, often making critical design edits and decisions when I could not, and I thank him so very much. I also thank Dr. Lisa Siefker Bailey and her keen editing eyes. Without her support and contributions, this edition would not be such a success. Together, this team made this publication possible; I could not have done this without them.

This publication was such a blast to design. Student submissions oozed with talent and made our selection process very difficult in the best way. We used the same guidelines as the last edition's editor, Suzy Milhoan: "selections must require only light edits, be well structured, flow properly, and make sense." We felt as though these requirements were straightforward and fair. However, we set a goal of no more than 100 pages, despite the abundance of talent, and we had to cut more pieces than we would have liked.

Submissions will open again in the Fall semester, and you are encouraged to submit your work! I hope you enjoy this year's Talking Leaves as much as I have enjoyed creating it. I look forward to seeing the next interpretation of this great publication!



Bailey Moss  
Managing Editor

# Letter from the Faculty Sponsor

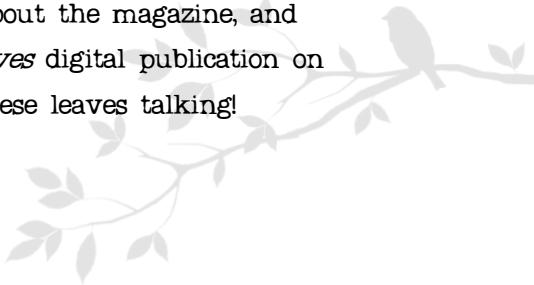
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The IUPUC Division of Liberal Arts is proud to present this year's issue of *Talking Leaves* in a new format, with a visual aspect which unites its eclectic independent voices. *Talking Leaves'* mission is to empower student voices and to encourage self-expression; as such, works receive only minimal copyediting from the staff and sponsor to preserve each contributor's unique voice. The selection process includes a blind reading of anonymous works, and we hope you enjoy the excellent quality of the pieces awarded with publication this year.

Creating a student literary magazine is of a lot of hard—and rewarding—work. The *Talking Leaves* staff gratefully acknowledges the continued support and encouragement of the faculty and administration, especially Vice-Chancellor and Dean Marwan Wafa, Division of Liberal Arts Head George Towers, and Senior Administrative Secretary Vicki Kruse. We also appreciate the support we receive from University Information Technology Services, the University Library, and the Office of Student Involvement. Gratitude also goes to Katherine Tsiopos Wills and Matt Souza for their publishing content advice. Thanks, as well, to the members of the IUPUC faculty who actively embolden and guide students in the creative tasks of artistic expression.

Launching the magazine digitally in a combined event with the Capstone Psychology Poster Session and the English Capstone Session is an exciting first for the campus. Please tell other readers about the magazine, and share a link to the IUPUC website's *Talking Leaves* digital publication on your social networking sites. We love to keep these leaves talking!

Lisa Siefker-Bailey, Ph.D.



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# The Hooded Boy

Brittany King

---

He left his house

Get something to eat

Candy and tea

A teenage dream

Cold outside

Where he stood

Not too far from home

“I’ll put up my hood”

Got to get home

Momma is waiting

“Hold it right there!”

“Where are you going?”

“Leave me alone!”

“You’re all the same!”

“Who are you?”

**BANG**

I got shot, right where I stood

Because I was black? Because of my hood?

Now I am dead

No justice, no peace

My killer is free

“What about me?”

# Horns of Madness

Shannon Carman

---

atonal non-melodic  
jazz fucking noise  
That's what he said  
to make me not want it  
made me crave even more  
the sounds that entice and anger  
to hear the notes burst  
the complexities  
of the free form  
avant-garde posse  
forceful saxophone explosions  
from the masters  
of the new genus  
those guys could  
blast a hole in a brick wall  
with those horns of madness  
their beautiful noise  
glaring loud and original  
onto the scene  
pushing away the  
weak and tired  
bebop is dead  
jazz has a new king  
and its name is Chaos

# An Attempt to Fill the Void

Jake Jeffries

---

A good man goes to war  
A war within himself  
Wanting to become more  
Than just the loneliness he felt  
In an attempt to fill the void  
In an attempt to disperse the silence  
The almost people must be destroyed  
The rebel flesh is prone to violence  
Is the treasure ever worth the search?  
Is this quest a futile endeavor?  
A good man must die first  
The man of tomorrow shall be better  
In an attempt to fill the void  
In an attempt to disperse the silence  
The almost people must be destroyed  
The rebel flesh is prone to violence  
A good man went to war  
A struggle within his mind  
A good man died forevermore  
To be born a better man this time  
In an attempt to fill the void  
In an attempt to disperse the silence  
A good man was destroyed  
A victim of the violence  
Regeneration is now nigh  
A better version will be born  
A light amongst the strife  
A new man whose hands are worn

# A Winter's Drive

Celina Mills

---

We drive through the countryside  
I stare out the window at the winter's sky  
You say you're fine, I know it's a lie  
I know it is, because I'm fine too  
I'm lying to you  
You're lying to me  
Aren't we a pair?

Such a pair of spares

We drew the unlucky hand in the game  
It seems I have all twos and threes this round  
You haven't shown me yours yet,  
But judging by your look it isn't good  
You're looking at me  
I'm looking anywhere but at you  
I'm lying to you  
Each day that I go without saying goodbye to you  
You're lying to me  
Each time you tell me you're happy with how we are  
Aren't we a pair?

Such a fine pair of spares

Spare parts,  
Each one looking for a heart

It's getting so cold tonight  
You look my way, we'll be home soon

You say you should offer me your coat  
So I won't freeze when I leave  
But I don't say anything  
I'm sitting here trying to remember  
When our love left us  
Why won't either of us leave?  
I'm lying to you  
Each time you ask me what I'm thinking  
And I smile and tell you nothing  
You're lying to me  
Each time you come home  
Smelling of whiskey  
And tell me you weren't drinking  
Aren't we a pair?

Such a fine pair of spares

We're nothing more than spare parts  
Each one looking for the other's heart.



# One Autumn Day

Lori Haggard

---

There was a moment,  
And I was fulfilled.  
I had wonder, excitement,  
Joy deep instilled.  
I had a chance to imagine,  
A life to protect,  
A small, silent presence,  
A name to elect.  
And just as I relished it,  
One autumn day,  
My precious beginning  
Was taken away.  
Whatever the reason,  
God's awesome plan,  
Through tears and through hurting,  
Emptiness began.  
And from that day forward  
I searched for a joy,  
Looking and needing  
To fill in the void.  
As years passed me by,  
And the pain was made less,  
I felt calm, like an angel  
Had let my heart rest.  
A presence was with me,  
In my heart he would stay,  
And I knew I would join him  
One autumn day.



# The Marauder

Aaron Kline

---

The trumpets blow  
We have gathered at our flag  
We approach the final hours

I hear our enemy on the move  
There unity does not break  
They are the long warned of  
And the first of many to come

Our commander comes in a soft voice  
He knows we have weak spirits  
Yet he gives his parable of valor  
To keep our spirits from fault

We know our fate  
We are reminded by the approaching death tank  
He reminds us of what we are protecting

Our homes that we won't go back to  
Our families that will never again have a father  
Our corrupt government which betrayed us  
Our dying country that we are forced to die for

The fields that we will never use again  
The skies which we breath  
And the seas and rivers that supply food and water to all that live  
I see ships of soldiers to the right  
The seas and rivers that we must protect  
Hold our demise



The land we use but do not replenish,  
Holds up the enemy that wants our blood  
It was once full of fruit and animals  
Now is the territory of death

The enemy is close  
Our commander tells us to pick up our weapons  
I pick up my sword and shield  
I belt my knife  
We form our defenses against our threat.

I can see the red in their devil eyes  
I can smell their sweat from their journey  
None of us are ready.  
My heart races and my mind clears.  
We run into a new hell which we shall never leave  
As we shout "Honor, Majesty, Responsibility."



# Teenage Dream

Brittany King

---

They no longer scream for ice cream  
Voices sore from loud music  
Raging from the party before  
Drinking the school night away  
Stealing smokes from mom  
Stealing drugs from dad  
Sex Education –their favorite homework  
Babies at 16  
Learning from T.V.  
Their idols from  
The shores of Jersey  
The twerking girl, sticks out her tongue  
They raised their hands to her  
Instead of in the classroom  
They drop out like flies  
Have to cook French fries  
Flip burgers, “Can I take your order?”  
Words of regret linger in their mouths  
Like the taste of cheap beer  
Cheers!  
Ringing in their heads  
Singing doubtfully out loud,  
Say it loud, so we can hear it,  
“We’re proud, still young!”  
Smells Like Teen Spirit



# It was all so Beautiful

Jake Jeffries

---

It was all so beautiful.  
Did I tell you the tale enough?  
Did I tell you I loved you enough?  
Our tale is so amazingly beautiful.  
It is a habit, my admiring you.  
Our two souls entwined.  
There is energy in your touch.  
There is love in your kisses.  
Your hugs they comfort me.  
Your voice, it sings to me.  
My home is in your arms.  
We are the sum of our memories.  
I've counted a surplus of blessings.  
Forget me not my love.  
In your heart, I live on.  
I will see you on the other side.

# The Chair

Alicca Rice

---

There sits a chair all alone in despair  
Trying to remember how it came to be there...

Sitting in a store, waiting for someone to come  
Hoping for a happy home, full of lots of fun.  
Then there they are, a couple full of joy  
A baby on the way, a little girl or boy.

The pregnancy is long; then the baby arrives  
The parents then begin, the best part of their lives.

The chair sits there, supporting a baby learning to stand  
And watches the baby walk, with parents hand in hand.  
The baby grows, chattering away  
For after that first word is learned, there is no end of what to say.

And still the chair sits there, and is surprised to find  
That it can become, whatever may be in mind.  
That simple chair becomes a hill, becomes a mountain, becomes a castle  
Always changing, always there.

The chair is a seat of honor, every birthday is a joy  
To hold a child growing up; excited to gain a simple toy.  
That child keeps growing, gains friends and goes to school  
And the chair is where that child sits, when there is homework to do.

Eventually puberty comes, full of every emotion  
And the chair holds them all, as they live in a turbulent ocean.  
Fighting occurs daily, stomping feet and slamming doors

And the chair is amazed, by the strength of the floors.

The parents sit and sob their pain, and the chair holds them close  
There never seems to be an end to the teenage woes.  
The chair offers comfort when the teenager feels alone  
And sometimes that chair holds two, when the teen brings another home.

The chair watches love flourish and fizzle several times  
And each time the teen goes on, strength there is to find.  
High school ends and college has arrived  
And though the teen is gone, the parents always keep their child in mind.

The chair sees how empty the house is, and misses the teen too  
But still life goes on, for there is always work to do.  
When the teen comes home, they are all shocked to find  
That there is an adult now, in body and in mind.

Finding a job is hard, and stress pulls them down  
But the chair sits there and watches as inspiration is found.  
When the time to move out comes the chair holds the parents close  
As they sit and reminisce the times they cherish most.

Soon stories of love are told and visits include one more  
Wedding plans begin, with happiness in store.  
And then a new baby arrives, and visits slow way down  
For they have their own life to live; then tragedy comes around.

One parent is now gone, for sickness had set in  
And now the house holds one and sorrow holds them in.  
But the child comes around and takes the last parent away  
So they can spend together, the rest of their days.

Then the house is for sale and much is left behind

The chair that watched the family grow seems to be out of mind.  
People parade through the house, looking to make it a home  
And someone makes an offer, to buy the house and make it their own.

The child and parent walk through the house telling it goodbye  
And sit once more in the chair and have one last cry.  
Then they leave together and hand over the keys  
And the chair is surprised to realize, that it is almost Christmas Eve.

Christmas comes around and a new family arrives  
And once again the chair is in the best part of their lives.

So as the chair sits there, no longer alone and in despair  
It recalls how it came to be there and memories fill the air.  
It feels hope for the future and never far from mind  
Is the happiness it feels, living the adventure of its lifetime.

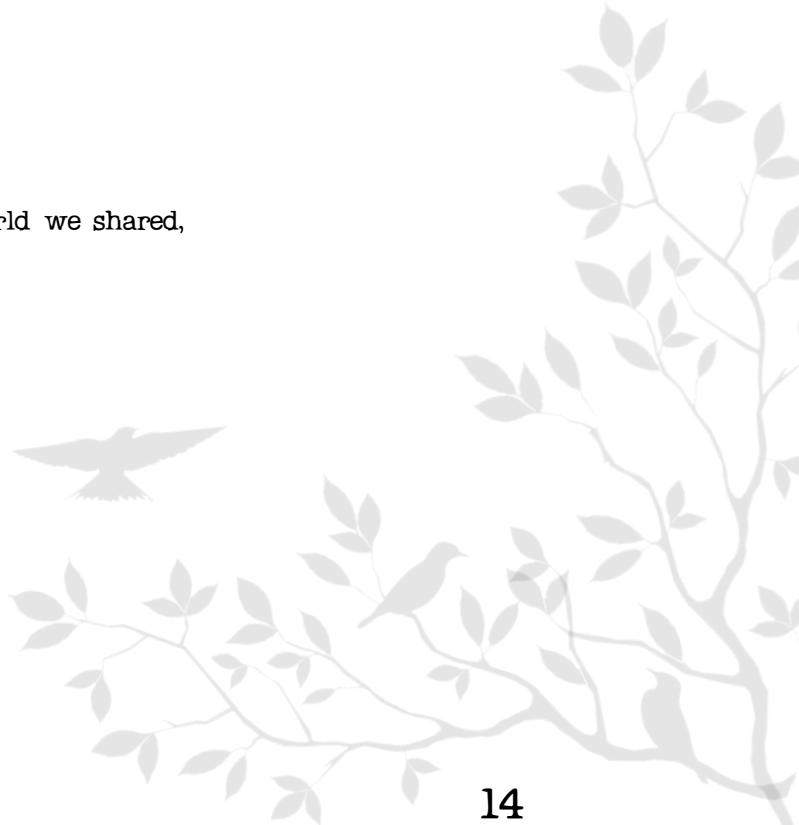


# Cookies + Tea

Brittany King

---

You loved the scent of Elizabeth Taylor  
And had refined elegance to match  
A diamond in the rough  
The hood made you tougher  
But your demeanor was of *Beverly*  
Sometimes I see me in you and reflect,  
“You always knew what was best.”  
Helping me with life or just through the day  
Even little things like how to bake,  
“Not too much flour, they’ll turn into cake.”  
Cookies were your specialty,  
The others were fake.  
Wish you were here  
I would ask more,  
About things I never knew  
Your mind I’d explore.  
You lived a different life in a world we shared,  
But your lifetime here on earth  
I was so unaware





# Miseration

Jake Jeffries

---

I've been broken beyond my means  
Sitting silently lost in recollection  
Perhaps losing more mind than there is to be found  
Synapse signals crossing in a disarray of damnation  
Will there be more than a memory to hold?  
Will our darkest day make way for a brighter tomorrow?  
If everything comes full circle will it crash at the end?  
Can we elevate our harrowed hopes to more than pretend?  
In the light of day our lives are illuminated  
It's alone in the shadows that we will be swallowed by sorrow  
It is damning to dwell on pointless past miserations  
Kindness can kill the worst degradation  
May solace take hold when all else fails  
With memory a weapon and grist as my guide  
I will grind on through the sands of my life  
May the waves never succeed in whisking me under



# Thee Unselfish Act

Brittany King

---

Beaten until unrecognizable  
Is this the same Man?  
Flesh hanging off his body  
But he still stands

Blood covered the ground  
Puddles like water  
This wasn't just punishment  
But slaughter

Nails in his feet  
Nails in his hands  
Pinned to the cross  
The Son of Man

They laughed at Him  
Spit in His face  
"Crucify Him!"  
He took our place  
Had the feelings of a man  
Wasn't numb to this  
Forgotten, betrayed  
By Judas and the kiss

Some people forget  
Some don't believe  
But I know what happened  
He'd do it again  
Just for me.



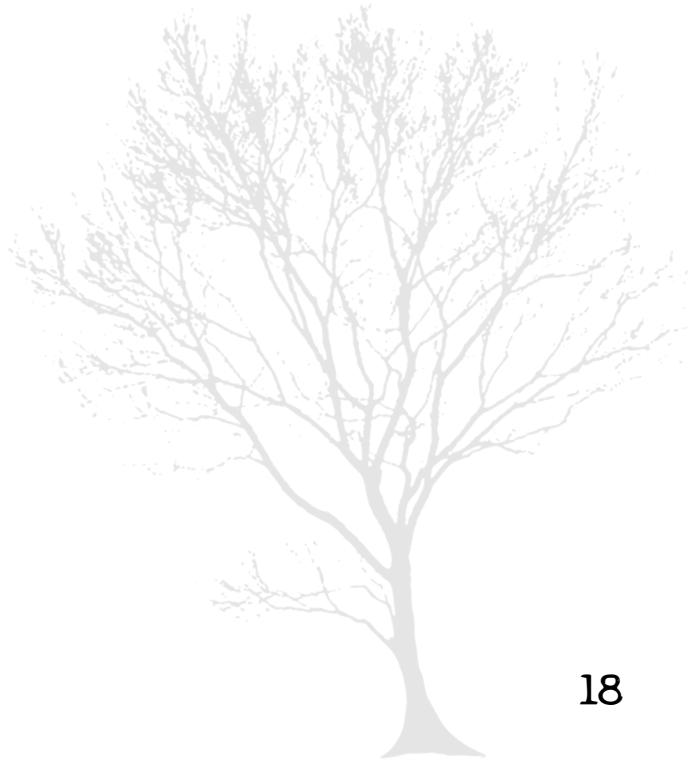
# The Tape Measure

Lori Haggard

---

In happened one day in fair early spring,  
You were gone, off at work, and I was fixing things.  
I imagined your glee to see what good I had done,  
When I found an old picture that had never been hung.  
I dusted it off and I started to roam,  
To find the best wall for this old picture's home.  
Yes! Up in our room, above my hope chest,  
This 8x10 frame would be suited best.  
To the toolbox I went for an anchor and screw,  
The drill and drill bit, and a level, too,  
I gathered each thing for this project of mine,  
Except a tape measure, which I just could not find.  
"No matter," I said, as I pinned up my hair,  
"I'll go the garage and there'll be one out there."  
I sought out the key and I opened the door,  
And, behold! There were tools from ceiling to floor.  
The smell (made me cough) was dust and gasoline,  
But it shouldn't take long to find what I need.  
Through drawers and tool boxes, through shelves and strange bins,  
I looked and I looked, each tin can was peeked in.  
I found ratchets and files (and cobwebs and bugs),  
Some old shotgun shells and collectible mugs,  
A complete set of crescents, both metric and standard,  
Every size and kind of nail, and fourteen different hammers!  
I know, because I counted, and I couldn't believe,  
Surely fourteen hammers is more than we need?  
There were tires and old license plates hung on the wall,  
Hoses and belts and a flat basketball,  
Ten kinds of saws I wouldn't know how to use,

Cans of strange chemicals and a pair of old shoes.  
An hour went by with my treasure not found,  
The old freezer hummed as I rummaged around.  
I began to lose hope of finding a tape measure,  
I was covered in dust from my workshop adventure.  
I sat down, exhausted, on the cold cement floor,  
I didn't care I was sitting in cat litter, what's more...  
I was sure I could find a school ruler inside,  
Yes! Forget the tape measure, let it rust where it hides!  
But no, I've invested too much in my plight,  
I will FIND a tape measure if it takes me all night!  
Yet, alas! You came home! I was so exasperated,  
I asked you to find what I hadn't located.  
Your eyes opened wide and you smiled as I gaped,  
When, in less than a minute, you had a measuring tape.  
I just took it, and slumped, and moped off to my task,  
Next time I'll know not to look 'till I've asked.



# Freedom

Brittany King

---

What does freedom mean?  
The aftermath of Dr. King's dream?  
Rosa Parks not moving?  
Harriet Tubman's railroads underground?  
Or could it simply be  
Dancing when no one will.  
Saying what you want without fear.  
Running through the streets screaming  
Not caring who hears.  
Freedom is when you can let go of "what if"  
Letting go of the fear of the unknown.  
"What if" MLK was afraid to state his dream?  
And never gave that famous speech?  
"What if" Ms. Parks moved back a seat?  
To see the sinister satisfied smirk on that white man's face.  
"What if" Harriet found her idea too risky?  
And turned away all the slave men, slave women, and slave children  
"What if" was silenced by them  
Their freedom was founded then,  
For them and others  
Martin said "No" to fear, adjusted his tie and walked on stage  
Rosa said "No" to them and sat with her purse along her side  
Harriet said "No" to doubt and showed the tried and beaten down slaves  
the way  
What does freedom really mean?  
When your faith outweighs your uncertainty.

# Robins

Kimberley Gaddis

---

Azure, crisp dawn blooms,  
bathing the waking flora.  
Robins soar at last

# Glory

Jestin Kimmet

---

The sun rises fast  
To welcome you each morning  
Your glory beheld

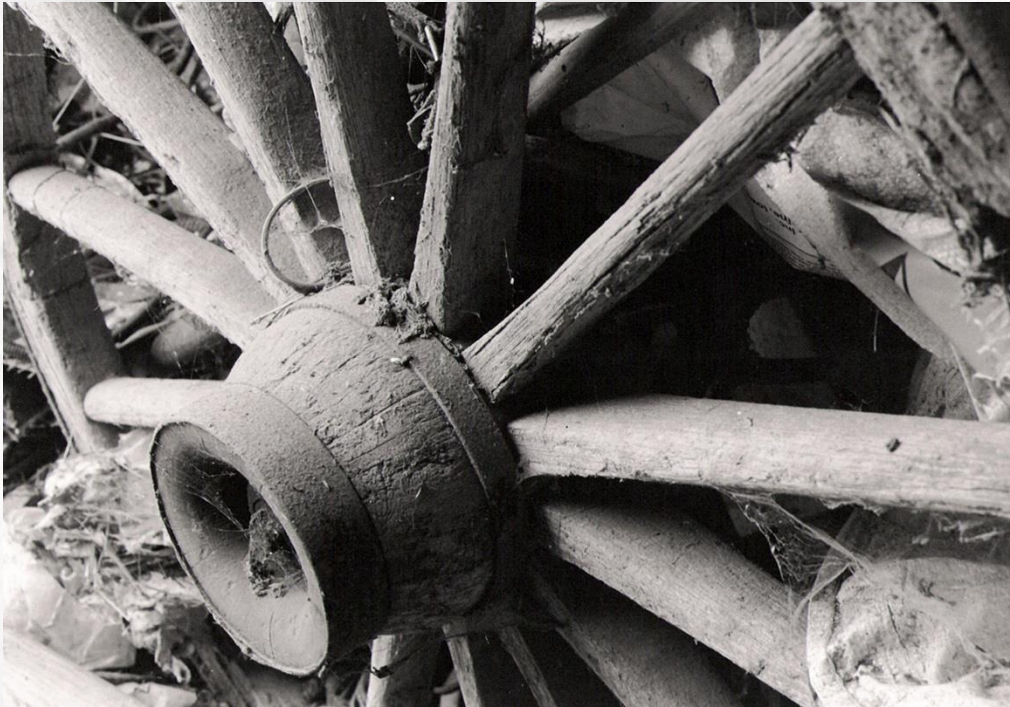
# Ripples

Kimberley Gaddis

---

Perched on stone, croaking.  
The echoed moon's slight ripple  
heraling their prey.





Black and White Photo

*Shannon*

---

## Beauty in the Mundane

Shannon Carman

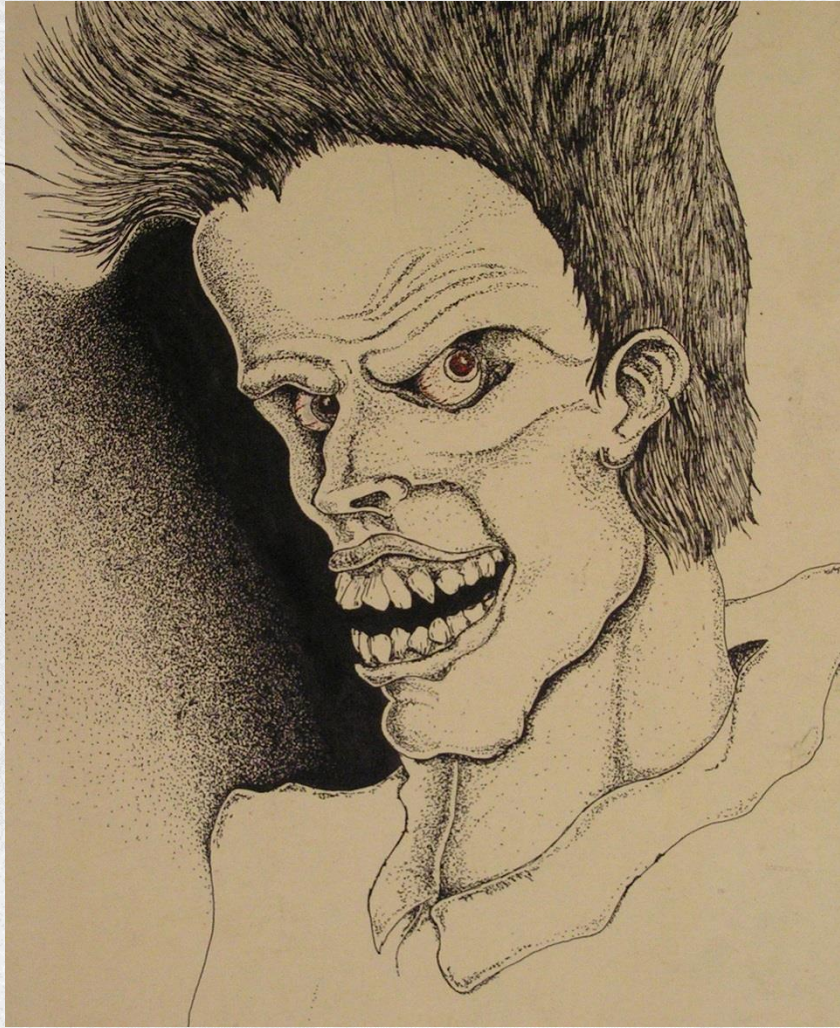


Colored Pencil on Construction Paper - Manipulated

*mm*  
Lily

Zechariah Rarey





Pointillism - Pen and Ink

*Shannon*

---

## Homage to Stephen B.

Shannon Carman



Digital Painting

*Bailey Moss*

---

# Spring Blossom

Bailey Moss





Black and White Photo

*Shannon*

---

# Poverty

Shannon Carman

25



Digital Painting – Manipulated

Originally Featured on the Cover of *Students in the Humanities* 411-2

---

Somber

Zechariah Rarey



Black and White Portrait

*Shannon*

---

# A Man and His Horn

Shannon Carman

27



Digital Painting

*mm*

---

## Winter Stretch

Bailey Moss





Connected Line Drawing - Pen and Ink

*Shannon*

**Chair**

Shannon Carman

29

# An Apple a Day...

Brittany King

---

I always wanted to be a teacher, just for the apples. I thought I would get an apple a day, but as I got older I realized that was just a fable. So now, I don't know what I want to do. I am like an apple myself. I don't open up easy. My outer shell seems tough. It takes a force to break into me, but once I'm opened, I'm sweet. I can be rotten and bitter at times though, it just depends on the day or season. I don't think my fascination with apples is strange, but my mom and step-Chris do. After I stopped talking, they sent me away to a "special resort" for a few years. Where every day all I ever heard from the doctors were, "*Girls your age talk!.. Why aren't you talking?!.. Talk you idiot!*" When I returned home still not talking, my mom thought slapping me around would help. Step-Chris thought calling me names would make me speak. Though occasionally, he would secretly pull me into dark closets with him, hoping my lack of speech would keep his secrets safe. They all didn't know that I could talk, but I chose to speak within my thoughts. They didn't deserve the privilege of my conversation, both of them were idiots, yet to them I was the fool.

My real father never thought I was a fool, he always called me his little angel. That's why I love apples, they remind me of him. Every autumn we would go to my grandfather's farm and pick bushels and bushels of crispy, juicy apples. When my dad was young, he would do the same with his father, a tradition carried down to me. That tradition however, will stop with me. I don't think I will ever have children of my own. No one wants to marry a mute, so my mother tells me. Though, if she could get remarried, I felt there was still a chance for me. My father always told me that I was important and special. That God never makes mistakes. That I have a purpose for the world. That little girl believed him, but this girl does not anymore. No one understands me, no one cared



like he did. I'm alone. The only way I can vividly remember my dad and the good parts of my life, are with apples. They are my friends, they are my memories.

I am 14 years old and it's my first day attending an actual school with other people. I'm not really nervous, I'm actually curious to see how this school thing works. My first three classes weren't so bad; people weren't nice, but no one ever is. The least pleasant part of my day was having to hand a note to each of my teachers from my mother.

*“Dear to whomever this concerns,*

*Ruby is a first time student attending a public school. She doesn't talk, she can talk but she chooses not to. Don't ask me why, it's annoying. Maybe her experience at this school will make her say something, here's hoping! If there are any questions about this, contact her doctor.*

*Thanks,*

*Ms. Vallman”*

I was dismissed from talking in all my classes. I had to write everything down when I was asked a question or anything.

*“Ruby, what year did the Civil War end? ...Miss Vallman, What is the solution to  $34x + 45y$ ? Do you know who Hemingway was?”*

Each teacher was shocked when they lifted up my scarlet notebook and saw the correct answer, which was inside of a huge smiley face. That was my smartass way of creeping them out and seeming more insane than I already did. They all gave me the same look, worried, confused, but all with a fake smile attached. I just stared back at them, looking deep in their eyes, with no facial expression. I felt I should be able to have a little fun with this whole deranged girl thing. My last teacher was a surprise to me. He was actually nice, and treated me like a normal student. *“Alright class, it seems like we have a new student...I handed him my mother's note, and he continued on with my introduction...Ruby*

*Vallman... it seems as though Ruby can't... well...*" Before Mr. Washington could get out the last words of his sentence, a fat, blonde-haired kid yelled out, "Talk! She can't talk!" Everyone laughed, but me. "Mr. Lowell, go to the Dean's office! Sorry about that Ruby, I assure you not every student is...outspoken as Lowell. Please don't be moved by his rude behavior." I wasn't moved, I wasn't upset, I have heard a lot worse, but appreciated Mr. Washington's obvious pity for me. I nodded my head towards him acknowledging his kindness, and took a seat in the back of the classroom.

I started to scan the room, looking at the back of each student's head, wanting to yell at the top of my lungs just to scare the piss out of them, but I fought the urge. As I continued to inspect the room, I noticed a crinkled-up sign on the wall. It had a girl on the front of it, she was really pretty. She had long brown hair and big brown eyes, the same color of soil when it's wet, and tons of freckles on her face similar to dots scattered upon a ripe banana. She had a necklace around her neck with the letter "M" on the locket, her name was Molly. There was a bubble coming from her mouth with words inside it that said, "Have you seen me?" I think Mr. Washington must have noticed I was staring at the paper while he was teaching, because after class, he stopped me at the door. "Molly was a beautiful student. Terrible what happened."

I wanted to walk out of the classroom but this intrigued me. I might not speak, but I enjoy a juicy story like the next person. I wrote on my notepad, "What happened to her?" He then looked at me with a questionable expression, "No one knows..." He stroked my arms with his hands and started to grab my hair. "You have beautiful hair, Ruby." He gathered more of it, each black strand slipped through his fingers like silky sand. "You're a really pretty girl." I started to blush. I was hoping he wouldn't notice, but I could tell my face probably resembled *Raggedy Ann's*. "See you tomorrow, Miss Ruby." I waved at him, then bowed my head towards him like a geisha princess; I felt like a total idiot. When I finally left the room, and started to walk down the hallway, I noticed more and more flyers with Molly's face on it. "Have you seen me?", "Call 555-6733 with any answers or leads", "Molly's Missing 10/10/12"

10/10/12... *That was only a few months ago?* Of course the first school I attend has a girl missing. This really made me feel safe and right at home.

I took one of the flyers with me just in case, hey you never know. I put it inside of my notebook and started to head home. As I gradually got further and further away from the school, I noticed a pebble sidewalk leading into a woods. It wasn't like a *Little Red Riding Hood* woods, but more like an *If you decide to take this path, you won't die* type of place. I walked the rocky path and started seeing reddish objects under the leaves in the trees. *Apples!* They were the most beautiful apples I have even seen. I became overjoyed, remembering my dad, picturing us together with every apple I stole from the tree branches. I missed him. Missing him made me hate everything about this day even more, except for Mr. Washington. He was the only person that was genuinely nice to me. The more I thought about him, the more I wanted to do something nice for him. I decided to bring him one of the apples the next day. I know it's cheesy, but if I was a teacher, I would love an apple. Besides, I knew he would appreciate it. He seemed like the kind of person that loved any type of positive attention like me. The following day I came to Mr. Washington's class extra early. Mainly so no student would see me put an apple on his desk. I knew that deed alone was license enough for someone to beat me up. I decided I would tell him after class that I brought the red fruit. (And when I say tell, I mean write down in my notebook "I brought you that apple, you're welcome," and then awkwardly walk away.)

*"Good morning class, please turn your books to page 34, we will be discussing the differences of the Tropic of Cancer, Equator and..."* As Mr. Washington went to grab the black dry-erase marker off of his desk, he slightly glanced at the apple. Instead of grabbing the marker, he grabbed the apple. He didn't react the way I thought he would. He didn't even smile or show any expression of flattery, he just looked at the apple, inspecting it as if he was searching for something. *"Is that an apple? What idiot brought in an apple?"* The class started to giggle loudly.

*"Mr. Lowell, what did I say about speaking out of turn!"*

*"Sorry... Washington."*

Mr. Washington scanned the room and held up the apple in the air, *"Who brought this?"* Nobody answer, I sure in hell wasn't going to raise my hand. *"Who did it? Don't be shy? It's a..."* (he glared at it again) *lovely apple*" The room grew even more still, especially me. *"Well, whoever brought it...thank you."* Those three minutes was one of the most awkward moments of my life. With that said, I decided *not* to stay after class and reveal that I brought him the red gift. I couldn't stop wondering why he didn't seem happier about the apple. Was it too small? Was it not red enough? It was sort of pitiful looking after I thought about it. I decided to bring him a better one the next day. I just really wanted him to know I liked him. Not in a weird *I have a crush on my teacher way*, but more like *Everyone treats me like shit and you don't way*.

That evening I went back into the woods and tried to find the biggest, reddest frickin' apple there was. The same type of apple my dad would always discover on the farm and would give to me. I dropped the apple off on Mr. Washington's desk even earlier that day before class. Then I waited by my locker before walking in with everyone else, making sure to be the last person inside the room. As I walked into the class, I saw Mr. Washington walking in behind me. He winked at me, *"Hello Ruby."* His hands accidently brushed against my hips. As I looked towards his face he smiled and I smiled back. I walked past his desk looking at my awesome apple. If he doesn't like this one, he is even crazier than what people think I am. *"Good Morning class, Mr. Lowell...Mr. Peters, have a seat"* He put his brown briefcase down on the desk near the apple. He didn't even pick it up this time or look at it long at all. He started to look angry and then slammed his briefcase shut and looked up at us.

*"Alright who brought the apple? He picked it up and started shaking the apple in his hand, Come on, someone brought it, it didn't just walk in here."*

*“I think a ghost is in love with you and is bringing you these apples Mr. Wash, a guy ghost too.”*

The entire class roared with laughter at Lowell’s comment, even I almost blew my cover with a silent giggle.

*“I told you to shut up you piece of shit! Get your fat ass out of my classroom now!”*

Every student’s mouth fell to the ground. Lowell ran out of the room with tears in his eyes and Mr. Washington watched him the entire time. He sinisterly wiped the fuming spit from his mouth, *“If no one can be brave enough to fess up about these damn apples, then no one can bring me anymore apples! Teachers do not like apples! I do not like apples! They’re disgusting, they’re nasty! I hate fucking apples!”* He slammed the apple in the trash, putting fear in everyone, except for me. I never felt so hurt or pissed off in my life. *Who hates apples?! No one hates apples? Aren’t apples like the American crop for heaven’s sake?! Or fruit... whatever!* Every day after that explosion, I secretly sat a rotten apple on his desk out of spite, and every day he threw each apple away. He no longer looked at me with smiles, or touch my hair or call me pretty. He hardly spoke to anyone anymore and that was okay with me; *join the club.*

I started to notice the impact the apples were having on him. He started to slowly look withered, shriveled, shrunken in, resembling each ugly apple I brought him. I no longer brought him apples out of anger, but out of curiosity. *Why does he hate apples so much?* One day after school on my way home, I caught him sneaking into the woods with a hand shovel in his back pocket. Everything inside me told me to go home, but of course I didn’t listen. I carefully followed him into the woods, keeping my distance. As I got closer, I could somewhat see him digging underneath one of the trees, like a wild dog. I couldn’t tell what he was digging, or why he was near anything with an apple on it. I didn’t stay to find out, it was getting dark and I have seen way too many horror films to stay in the woods alone at night. I decided the perfect time to find out what Mr. Washington buried was during his class. One, because I

hate that class and Two, because that's the only time I would know for sure he couldn't follow me.

The next day before I ditched class, I stole a racket from the gym to help me dig and to use on Mr. Washington if he caught me. I dug and I dug, and dug some more and found nothing. I knew for certain he hid something there yesterday. *Did he bury something or dig something up?* I started to get worried and ran out of the woods. I found no incriminating evidence, nothing about why he was in the woods, or why he hated apples, or why I even cared. Though, something inside me was telling me *"open your eyes."* The following day as I walked inside the school, I noticed two police cars in front of the building. As I opened the door, I saw the police men talking with some students from Mr. Washington's class.

*"And Miss Molly... was she in your class?"*

*"Molly? Molly has been missing for months now..." "Yeah, here is a flyer of her. No one knows where she is?"*

*"Huh, that's strange"*

*"Why, what's going on with Molly?"*

*"Apparently, Mr. Washington ran into the police station hysterical about a Molly Tanner. Saying over and over again that he "couldn't take it anymore"*

*"Couldn't take what?"*

*"I'm not sure, he didn't say, he said she's at the school and that he was sorry...something about her bringing him apples?"*

My heart sank. I made the little bastard a psychopath, my apples made him crazy.

*"That's impossible, she is missing."*

*"Yeah, there is no way."*

*"That's the information we were given. He said yesterday she gave him an apple with her name on it"*

*"That explains everything!"* burst out Lowell, like always.

*"What? What do you mean?"*

*“Well, everything was fine at first. He came into class as usual—seemed fine. Then he saw an apple on his desk, which wasn’t unusual because someone brought him one every day.”*

*“Who did?”*

*“Oh, I don’t know, he didn’t know either. I just thought it was a prank or something...but then when he went to throw it away, he started yelling and ran out of the room like a mad man.”*

*“What did the apple say?”*

*“I’m not sure, it had something engraved on it, but I couldn’t tell what it said.”*

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. *What have I done? I didn’t mean for any of this to happen but...wait...yesterday? I ditched class yesterday...I didn’t give him an apple? How did he get an apple?*

I ran to Mr. Washington’s class and found the apple under his desk. I turned the apple over and saw the engraving.

***To: Mr. W***

***From: M***

My heart hit the bottom of my stomach, I felt it. I heard it thump like a fallen tree in a forest. I started to shake like a withered leaf in spring. My trembling hand dropped the apple on the ground. When I looked down, it was split into two perfect slices. Inside, where the apple core should’ve been, was a piece of silver jewelry. I turned it around and saw it had a letter “M” inscribed on the face. *I’ve seen this before?* I found one of Molly’s old flyers and saw the same letter on her locket in the picture. I was overwhelmed with shock, it sent a sharp pressure through my knees, causing them to snap like tree branches with unsurmountable pressure upon them—I fell on the ground as if I was a priest kneeling to God. I opened up the locket in the apple, and saw an inscription inside it. Tears started to fill my eyes, then they rolled off my cheeks like dew on Summer grass. My mouth was wide-open, gathering the crisp air around me. My lungs filled up with the lucid oxygen, I took in a deep breath, releasing the first words to leave my lips in years..





# Chapter 1 from the Novel “The Transformation”

Bailey Burnett

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SMACK! I hear the slap of his hand echoing through the house. I wake up and jump out of bed, still groggy from sleep. Rubbing my tired eyes, I tiptoe over to my bedroom door.

As I push my ear up to the door, I can hear my mother’s cry after she is, once again, abused by my father. My tangled hair falls in my face as I drop my head. “God,” I whisper, exhausted from my lack of sleep, and also my lack of energy and desire to continuously witness this abuse. Why does she let him do this to her over and over again?

“Lorne, please... Stop. Blair is asleep in the other room.”

“Andrea, this is my house, and you will respect my demands. Don’t make me do this again.” No sense of remorse in his dark voice.

I have to get out of here. I hastily slip on my Doc Martens, not even bothering to take the time to lace them up, and grab my coat. I throw my long, blonde hair into a disheveled top knot as I’m walking toward the front door. I don’t have any clue where I’m going, but I’m gone and out the door within seconds. They don’t even notice me leaving. His snarling, almost demonic, voice I hear for just a few more moments before the ringing of his hand against her face is no longer lingering in my ears, and the smell of blood has left my nose. Guilt overwhelms me as I leave my submissive mom behind, but I know it’s no use. How many times have I tried to convince her to run away with me and failed? How many more years will I have to see her gashes, hear her pleas, before it stops? I couldn’t have taken even one more minute.

The blistering shock of thirty degree weather hits me in the face, but I keep walking. Nothing will disrupt me from escaping. As I keep shuffling through the deep, freshly fallen snow, my mind catches up with my body and I begin to shiver uncontrollably. Only moments later



do I realize the cool, pale tone to my skin is gone, and in its place is a ghostly, purple hue. My tears have stopped flowing from my eyes, but instead crystalize on my cheeks. I hadn't even noticed I was crying.

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My dad wasn't always a bad man. I remember when I was younger he would take me in his cherry red, Chevy pickup truck anywhere our hearts would lead us. Sometimes we would end up at the local Dairy Queen, sharing a banana split, giggling over the hot fudge that somehow managed to always end up on my face more than in my mouth. And sometimes we would just drive to nowhere in particular, for hours it would seem, before the setting sun would beckon us back home. Those are the days I cherish now, looking back on my childhood.

There is one event in particular that stands out to me so vividly because it changed my family forever. I had just celebrated my thirteenth birthday a couple weeks before, and my mother had been acting strange ever since, checking up on me more than usual. On a late September evening, the questions began.

"Honey, how does it feel to finally be thirteen?"

"No different, really. Same old me." I wasn't really paying much attention to her. I was preoccupied with a book I had been reading.

"No different? At all? I remember when I was your age; growing up can be hard. I just want to make sure that you're feeling okay. Have you noticed anything... strange lately?"

"Strange?"

"Oh, like things out of the ordinary... in yourself." I could tell by her contemplative expression that she was having a difficult time putting into words what she was trying to ask me.

"Mom, you're kind of freaking me out." I exasperated, being a typical thirteen-year-old. "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. I'm going to my room, okay?"

"Of course, honey." She had retreated.

The next morning was a Saturday, and my dad and I had just returned from one of our usual trips to the hardware store. The moment

the pickup came to its abrupt stop in the driveway, I threw the door open and sprinted toward the house to let Mom know we were back. It only took a few seconds for me to notice my mother standing on the porch talking to a young man, so I paused where I stood in the driveway.

This man had a mysterious air about him. The word that forms at my lips every time I remember him is “angelic.” His perfectly ruffled hair sat coiffed upon his head like a beautiful blonde halo. He wore form fitting clothing, black jeans and a white tee, nothing special, but he radiated with allure. The way he presented himself was as if he were a sophisticated grown man, wise with old age, but he looked to be only twenty. Underneath the clothes, I could tell that he was built. Being only thirteen at the time, my hormones hadn’t fully kicked in yet, so I didn’t pay much attention to his physique. But looking back on the image of him that has emblazed in my mind, I have such a strong desire. His broad, muscular shoulders arouse me in my dreams. Only imagining the flex of his tattooed arms sends shock waves down my spine. His face made him all the more attractive, with his chiseled jaw and thick, pensive eyebrows. A faint scar ran from his right cheekbone to the middle of his forehead. Such a flaw could have made any ordinary man repugnant, but on him it was what made him so appealing.

He had deep, brooding eyes that were serious as he spoke to my mother, you would have thought he was mesmerizing her. I couldn’t make out any words; his lips were moving too quickly, inhumanly fast. My mother was looking at him with an expression of disbelief and maybe even hatred.

Being so young at the time, I really thought nothing of it. It was only as I grew older that I began to question what had been happening between the two of them.

My mother looked up at us in surprise, while the beautiful man quickly said his farewells and climbed into his car, only after staring at me like he was looking God in the face. All the time I wonder why he looked at me in that way, and why he made such an impact on my

memories. I have dreamed of him often after that first encounter, but we never saw him around again.

Later that night, as my mother tucked me into bed after a dissatisfying dinner of canned soup and grilled cheese, I could hear their hushed voices over the television in the living room. Random words and phrases stuck out among the whispers. Why was he here? What did he want? Liar. Blair needs to be protected. After maybe thirty minutes of their quiet bickering, I could hear the front door slam shut, followed by the pickup reversing out of the driveway. My mom cried herself to sleep that night. The next morning was the start of a dark and haunting reality.

The dynamic in my family shifted. My father became malicious, venomous even, and it only got worse with time. The rage in his heart, rage for what I do not know, consumed him. Never again would I see a smile upon his face, or hear a laugh escape his mouth. My mother was now cautious and worrisome. She always had to tiptoe around him, concerned with setting off the bomb that was my father's anger. He was never physically violent with me, but I could tell that in the dark crevices of his mind he wanted to be. He would look at me with such disdain and contempt that I could practically taste the aversion he now felt for me. What had I done to make him hate me so much? It was as though he flipped a switch that night. My daddy was gone.

From that time on, odd occurrences started happening around the house as well. One day, after I came home from school, my father was storming through the house looking for his work boots. He worked second shift at the local factory in town, so he left soon after my school let out. His newly aggressive behavior made me so nervous, I was anxious for the clock to say three o'clock. But as he continued to make his rampage through the kitchen, he slammed his fist down on the countertop, like Thor's hammer, seconds before a sudden boom radiated through the house as though an explosive had detonated on our front porch. It was instantly silent, but then my ears began to incessantly ring. I ran to the front door. The entire left half of the porch had spontaneously collapsed. I looked at my father in shock, and he was still looking for those damn boots. He

didn't even notice what had happened moments before, or maybe he just didn't care.

As time progressed, everything in the house fell apart. First the paint started to chip, and the wall paper began peeling away. The windows cracked, while some even shattered, leaving us to replace the glass with plywood. The color, and life, of our home drained. Purples and blues were muted to grays. Yellows and oranges were subdued to stale cream. I began to think that perhaps the house was just as fed up with my father's behavior as I was. He drained the happiness out of not only my mother and me, but out of everything around him.

Tonight is the final battle of this war. It's my eighteenth birthday, and I'm making my first adult decision. I just can't be a bystander any longer.

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I have been walking for at least an hour to nowhere in particular. At first, I thought about walking to the police station. But what kind of daughter would that make me, turning in my own father? Funny how I am concerned with protecting such a monster. After the first twenty minutes, the freezing temperature really doesn't have an effect on me anymore. The snow falls around me in a whirlwind of white, but all I can see is the bleak blackness of the night that calls my name. It looks like the plows haven't made it out yet to clear the streets, but I'm not surprised; it's only four a.m. I'm probably walking through at least three inches of snow, and I'm sure my feet are near frostbitten, but I really don't think much of it. I just keep walking.

Finally thinking maybe I should figure out where I've taken myself, I start to glance around me. It's actually quite magnificent, the pure snow resting on the tops of the willow trees lining the road. Without the glow of the moon on the sparkling, white ground, I wouldn't be able to make out anything in the obscure night. As it is, I really don't see much but the foggy images of old, abandoned homes. My family and I live on the outskirts of town, so as I keep walking farther away from my home, I walk farther away from civilization. Should this scare me? I don't even

feel a sliver of anxiety. I never do. I was trained not to. From the time my father changed, to the present, my mother taught me to be fearless. If you fear, you lose all power.

“Look death in the face, and laugh at it.” She would tell me. “You’re my daughter, which means you have the strength of a thousand men running through your body. Use that strength, Blair. Don’t ever forget that you’re a fighter.” I wonder why she could never follow her own advice. Where had her strength gone?

I keep walking for a few more paces along the graveled road, and I’m suddenly aware of someone watching me. The creepy sensation of following eyes make the hair on my arms stand. I have a sudden outbreak of goose bumps all over my body. Remember you are a fighter. Trying not to show my rapidly approaching alarm, I continue walking as normal, but I begin to examine my surroundings more closely. My eyes shuffle from left to right, careful not to move my head and give away my motives. Why do I have this strong sense of eyes bearing down on me? It’s unsettling, but yet, underneath the dread, I feel a blanket of calm and warmth enveloping me. My heartbeat suddenly slows to a steady thump, and my blood no longer runs cold. It’s okay.

I notice a house up ahead that sticks out to me more than the others; run down and nearly falling apart, but beautiful. A beautiful disaster. I’m drawn toward the deep blue shudders, the stale white, chipped paint of the front door. The sunken front porch, inviting you in for some tea upon the swing that haphazardly hangs from the ceiling. I’m slowly realizing that this house is remarkably similar to my own home. I’m walking faster now, to get a better view of this strange sight. The only things missing are the marks on the door frame signifying my growth over the years... but wait. How is this possible...? The marks are there, every single one of them. Even my name is written...



# Chance

Lori Haggard

---

Rin stares at the small, black square lying on the sidewalk of Nixon Street. The afternoon sun bakes its matte leather hide, softening it. *Take it*, it says to her. The man who dropped it did not see it fall.

She approaches the wallet and pushes her greasy, black hair thoughtfully behind her ear as she stares at it. She has to decide quickly if she will take this chance.

Her wide eyes relocate its owner, a man in his mid-fifties with graying brown, crisply-cut hair; he is across the street now.

*Sir! Sir you dropped your wallet!* She didn't say.

The heat, the hopelessness, and the hunger compel her, and she stoops.

*Did anyone else see it fall? Will they know?*

Mani's innocent eyes fill her mind. He will be at the house when she returns. He will be set before some rummaged provisions; then, he will be let down and still be hungry. The flies will pester his mouth as he cries, cries for the simple need of food, cries for a basic need of life. His one-year-old stomach has never known satisfaction. She feels the responsibility for her son pull her hand like gravity toward the wallet. It isn't fair.

Nothing has been "fair" since Hadley had come home in a hearse instead of a taxi from boot camp. It was a "one-in-a-million chance," they had said. The building had just been inspected the week before and they did not, yet, know why it collapsed. He and Rin had only been married three years. Now, she is alone.

The wallet is in her hands. When a stranger hurries by, she pretends to look for something she dropped. No matter, they have no interest in her or the wallet they didn't see, because now it is tucked just inside her shorts. It presses against her side and refuses to be slim.

She wipes dirt and sweat from her forehead, rises, and casually retreats to shade and privacy behind two phone booths. She only needs enough for diapers and some food.

Even on welfare, Rin could not pay the bills. She had managed for a while and then the eviction notice came. A neighbor had come over proffering help, but the woman had been more savvy than savior.

The next day Child Protective Services showed up at her apartment. A grandma-haired woman with a pitying, wrinkled face asked too many questions and reproved Rin's situation, demanding to know where Rin would take the baby once the eviction was complete. Rin had felt sure her family would take pity on her, and she told them she would be going back to Japan. This temporarily satisfied CPS.

She had collect-called her family immediately after the visit from CPS, but they had refused to take her call. They had disowned her three years earlier when she had married an American. After 20 years, the animosity from the war should have died, but some who had lived through the war still clearly remembered, and hated.

Rin had, then, gone to the veteran's office to ask for help. Surely there was some recourse for a widow in her position?

Mani was barely 6 months old and fussing. A middle-aged woman with long, brown hair perfectly styled like Farrah Fawcett and wearing a trendy, ocher leisure suit had walked Rin back through cluttered cubicles and brattling typewriters. Rin sat on a metal chair in a stuffy office with a single, small window. The blind on the tiny window was only half drawn and it stared, like a sleepy Cyclops, down onto a back alley of Indianapolis.

As the woman began to speak, the smell of bubblegum drew Rin's eyes away from the window and toward the scent. The woman chewed the gum and smiled while she spoke, making small smacking and popping sounds. Rin stared irresistibly at her lips, seeing every moist word the woman spoke, and the gum in little pink glimpses between her teeth. The juicy rejection she spit at Rin sounded sweet, yet was empty of promise.

The Veteran's Benefits would not cover anything other than the funeral costs.

Rin had unsuccessfully looked for a job after that. Having no place to move to once they were evicted, she had hidden in an old, abandoned house two streets over from the apartment. She had to keep CPS from finding out, but days and desperation had accumulated.

She tugs the wallet free from her shorts as she looks over her shoulder, then steals a quick glance inside.

*Cash! How much?*

She counts quickly...*ten...twenty...forty...enough! Easy now*, she tells herself as she tucks the wallet back in place.

She turns to leave and there is the man. The Man. Before she can look away his eyes meet hers, and her quick glance down betrays her. Chance indicts her without hesitation. Her heart begins to beat a thrum of panic.

"YOU," says The Man, planting his feet wide and pointing and angry finger in her direction. He knows. He reads it right in the poverty on her dirt-streaked face where desperation spells out I did it.

That same desperation forces her feet into action before her mind takes it all in. She runs. She runs from The Man. She runs from her guilt. Rin runs faster than she has ever run before.

Her foot pace matches the hammers of her heart: a cadence of fear. Feet and heart race each other. The Man races her. Her mind races, too. The whole world is racing!

*He won't catch me; he's too old; he's too far behind; he's too...I need to go home! No, NOT home!* She darts blindly into another street without slowing. *Definitely not home. But where?*

Behind her, The Man yells, "she stole my wallet!" and she has instant enemies. The woman on the corner is her enemy. That child with the dog is her enemy. The people in the shops are all enemies. The birds. That tree. The car. The trashcans. The sunlight. The hunger. And chance, chance has also become her enemy.



She sees a narrow path between buildings. That's her chance! She steals into the shadow there, safely into the sly shadow and into...

...a man. A different man. A homeless man. A quick, filthy, greedy man who does not need to know the situation in order to take advantage of it. She's running, that says it all. He grabs her, and her beating heart finally wins the race as her footsteps are halted. She is so startled she hardly protests when he pulls her out to the street where they are waiting. All those enemies are waiting. All those races...lost.

No, not all. Racing still are her heart and her mind. They sprint from one anxiety to the next: The house; the flies; the hunger... Mani! How is she going to feed Mani? The finish line has never been further away.

The convening enemies hold her until the police arrive. The wallet is snatched back by The Man. His anger is intense but Rin doesn't care. It is nothing compared to the fury she feels inside.

*Why did I pick up that wallet?*

The Man desperately counts his cash and turns back to Rin. She wonders if he will let her go.

Not a chance.

He sees her almond eyes, her black hair, and prejudice dials the police.

The summoned police show up nonchalantly. No lights. No sirens. Two officers lazily get out of the squad car and meander over to the huddled crowd of people baking in the afternoon sun. The homeless man waits around for a reward he will never receive. The gathered enemies form a temporary prison around her, and a collective fragrance of sweating bodies accosts her nose.

The officers stride purposefully over. One of the officers is a woman. Her name badge reads "Officer Mills" and she is petite, old and sharp. She places a disproportionately heavy hand on Rin's shoulder and makes her sit on the hot ground where small, fiery pebbles burn into her legs. The other officer is a plain, ordinary man who doesn't speak directly to Rin. He wears a badge but no name tag. He is neither loud nor soft

spoken; his hair is neither brown nor blonde, and his build is neither thin nor husky. He is so unremarkable that she struggles to recall his face even seconds after he has turned away from beholding her. He returns to the car and speaks into a handset to unknowns back at the station. The female officer's scrawny legs begin pacing in front of Rin.

"What's your name?" the woman injects, and keeps pacing, staring down at Rin, expecting an answer. Nausea has squeezed Rin's voice out of play. The pavement grows hotter and the heat joins the throng of enemies. As the officer moves back and forth, sunlight and shadow alternately puncture Rin's eyes, so she looks down. The officer decides that Rin has done this out of defiance and she abruptly squats in front of her.

"NAME, honey!" This is not a request. The woman has small, demanding eyes with too much eye shadow. The eye shadow is bubble gum pink, and so is her blush, generously applied to her pasty cheeks, as well as the lipstick on her tight, pursed lips. Her bubble gum countenance is directed at Rin's grimy face. She even smells like bubble gum. Rin's mind flits back to the Veteran's Benefit office and "Farrah Fawcett's" teeth. Sweat begins to trickle down the officer's wrinkled cheeks as tears begin to carve muddy paths down Rin's.

Resolve finally frees Rin's tongue.

"My name is Rin Linson." It is the first answer to a series of questions Rin answers readily and honestly. She is 24. No, she has never stolen anything before. No, she has never been arrested. Yes, she realizes stealing is wrong. She was looking for a job and that is why she was "hanging around" Nixon Street.

"Ma'am, I *found* the wallet," Rin begins, but she is not allowed to finish. The officer has no interest in excuses. Instead, she asks her the one question Rin cannot answer truthfully.

"Where do you live, Miss Linson?"

Her mind darts to that gray house on Arnold Avenue, the secret place where Mani and Lyddi are waiting for her. Sweet, 14-year-old Lyddi lives next door and keeps Rin's secrets. She is watching Mani, now, while she is away.

Lyddi caught Rin going into the house one day on her way home from volleyball practice. For some reason, Rin did not lie to her about why she was there. If Lyddi called the police, she would have just left and looked for somewhere else to stay. But when Lyddi smiled at her instead, Rin gushed her life story to her all in a three minute confession of tears. After a few long seconds of silence, Lyddi showed Rin how to get into the privacy-fenced back yard of the old house through a loose section. She had talked kindly to Rin and had caressed Mani's soft brown curls with her clean, satiny brown hand.

After that, Lyddi snuck food over occasionally. Sometimes days would pass and she would think she had forgotten her. The girl's window angled toward the abandoned house and sometimes Rin stared into it for hours hoping to catch a glimpse of her young friend. Sometimes she would see her twin black braids flash by, and other times she saw Lyddi's parents and wondered what they were like.

Staying in that house is the only illegal thing Rin has ever done. Well, until now. As she realizes this, her mind shoots a bullet of despair into her heart and she cringes.

*I have become a criminal.*

Now, if Rin tells the police officers about the house, they will find Mani and know she never went back to Japan. Lyddi could get into trouble, too.

"I...I don't have a home," she finally squeaks out, squeezing her eyes shut against the lie, trying to keep more from emerging.

Her hesitation makes the female officer suspicious.

Officer plain-man returns to join the questioning. He is speaking into a cellphone.

The female officer tells him Rin's name, then turns to him and says in a low voice, "She claims to be homeless." They converse briefly. The male officer speaks Rin's name into a cellphone and there is a long pause.

The sweat has gathered at all of Rin's creases. Summer has conjured up a sweltering specimen for June. The heat has soaked into the

pavement. The pavement, in conjunction with the building facades, radiates it back exponentially, creating a crucible of cement, brick, and asphalt.

Rin watches as officer plain-man walks over to speak with The Man. After a few exchanges Rin cannot hear, he frowns, shrugs, and nods reluctantly.

Officer plain-man returns, beholds her briefly once again with a pensive, knowing glare, then turns to his partner and says, "Let her go." An unsatisfied scowl darkens Officer Mills' face just after the briefest flash of indignation opens her puckered mouth. Rin's heart leaps along with her feet, eager to race each other once again.

The still-gathered enemies are asked to leave and they do so slowly and disappointedly. Officer plain-man returns, unfazed, to the squad car, still speaking into the cell phone.

Now on her feet, Rin brushes the pavement pebbles off of her legs. Sweat escapes her knee creases and begins to drip. She looks expectantly towards the police-woman. Officer Mills' scowl tightens. She holds Rin there with her squinted eyes another unbearable moment before relenting.

"You heard him, you're free to go." she says, but then adds, "*This* time."

Rin doesn't move until the squad car drives away. She exhales a quiet breath of relief that she has been given another chance and then turns toward the house five streets over and sprints. The enemies are gone. The tree is just a tree. The birds are just birds. She has become invisible to the people once more.

As her feet and heart take pace, her mind flits again to the house and Mani. She is returning with nothing.

*Nothing.*

Her speed slows. The guilt she is running away from outpaces her and stretches before her on the ground like an evening shadow. She stops.

*How can I go back with nothing? I have failed. I have failed at everything! I cannot feed my son. And, look where I have ended up! As a thief that steals shelter in empty houses and wallets on the street!*

She thinks on what she has done, about how they let her go, and tries to construct a path from her past to now. She recalls all the stepping stones and wonders how they led to here: Alone. Homeless. Hungry. *Stealing*. She thought she had done the best she could. Did she miss the chance to take a different path?

She resumes her journey, pulling her feet to each step with a string of regret, and turns onto Arnold Avenue. Her feet lead her automatically to the fence panel. She squeezes through the gap as she pushes it aside. She steps automatically over the abandoned, rusted roller-skates missing a wheel and moves automatically around the tipped-over birdbath and long-forgotten wheelbarrow. The overgrown grass clings slightly to the sweat on her legs. She thinks of Lyddi and is grateful chance has at least brought her a friend. She shuffles quietly through the back patio door with a ripped screen, grateful to finally escape the searing sun. Mani and Lyddi will be in the kitchen where no windows pose the risk of being seen from outside.

“Lyddi?” she calls softly, so she doesn’t startle her when she enters the kitchen.

“Mama!” she hears Mani say. Rin smiles. She momentarily forgets her burdens in the delight of his sweet, baby voice.

There, in the kitchen, Lyddi is sitting at the table with Mani in her lap.

Rin freezes.

Beside them stand two women in professional clothing and Lyddi’s parents, lined up like soldiers.

“Rin Linson?” It is not really a question. A familiar grandma-haired woman takes two small steps toward her and then invites her to an empty chair by the table where it is understood she is to sit. Dread pricks at her neck and spine. She furrows her brow and looks questioningly at Lyddi and does not move toward the chair. Mani reaches his chubby little arms out to her, grasping at the air in little-fisted pulses, and Rin steps, instead, toward him.

Lyddi's chest rises and falls rapidly; her lips are pulled in between her teeth, clamped there with anticipation. "Rin...I..." she begins, but looks back at the second, larger woman who is wearing a twill, pastel-pink business suit.

*Bubble gum. Not more bubble gum!* This unfamiliar woman steps quickly between Rin and little Mani. His outstretched arms are betrayed into the bubble gum-suited woman's arms instead.

"Rin, please sit down," says the grandma-haired woman in an overly-nice voice.

Lyddi suddenly stands, regretting her choice to tell her parents. She had come to visit Rin yesterday and saw the overused diaper and painful rash on Mani. It had been two months and she had kept this secret, but Rin hadn't found a job and the baby needed better care. She had turned to her parents for help, but now it seemed a rash was surely better than losing his mother. Lyddi's face morphs into a desperate frown and tears burst from her soft, brown eyes. She implores the women to give Mani back to Rin. Her voice trembles and chokes. Rin joins the plea. They urge, cry, and reason. Lyddi's parents try to take Lyddi and leave, their voices now joining the cacophony. As the volume crescendos, the ground seems to tremble with impending chaos. The two official women back away and make toward the door with the baby.

"Someone will be by to see you tomorrow," says the grandma-haired woman. Mani struggles in the arms of the other and whines loudly for Rin.

As Mani gets further away, every path, every choice crumbles beneath Rin and reveals a chasm that swallows her hopes. She tries to scream NO! She searches for her voice, but the chasm sucks that away, too. There are no more stones, no more paths to try. Rin looks around the room as if searching for the place to start over, any small place to go because not moving is not an option. The only way is toward Mani.

All prior paths forsaken, Rin lunges to the bubble gum prison that holds her child and pries him away. Lyddi's parents move into place and block Rin's escape. Lyddi's mortified expression pulls at their resolution

and at the last minute, they draw aside and let Rin and Mani through.  
She runs.

Rin runs again.

She runs into the unknown.

Long after her lungs and feet lose power, fear bears her up and carries her distances she has never been. Chance follows, overtakes, and eventually leads the way.



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# The Religion System

Alicca Rice

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“And lead us not into Parlycalcalon 8, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom of the galaxy with the glory. For all eternity.” Jess sighed as she finished the Saint’s prayer. Every day at 3 a.m. all citizens were required to rise and recite the prayer before their devotions. They were completed kneeling beside her bed in her grey bedroom. She had yet to work long enough to earn her first color option.

The holographic image of Saint Michael stood over her kneeling form, nodding. “Very good, my child. The Lord has heard your most heartfelt prayers. The system has totaled your sins from yesterday. Your penance has been deducted from your account. You are forgiven.”

Saint Michael vanished only to be replaced by Saint Joan of Arc. “The blessings of the Father be upon you.” Jess bowed to the hologram, touching her forehead to the floor. As she rose the hologram spoke again. “The Father has given us a great many blessings. Before the blessed Saint Crane was given the divine inspiration to use the technology to resurrect those of us who died in God’s service, the world was filled with great evil. People had to fight for survival. Now we are blessed. The system tallies our sins and we are provided with what we earn through our service to God.”

Jess found her focus slipping away. She was tired of hearing about how blessed she was to be watched and judged by a computer system, but it was how things had always been. Before she was born, there had been many wars. When Saint Crane had created the system that allowed the Saints to be reborn through technology, everything had changed. God was once again the true leader of the world. Wars ended and everyone was given what they needed to save their souls. She had no reason to feel like her life was missing anything. She should be grateful to be born into a world of peace.

Following the benediction, Jess rose and went into the kitchen. It



was also grey. The only color she had earned so far was for her table. It was a red table that hid the food replicator that brought her food to her. On the table was the morning meal she had earned for her work yesterday. A small bowl of rice. She sighed. *I knew I would regret yelling at my boss yesterday.* Forcing herself to swallow her disappointment, she sat down at the table. “Father, thank you this day for all of your blessings. Thank you for the peace of the world and the system that brought it. Thank you for the food and the lessons it brings us. Amen.”

After forcing down the tasteless meal, Jess grabbed her bag and left for work. Leaving her rooms, she paused. Outside of her rooms was the large hallway that connected all parts of the space station she lived in. It was one of the few places bursting with color. The Conservatives always complained that the rainbow that circled the walls was a temptation to oppose the system. All Jess cared about was what was beyond the wall. The stars that shone through the station’s window always took her breath away. Continuing on, she walked faster than normal. *No way I want to be late again. Last time I did that I got ashes in my food.*

Jess sighed in relief as she entered her assigned work area. She was a technical assistant in the system’s file storage reception area. It was her duty to access the system to answer any questions that people had about their tallied sins so that they could learn from them and live better lives in the service of the Father. Sliding into her office she logged onto the system and waited for her first parishioner.

As she waited, she glanced around. She had a habit of leaving a mess behind when she clocked out and she didn’t want to get in more trouble for being lazy. For once everything seemed to be in order. The blue chair on the opposite side of her desk didn’t have anything on it. The brown floor was clean. The beige walls were mostly blank, but the one to her left had a poster of a beach. She had never been to one, but it looked pretty. The shelf to the right had various files that held instructions for if the system was interrupted and the code of conduct. All in all, she hated the place. But she wasn’t allowed to personalize the small office past her one poster. Even that was hard for her to get approved.

It wasn't long until the first person came. The man strode in as if he owned the place and sneered down at Jess. "Why was I given rice for breakfast?" he demanded. "I was perfect yesterday. I demand recourse. The system has clearly erred."

Jess frowned. "I am sorry that you feel that way sir. The system has many complex ways of judging our actions against the will of God. It can be quite confusing sometimes." She activated the scanner on her computer and it identified him as Marc Howard. She looked over his file, trying to ignore his sputtering.

"I will have you know that I am not confused. Clearly you people need to be better trained if you think this system is complicated."

"I'll pass along your comments to management sir," Jess replied. Unfortunately, as everything was recorded, she knew that the complaints would be passed on whether she did it or not. "Your file indicates that you stole something yesterday."

"Stole!" he thundered. "How dare you! I have never stolen anything in my life! You have the wrong file."

"I'm sorry sir, but this file is yours. If you think the data is corrupted then you will need to go to data management. All I can do is view the file to answer questions."

"Then clearly you are as useless as you look. I can't believe this," he shouted and stomped from the room.

"Please Father give me patience," Jess muttered. "Or possibly a new job."

Not long after another person came in. Then another. They all began to blur together, but one thing stood out. *They were all assigned rice as penance. I've never heard of that being done before. Most of them swear they didn't do the crime they were accused of. I've never had this type of reaction.*

At the end of the day, just after the office closed, Jess couldn't stop her curiosity from overwhelming her. She switched on the scanner one more time and pulled up her own file.

“What?” she cried, staring at the screen. She rubbed at her eyes and looked again but the words did not change.

**Name:** Jess Nareth

**Job:** Data Representative/ Counselor

**Crime:** Assault

**Details:** Assaulted a human being by striking them with a fist.

**First major offence.**

**Punishment:** Rice rations for three months.

“B-but I never did that!” she stuttered. “Why does it say that?”

Her computer beeped before her screen flashed black for a moment. **Incoming message: Recorded breach. Report to Data Management Immediately.**

Swallowing nervously, Jess logged off of the system and stood on shaking legs. No one was summoned to Data Management. You only went there if you had a question. “Only one way to find out,” she whispered and walked out of her office, trying to look confident.

She tried to force herself to admire the stars the way she normally did as she walked down the hallway, but she couldn't focus on them. They twinkled ominously in the distance and suddenly seemed angry, as if they longed to burn her up and use her for fuel to keep on burning. She turned away from the window and instead focused on the floor. She didn't normally look at the floor. It was grey and dull. But now she was too scared to look anywhere else.

The walk wasn't anywhere near as long as she wanted it to be. She was so focused on the floor that she almost walked into the door before it was fully open. Biting her tongue to hold back the curse that almost slipped out, Jess felt her face heat up. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Jess pushed back her shoulders and walked into the room.

She looked around curiously, having never been into Data Management before. The walls were a light blue and the floor a cream color. There were chairs scattered throughout the room and a reception desk across from the door. The lights were dim and there were no other people in the room. A shiver forced its way down her spine.

“Hello?” she called. “Is anyone still here?”

A door behind the reception desk clicked and swung open. There was no one in sight.

“Hello?” Jess whispered, voice quivering. Every instinct she had was screaming at her to run. Leave and never look back. The only thing stopping her was that horrid bowl of rice. She couldn’t even imagine what kind of food she would get the next day if she dare to ignore a summons. Forcing one foot in front of the other, Jess walked behind the reception desk and entered the room behind it.

If the first room was creepy, this one was terrifying. It was clearly a place for system maintenance only. Row after row of computer banks filled the room. There was little light and no place set aside that looked like a place for humans. Just computers.

“Is anyone here?” she called weakly. “I didn’t mean to intrude. I got a summons to come here.”

“We are pleased that you have come straight here,” said a male voice from behind.

Jess spun before throwing herself to her knees and touching her forehead to the floor. “Saint Crane. You honor me,” she said to the hologram that had appeared behind her.

“And yet you have been quite disobedient,” the hologram said gravely.

“Please sir, I never attacked anyone. I don’t know why my file would say such a thing.”

“This is known.”

“Sir,” Jess looked up at him. “I’m glad. I’ll let people know that the mistake is being fixed. I’m sure they’ll be relieved.”

“There was no mistake.”

“What? What do you mean? You just said you knew about the error,” Jess stared blankly. “I don’t understand.”

“There was no error,” the hologram said again.

“But you said you knew that my file was wrong.”

“There was no error.”

“Clearly there is!” Jess shouted, before paling. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that.” She bowed again.

“The will of the Father is being carried out.”

Jess looked back up, furious. “So the system is recording false crimes on purpose?”

“The will of the Father is being carried out. You are to tell people that the system is not wrong. You are to stop sending them here. If you do this, you will be forgiven.”

“Wait. Are you telling me to lie to people?”

“You are to tell them the Father’s will. The Father’s words are truth. This is your mission from the Father. All of your sins will be forgiven as long as you do the Father’s will.”

“But the system is recording crimes that never happened. How could that possibly be the Father’s will?”

“You are to tell them the Father’s will. The Father’s words are truth. This is your mission from the Father. All of your sins will be forgiven as long as you do the Father’s will.”

“You can repeat that all you want. I know you understood my question.”

“But he’s not able to answer it,” another voice said.

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, Jess whipped around. This time the person behind her was a human being. A man with similar features to Saint Crane stood there. He was tall, with dark hair and twinkling blue eyes.

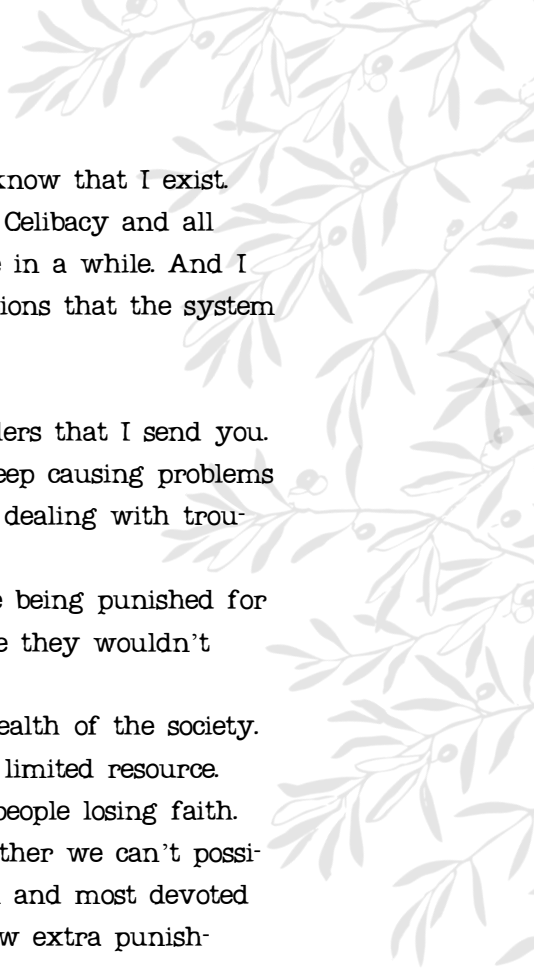
“Who are you?” Jess asked, crossing her arms.

“My name is Jon Crane. The grandson of the man who created the system. Now I’m the person who runs it.”

“What do you mean person who runs it? No one runs the system. It’s A.I. It runs itself.”

He smirked. “Of course it does,” he answered sweetly. The system runs itself and the people.” He laughed coldly. “No one would obey if they thought that there was any human influence behind the controls.”

A cold feeling was setting in the pit of her stomach. “Why are you telling me this?” Jess asked.



“Amusement,” Jon replied. “Most people don’t know that I exist. After all, a Saint couldn’t possibly have any children. Celibacy and all that nonsense. It’s nice to see a living face every once in a while. And I could tell that you weren’t going to stop asking questions that the system is programed not to answer.”

“So now what happens?”

“Now you walk out of here and follow the orders that I send you. Stop clogging up the system and tell people if they keep causing problems then they will be put on a fast. I don’t want to keep dealing with troublemakers.”

“They’re only making trouble because they are being punished for crimes that they didn’t commit!” Jess cried. “Otherwise they wouldn’t have any problems.”

“And people are getting far too good for the health of the society. We don’t have a planet to live on anymore. Food is a limited resource. There just isn’t enough to go around. We can’t have people losing faith. After all, if we are a nation protected by the Holy Father we can’t possibly have a food shortage. Our status as God’s children and most devoted followers would prevent that from happening. So a few extra punishments that people will eventually accept as a testing of their faith will protect our society.”

“So you think keeping people ignorant of the truth is better than having everyone work together to solve the problem?” Jess demanded.

“Of course it’s better. Everything we are is because of our faith. We have peace. There is no more war. No more sickness. No more poverty. All because of the system. That has to be protected no matter the cost. It truly is the most important thing that we can do to help people,” he explained.

“And it’s not just you trying to stay in power?” Jess challenged.

“Of course not. Everything I do is for the good of others.”

“How can you be sure if what you are doing is truly good?” she asked.

“I get guidance from the system too.”

"You do?" her eyebrow arched up, not believing a word he was saying.

"Of course I do. It is set up to advise and guide the person maintaining it. All of this was set in place by the very first programmers."

"So you are following instructions from people who have been dead for over a century?"

"You would be surprised by how much is still relevant. Society adapts, but people only change so much."

"So the system told you to accuse people of crime to save up on food," she demanded.

"Some things the system never imagined would be an issue. That's why there is a person behind the scenes. A computer can only figure out so much. Eventually someone who can think needs to step in."

"So it was all you," Jess declared triumphantly.

"Yes. I did what I had to do to protect all of us."

"So tell me," Jess growled, "What are your rations?"

"I need to stay strong to run the programs and protect the system," he defended. "If I became too weak to monitor the programming then too many people will have their rations cut. That would cause problems."

"Because more people would discover what you are doing."

"People don't understand how necessary what I am doing is. I have spent my entire life in service to our society."

"Well that ends now," Jess declared, striding around him.

"What are you doing," he cried, grabbing her arm.

She jerked out of his hold. "I'm shutting you down. There's no way I will allow you to corrupt the system to punish people because there is not enough food to go around."

"You will destroy everything we have achieved. There will be chaos and riots in the streets."

"People have to know the truth. I won't let you control them like this. They have a right to know."

She turned back to the computer system. She hesitated, not sure

where the switch was that she needed to hit to free everybody. The bang of a gun and the white hot agony of a bullet tearing through her flesh was her answer.





# An Excerpt from the Novel “Galaxy Armada”

Rainan Hash

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It was nearly midday when a shout alerted the people to a low hum in the distance. Someone had spotted a shadow in the clouds several kilometers from Ferranam’s airspace, and judging by the size and speed it was Deshan’s personal craft, the whale-shaped vessel that had landed just days earlier. However, instead of the nearly overwhelming sense of apprehension that had laid over most of the city on Inspection Day, Ferranam was buzzing with restless excitement. The hum of Deshan’s personal ship was getting louder; it wouldn’t be long before it was hovering over the city at eight hundred feet. Even now there was a vibration that could be felt in one’s feet as the hum approached.

The street immediately before the House of Accord cleared out quickly, people ducking into buildings and seeking cover from the dust that blew up from the ship’s landing, but many remained to watch. Plumes of silt hissed against windows as the huge craft, nearly as wide as the street and almost as tall as the buildings, touched down on its narrow belly and balanced on extensor legs. The rotors emitted a deafening roar like huge Chinook military helicopters. The noise of the enormous craft came level with the House of Accord and the hatch, a mere twenty feet from the forward viewports, began to slide open. Genesian Liaison Hanal and her assistant-successor Eoll stood before the entrance to the House of Accord and Evan, Lily, Tene and Pilani waited around the corner, craning their necks to get a better look. A slightly above-average-height humanoid clad in dark official-looking robes descended from the whale-shaped vessel, making his way down a short and narrow flight of three steps before standing on the stone-paved street. His pale skin, almost pasty like a creature that has never seen the sun, clashed against the warm colors of Ferranam’s buildings.

Hanal was nervous. Deshan had considerably more power behind him than she did, and even with all of her people behind her there was still a huge risk about to be taken. But it was because of her people that she had to risk everything. She looked bravely at Deshan, trying to see his eyes behind his breathing mask, and said, “My office.” She surprised herself; the voice she heard sounded strong, her words more like a command than the suggestion she’d meant. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Eoll turn his head away so she wouldn’t see him smirk. Deshan nearly cocked an eyebrow at the tone in the Genesian Liaison’s voice. She sounded haughty, this one! Did she think to tell him that her people had improved in two days and that his direction wouldn’t be necessary? Fool! He thought to himself, *this city will be mine by nightfall*. “If it’s necessary,” he said as though he’d rather swim in raw sewage. Deshan decided that when he took this post, he would come down hard on the people of Ferranam to punish them for the Liaison’s insolence. *It will be good to have control of this place*, Deshan thought as he entered the building, throwing a disdainful glance at Eoll and the little clutch of gawkers who watched from around the corner. *Meddlesome creatures!*

Deshan followed Hanal into her office, quickly sidestepped around her and settled into Hanal’s deep chair, effectively reprimanding her for her earlier lapse and putting her in her “rightful” place as his subordinate. However, the woman who usually cowered in his presence sat easily, even crossing her ankles comfortably. *Is that...satisfaction on her face? What is she thinking?* Deshan was beginning to feel the stirrings of unease. He had been Liaison long enough to know when something was amiss. This Genesian wasn’t acting in a manner to which Deshan was accustomed. He had had Ferranam already lying in his palm not long ago, but today, even as his personal transport settled into the wide, stone-paved streets of Ferranam, Deshan had noted how the people no longer scattered at the very mention of his name. They had stood—visible but well out of the way—and watched as he stepped down from his ship. Though he had regarded these countrified peasants with open scorn, they hadn’t shrunk from his contemplation. Something was certainly not right here. Still,

Deshan had a job to do. Sitting upright in Hanal's seat of office, he regarded her silently and waited for his inaction to drive the smug confidence from Hanal's face. He could always count on prolonged silence to drive her to begging. Fear was wonderful leverage by which to achieve his means and Deshan was quite used to keeping the business-end of the lever firmly in his hand.

Hanal sat just as comfortably in the simple chair across from her usual one. She sat with the air of one who knows something of great importance, and with this knowledge she felt very confident. For years, she had dreamed of a moment like this, when she would finally outwait Deshan's haughty silence and tell him just what he ought to do with his authority. She was well-aware of how Deshan used fear to upset her, and without fear he would have very little power over her now. Even as she sat, she heard Eoll quietly take his customary place at the desk outside of her office and her courage was bolstered all the more. If Eoll was near, he would be able to hear all that was said. Beside his left hand was the direct line of communication to the GSS. Whatever the outcome of this meeting, the final word would be all over Gena before Deshan could report back to his superiors at Archonas.

Deshan couldn't take it anymore. "My sources inform me that all lines of communication have all but ceased. I am also aware that there has been almost no activity at the cadmium deposits for nearly a full day. There seems to have been some sort of disturbance in the flow of production, and I see no explanations for it. Would you care to enlighten me?"

"Nothing is wrong with the lines, Deshan," Hanal said lightly. "And there's nothing wrong with the mining operations. In top form, they could get that extra nine percent within a month or so."

"Is that so?" Deshan said with an ironic eyebrow-lift. "In other words, there is absolutely nothing wrong with your people's communications and my sources are inaccurate? Perhaps the fault lies with my sources...unless you're trying to hide something. You have been sitting

far too patiently, Genesian. If there is something you're not telling me, I will wring it from you myself."

A small smile curled about Hanal's lips. "There is nothing to tell, Deshan. My people have merely been going about their lives, doing what they must to survive. Would you care for some tea? I could call Eoll in."

"I won't touch anything you Genesians deem fit to drink, lest it be runoff from those filthy zytedel fields."

"Oh no, what we like is a nice tea steeped from herbs. I think I would like some. Eoll," Hanal said over her shoulder, "Could I see you for a moment?"

The Genesian stood in the doorway. "Yes ma'am?"

"Could you prepare a cup of tea for the Archosian Liaison and me?"

"Certainly," Eoll turned quickly and left.

"There," Hanal said, "he'll be back soon. Now, what was it we were discussing?"

"The overall surcease of activity in Ferranam," Deshan said coldly. "I have seen a nearly complete halt in cadmium and selenium production and I would like an explanation."

"There's nothing to explain," Hanal said with a totally clean expression. "We haven't stopped to take a spare breath since you left the other day. Since our last meeting, I've just been too busy to send in any reports." Eoll reappeared, bearing a small oval tray with two delicate cups, steaming. He set the service on the desk and Hanal nodded in thanks. Quietly and with absolute leisure, Hanal took a cup and inspected the depths, as though checking the color and scent of her favorite blend. Her calm infuriated Deshan.

"Hanal, what is going on here?" Deshan demanded, placing both hands flat on Hanal's desk. "As my inferior, you are required to answer me. Why have all communications and mining activities ceased?" It was taking all of his control not to rise to his feet and lash out at the woman before him. It was his aversion to touching these primitives as well as his loyalty to the Archosian Trade Council that prevented him from doing so.

“I don’t see why you’re so upset, Deshan. It’s not like we’ve been sitting with our feet up since you left.”

“Then what *have* you been up to, Genesian?”

Hanal shrugged. “Oh, nothing of great importance,” Though she was shaking inside, she was managing to keep herself very composed. Her secret knowledge was assisting her poise and assuaging her fears. “We’ve been quite busy.” She sipped her tea daintily.

“Doing *what?*” Deshan’s voice was beginning to grate. He was becoming impatient and infuriated with how she was dancing around his questions, and Deshan was not fond of dancing in any form.

“I shouldn’t bore you with the details; you know the basics of what I do here. I’ve merely been attending to the needs of my people, performing the tasks of my post. And I so very like my post, Deshan.”

“Hanal, if you do not give me the information I want, I will be forced to recover it from you in a most unpleasant manner.”

“Ah but first, may I ask a question? Have you ever wondered how we keep our mining equipment in such good condition, the same equipment that your people gave to us?” Hanal glanced at Deshan in a way that might have been mistaken as coquettish. However, she was actually keeping one wary eye on him in case she had to act fast.

Deshan huffed with impatience. “What does that matter to me? If mining equipment is in need of replacement, the Archosian Trade Council—”

“It’s not the equipment that needs replaced, Deshan,” Hanal pounced. “The whole system needs reworking. Everything, from who does the work to who is in charge, needs complete revolution.”

“What?” Deshan barked. The woman wasn’t making any sense. “Hanal, there is nothing wrong with the system—”

“Perhaps not from your perspective,” Hanal said smoothly and pointedly. She set her delicate teacup down. “However, there are those who have quite a different opinion.” Hanal lifted her eyes and delivered a very direct, defiant stare. “The people you are currently enslaving, for example.”

Deshan looked at her through narrowed eyes. He did not like where this conversation had turned or where it was going, even if he wasn't entirely sure of the final destination. The calm, controlled way in which Hanal had set her cup down was too relaxed. This was too much. "Hanal," he said in a low voice, "do not forget who has the superior post here."

Hanal barely blinked. "Won't you have some tea?"

Deshan suddenly stood and swiped the delicate cup from the tray, flinging it against the wall and listening to the crystalline sound of its destruction. "Enough! Hanal, you are excused from your post. As of this moment, I am the governor of Ferranam, and I will thoroughly investigate the goings-on here." Deshan, standing, leaned forward slightly and flattened his hands on the desk and commanded. "Now, get out!"

"No."

For a moment, all Deshan could do was blink. "What?"

"I do not surrender my position." Hanal met Deshan's eyes with a hardness that surprised the Archosian Liaison. "My people will not obey you, and neither will I."

Deshan growled, "You forget your place, Genesian. My orders stand! Ferranam is *mine*, and all its resources are under *my* control! You are dismissed!"

"No!" Hanal spouted back, "It's over, Deshan; my people are done with your oppression and we are no longer your slaves. We are through. *You get out of my office!*"

Deshan suddenly reached out and grabbed the collar of Hanal's robe, jerking her up out of her chair and forcing her to stand with her face just an inch from his. "Hear me, Genesian: your people are *nothing* to mine; we *own* this planet and everything on it. The Trade Council has you in its pocket and it will *stay* that way until we have the last gram of cadmium on our scales, and your people will work for us until *I* say we are through." Deshan spoke through gritted teeth and Hanal began to feel her old fear fighting against her control, but she refused to be cowed. "They won't do it; my people are done with working for you."

“Then I’ll kill as many as it takes to convince them otherwise!”

“You’ll have to kill every last Genesian on the planet, and then you’ll have no one left to work for you.”

“It would be my pleasure to see you filthy peasants eliminated!”

“I would love to watch you try,” Hanal hissed, every fiber of her being taunting him to just try it.

“What will you do, Hanal, *fight* us?” Deshan ridiculed.

“Yes!” Hanal growled through her teeth, baring them at the Archosian.

“And just how do you expect to do that?”

“With *those*,” Hanal nodded to the large window-glass behind Deshan. There was a deafening roar in the street, twice as loud as Deshan’s ship and much closer. The Archosian released her collar and whirled around, stopping to stare in disbelief at four dragonfly-like craft hovering over his personal transport ship. For a breathless moment Deshan stood and gawked. His eyes were wide over the mask that covered his nose and mouth, his hands half-raised as though he would shield himself. Hanal stood behind him with an expression of triumphant defiance, a smile spreading across her face as she watched the Liaison try to make sense of what he saw. Deshan gaped at the four crafts, the likes of which he had never seen before, and began to feel a very unpleasant sensation deep inside. With his ship grounded and blocked from escape, Deshan felt fear for the first time in his secure life.

After a terrible few seconds when he couldn’t catch his breath, he turned again to Hanal and demanded “What are those ships, Hanal? From what smuggler did you have those stolen?” He felt fury once more, and grasped at it in order to steady himself. Rage was his only stability and he clutched at it like a man drowning.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have put so much into the training of engineers, Deshan,” Hanal said ironically, a sardonic smile forming. “With our now-extensive knowledge of Archosian science, my people now have the leverage we’ve been waiting for. Those are Genesian-built ships, designed for battle. As I said, we have been *quite* busy.”

“This is a direct violation of the agreement between our people!”  
Deshan raged.

“The people of Gena are demanding their freedom!” Hanal raised her voice and glared at Deshan. “My people are willing to fight for autonomy, and we now have the means to do so. I offer you only one choice, Deshan: the people of Archos are to leave this planet and never return, so that the world of Gena may govern itself. It is our right!”

“You peasants have no rights! Your stupid ancestors gave up their rights when they agreed to our arrangement. Have you no appreciation for the wealth we’ve brought to your miserable little rock?”

“My people don’t need your help anymore and we certainly don’t want your *wealth*,” Hanal spat, “for it is a fortune carved out of the backs of innocent people.”

“You worthless little *bitch*,” Deshan raged, “after all we’ve done—”

“You’ve done more than enough! You’ve taken our *world* away from us, and we will not stop until it is ours again. Get out of my office, Deshan, and go tell your Trade Council that they have one standard day to leave Genesian airspace.”

“And if we don’t?” Deshan challenged, “What do your foolish people plan to do if we refuse? And I can assure you that we *will* refuse.” A patronizing tone crept into Deshan’s voice and he began to smile again, almost certain that this little rebellion could be squashed quickly and efficiently.

Hanal composed herself. She wanted to say it right the first time, to make the perfect impression on the Archosian. “As of this moment, each city-state has an Archosian ship in its sights, and each city has been allocated four mining-grade laser pulse-drills trained on their targets. I think you know the power in those drills, Deshan. In fact, I think you understand perfectly well what will happen if those drill-banks hit their marks at full power. Total destruction of your city-ships, Deshan; that is what awaits you if you do not comply.”

“Idiot!” Deshan scoffed, “Mining drills aren’t enough to destroy—”



“They are now,” Hanal cut, “I have said, perhaps you shouldn’t have trained such excellent engineers; they’ve been working on improving those drills for the past three hundred years in order to meet the demands of Archos. Ironic, isn’t it? You’ve placed the weapons of your own ruin into our hands.”

Deshan knew then that she was right; even with minor improvements to the targeting mechanisms and refinement in beam width and duration, an Archosian-made mining drill could compromise hull integrity. The gravity of the situation suddenly dawned on Deshan and he realized that if these Genesians were serious, they could fatally damage and even destroy some of the smaller space-borne cities. That tiny gram of fear that had been niggling at the back of his mind was steadily growing into a substantial threat. It could consume him if he didn’t control it quickly. He leapt for a contesting argument. “You don’t have the balls, woman.”

Hanal’s tone was direct, clear and unflinching, and a slow curling smile began to form on her lips. “You underestimate me. A grave miscalculation, I think.”

Deshan’s only reply was an incoherent bellow of rage and frustration. He looked only moments away from reaching out and throttling Hanal. Then, “*You cannot DO this!*”

“I’ll do whatever I damn well please,” she said, “And if you don’t leave my city immediately, I’ll have your ship destroyed.” Here, she was taking a huge gamble. The prototype ships had yet to be fitted with weapons, but Deshan didn’t know that.

Deshan was visibly seething with rage. “You think you’re being clever, Genesian, but we shall see how this little ‘rebellion’ of yours looks through the eyes of the Trade Council. I’ll guarantee that before the sun sets tomorrow those trifling little craft will be broken down into scrap-metal. Perhaps I’ll use it to skewer you after this outburst. Mark me, Hanal, you will regret this. Charon! I require immediate transport aboard my ship!” Deshan suddenly began to fade from view and Hanal realized that he was being taken aboard via teleportation. Outside, the four prototype ships had ceased hovering above the Archosian ship and backed off

quickly when the whale-shaped vessel began to rise into the air. They had been instructed earlier to let Deshan go. When the last particles of the Archosian Liaison had disappeared, Hanal huffed and suddenly felt one burden slip from her shoulders while another, much heavier load descended upon her. She had started this, now she had to finish her job. No, not just her, the people of Ferranam and the entire indigenous population of Gena would have to mobilize in full force for this insurrection to succeed.

On the one hand, Hanal felt victorious. She had successfully informed the main target of her intentions without giving away the fact that Gena had only four largely untested prototype ships to defend them in the air. She had delivered the threat of destruction to the Archosian city-ships with at least enough detail to cause disquiet, at least in Deshan. He had looked uneasy at the thought of his precious nitrogen-free home being destroyed, hadn't he? At least Hanal could enjoy the thought of Deshan being afraid. As Hanal was savoring her small victory and contemplating the task yet to come, Eoll quietly approached the doorway and tapped for her attention. Hanal turned and watched him for a moment, giving him time to ask her, "Has it been done?"

"It has," Hanal replied with gravity. She folded her hands behind her back so he wouldn't see her make fists to stop their shaking. Her bravado had worn off quickly and she was beginning to feel anxious. Just what was it she *had* done? Of course, the moment the initial thrill of setting her challenge faded, the reality of what her people now faced came crashing into her like a blast of air from Deshan's personal transport. Eoll reacted with equal solemnity. "This is the right thing, Hanal. Our people need their freedom."

"He will come back, Eoll, and when he does it will not be to ask me politely to stand down." Hanal let out a sigh that was the greater part relief that the easiest part was over and part apprehension for the long road ahead.

"It is the price we pay for change," Eoll said. He was beginning to show signs of a smile. "You are the leader who will change Gena's future for the better."

“They’ll write history books about us, Eoll,” Hanal said with a slight laugh. “And for the first time in a millennium they’ll be written in Genesisian.”

“Hanal?”

“Yes, Eoll?”

“Shouldn’t we tell the people that it has begun? They’ll need to prepare immediately for whatever the Archosians may do in retaliation.”

“Yes,” Hanal said with sudden finality, “Open all of our non-electronic lines of communication and send the boy and his friend to Forge’s post. Of course, with Deshan’s ship gone, they may have already learned for themselves. Still, we have to tell them that it’s not finished yet, there’s so much to do and very little time to prepare.”

“I’ll compose a communique immediately.”

“No, take one of the prototype ships; the Archosians will be watching our networks more closely than ever and they may try to intercept our messages. They’ll try anything to break up our networks and send us into confusion.”

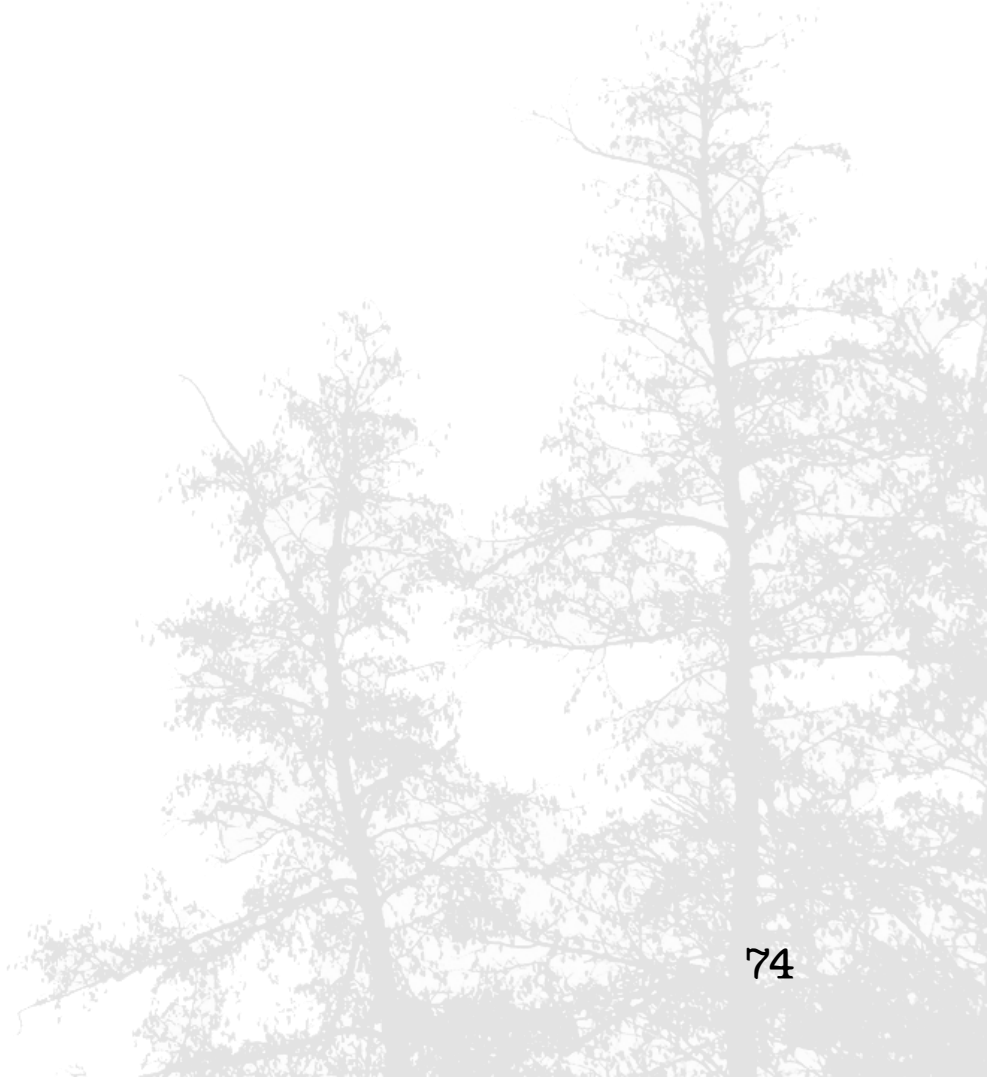
“Yes, I’ll get on that right away.” Eoll took a pen and paper from Hanal’s desk and began writing furiously.

“Make sure you advise them that we may be in for a long trial; the Archosians won’t give up easily and neither shall we. Remind them of the electronic silence; no one is to send a message over the lines lest the Archosians intercept. They must keep those mining drills aimed at the locations given to them by the GSS; they’ll receive updates when they need them. The Archosians have no weapons that can match the drills, and once Deshan reports back with our ultimatum they’ll know that we are armed and ready to fight. That should be enough to send those soft-bodied creatures running, and if not then we’ll start ending warning shots.”

“Shoot to kill?” Eoll asked, pausing his writing hand and looking up.

“Not yet. If they look like they’re getting ready to leave, let them go. If they look like they’re going to try and wait us out, then use warning shots. If they attack, I give full instructions to defend Gena with everything we’ve got. We may be peaceful people, Eoll, but peace does not mean we are weak.”

“Hear, hear,” Eoll said enthusiastically, rolling up the papers he had finished writing on. Eoll believed in his people, but they still had a long way yet to go. No freedom ever comes without a fight.





# Hank

Shannon Carman

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I don't know why it went down the way it did. It just happened. Maybe it was the booze, maybe it was just her time to go. I don't know, all I know is she's dead and there ain't no going back.

That day started out like any other. Slept in after a rough night at work as usual. Grabbed a smoke and coffee before heading to the front stoop to grab my morning paper, of course it wasn't there, so I looked over the side of the railing into the bushes. That paperboy had a mean streak in him and always missed the mark for me. My neighbors all got their paper on the top step, must have been that time I almost hit him while I was driving home from the track. I might have been a little drunk but he should've been on the sidewalk with that bike of his. The road is for cars, not bikes. How the hell was it my fault he wrecked that bike of his?

The headlines of The Times read "Gang Trouble in Detroit," who gave a rat's ass, don't live in Detroit and never will. I just wanted to catch the news about a possible strike at the warehouse where I spend most of my nights. Naturally there was nothing in the paper about it, no one gave a shit about my little piece of the world. Mar, that prick, had been pushing for a strike for weeks. All for a buck an hour. That son of a bitch never did nothing anyhow for the job, why was he so hot to get a raise for? He was lucky to even have a job, lazy as he was. He had a gift of gab, though, and had everyone all fired up. Most of us didn't have a rich daddy's inheritance like him to help out if there was a strike. But the others didn't think like that, they just thought about that extra dollar and swallowed his line of crap. They didn't think how they were going to live while waving their signs around. All I could think about was how crossing the picket line might get me hurt or killed, but I had no choice. I had to get the bills paid one way or another.

My stomach was grumbling and I needed to eat so I walked down to Nancy's Diner on the corner. The food was OK but the waitresses were friendly and the coffee was good and hot. They had a jukebox full of country 45s and nobody complained if I smoked while I ate. You know what they say about sometimes the simple pleasures in life are the best. Well, smoking is one of my simple pleasures.

The door to the diner opened into a world of coffee, bacon, and the smell of hot grease. The place was full of regulars and I briefly thought how sad it was I recognized most of them.

"Hello, Alice," I called out to my favorite waitress. Alice was probably twenty years older than me but still easy on the eyes. Dark hair and green eyes, I always had a weakness for green eyes. Probably get me in trouble someday. She didn't respond so I gave another shout, raising my voice over George Jones' "She Thinks I Still Care" coming out over the jukebox.

"Hey, Darling. How you been doing, Hank?" Alice asks me as she pours my coffee. "Usual?"

"Yep, coffee, eggs and bacon, you know me too well. When are we going to run off together and leave this shitty town?" I joke.

"Hank, you know my husband would kill us both for just joking that way," she answers but we both know she would love to leave this town. I can see in her green eyes that something just ain't right at home. But I ain't the one to rescue her from that possible hell.

The eggs and bacon showed up halfway through my third cup of coffee. They were cold but at that point I didn't care. I had already wasted enough time, it was time to go, and I had shit to do. I wiped the yoke up from the runny eggs with my last bit of white bread toast and polished off my fourth cup of coffee. I threw a buck or two down for Alice's tip and got the hell out of there.

The walk home was cold and wet, thankfully I only had a block or so to walk. I decided to dodge the rain for a minute by stopping in at the mini mart half way home. I needed some smokes anyhow. Way too clean and bright for this neighborhood, the mini mart just seemed out of

place with all the rundown grungy businesses on this block. It was part of an effort to clean up this block. Years ago, way before my time, this neighborhood was something special. It was supposed to be the place to live over fifty years ago. All the buildings were new and the business establishments honest and above board. Back then you could keep your doors unlocked and the kids were safe to run around the neighborhood without a care. There were fine cars up and down the block and even a theater just around the corner. Then the depression hit and our little part of the city never recovered. Now you're lucky to not see a hooker or junkie in the shadows. And the theater shows pornos 24 hours a day. Nobody lets the kids run free in this neighborhood anymore. Sometimes I wish this neighborhood was like it was in the past but mostly I prefer the way it is now, everything is real. Strange and violent shit went down back then too, but it was always behind closed doors, nobody ever knew. I like my skeletons where I can see 'em.

I grab a six of Old Milwaukee's Best from the cooler and a carton of Luckys from the clerk, on the way out I get one of those free local papers to shield myself from the rain. Another minute or two and I'm walking back up the steps to my place. I've got the only single residence on the block. It's a shithole, but it's paid for. A relic left over from the glory days. All the other buildings were cut up into low cost apartments decades ago. My parents bought this place when they were young and gave it to me along with all their other rundown shit when they kicked the old bucket. Lucky me. I'd sell it if I could fix it up enough for someone to actually want the old beast. But, then what would I have? A pocket full of money that I would just blow on cigarettes and women.

Back in my own dry world I pull the tab off the first of six I will be downing before work. Work night so I gotta keep it light on the drinking. Six is about all I can handle and still have a productive night at work. Any less than six and I just can't handle going in. Always gotta have at least a little buzz on to take the edge off the monotony. After a couple of cans I decide it's time for a change of venue. I guess a few in the bar down the street won't hurt me anymore than a few here at

home. Plus, you never know I might just get lucky with one of the barflies down at the watering hole before work.

Clancy's place was hopping, well, for Clancy's anyway, even though it was only early afternoon half the stools and a few of the booths were already filled. Mostly guys like me. Factory workers looking to get a little better in the head before going to a shitty job. There were a few women at the bar but nothing worth looking at yet. Not until I had a few more beers in me anyways. The bathroom had that weird smell of piss and bleach. There was some drug deal or something going on in one of the filthy stalls at the back. "Get that fucking shit out of here before I bust some heads, you damn cokeheads" I had to piss like a Russian race horse and those fuckers were keeping me from it.

"How the hell you doing, Clancy, you damned old mick?" I throw out to the man behind the bar polishing glasses.

"Better than you, you manky eejit. At least I'm not half plastered before dinner" Clancy answers, voice filled with mock anger. He's about the closest thing to a friend I got in this world and we only speak a few words a day but I know if I ever needed use of the stout shillelagh he keeps behind the door and a strong arm to raise it Clancy would be there for me. And I would be there for him if he needed it. That's the kind of friends we are.

This is the kind of bar that's for drinkers. No kitchen, no television, nothing but beer, booze and trouble if you don't watch your shit. I never have any troubles here. Strictly here for the booze and sometimes the women, but mostly the booze. If you come to this bar looking for anything else more than likely you'll find the business end of the shillelagh. Clancy don't put up with no crap from anyone, even his friends, and that's exactly why I like it here so much. Even though the sign reads "Clancy's Irish Pub" there ain't nothing Irish about it except Clancy himself. Years ago, maybe, but people 'round here don't care if it's Irish, Italian, or Oriental, as long as the beer is cold and the booze cheap. Like the diner around the corner, the jukebox was full of good music. Not as much country but plenty of rock and roll. Not that new shit those guys



at work are always blasting out of their eight tracks, but the real stuff like Ricky Nelson, Chuck Berry, and the Everly Brothers. Back when music was music and you didn't have to wear make-up to be a rock-and-roll star. Hell, even as I walk in I can hear Orbison crooning "In Dreams," what a great fucking song. Looks like I found my pot of gold, I can tell this day is going to turn out just fine after all.

I had no idea in Hell just how just wrong I would be.

Shit. I just looked up at the clock and realized how late it was. Gotta go to work. Probably had a few more than I should have. Who gives a fuck, the place is going downhill anyways. Spent a few more hours at Clancy's than I intended but when you got the bartender matching you drinks it'd be a sin to quit.

I may have stumbled a little bit making my way home but I did make it and I was mostly sober when I made it to my garage out back.

"Hey you bums, get out of my garage." I yelled at the two homeless guys stretching out on the floor of my garage. Everybody needs a dry place to sleep but it ain't gonna be my little piece of the world. Must be bad out there for 'em if they chose my oily garage as their shelter. I was afraid one of 'em may have been messing with my old car but it looked all right. The old Plymouth started right up, just like I knew she would, and I steered her towards Monahan's Warehouse. I flipped on the radio just in time to hear "Convoy" and I couldn't help but sing along. That song got me every time. Half hour to work, might as well enjoy myself.

There was a 76 off the next exit and my Satellite needed some gas so I pulled in and pumped her full of the cheapest stuff.

"God Damn It!" I yelled over, \$11.00 for a tank of gas. Shit is getting high. If it goes much higher I'll have to start walking. What the hell are these politicians thinking letting these damn A-rabs get away with this? Seems like our boys in Texas could get enough oil for us to use.

"Son of a bitch!" I yelled to myself. What the fuck do you think I saw as I pulled up to work? That goddamned Mark Bennett and his fucking cronies all lined up with their damn signs picketing for that extra

dollar. I should've known this night was going to go to shit, it started out way too good.



# Horror Hearts Contest Winner “The Princess’s Ball Gown”

Eleanor Billman

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Part I:

It was the night before the big Halloween party, and Janie was the only girl she knew who did not have a costume. She had watched her friends preparing for the event since near the end of summer; such rituals were a big deal in the little town Janie belonged to. One of Janie’s friends, a skilled seamstress, had not been seen since mid-August when she began designing her own costume. Janie wished that she could be as passionate about the whole ordeal as her seamstress friend, but the idea of costuming just never appealed to her. She had not been out on Halloween since she was a child, dressed to her mother’s liking, and led along by the hand. For the young Janie, Halloween itself was far less exciting than the weeks following it, when candy would become a reasonable substitute for most meals.

It seemed that all the other girls could not wait to transform; to become anything other than the normal girls they were. Maybe the transformation was what was so appealing about costuming; the normal girls never seemed to change much otherwise. They were always the same, always predictable. Janie had never fully known who, or what she was, and she certainly had never felt “normal” like the rest of the girls. The only thing Janie could predict about herself was a daily transformation; a new costume for a new Janie every day.

The transformations made her feel strange. Everyone she knew could be categorized somehow; they all had that one thing that could define them, like her seamstress friend. But not her, not Janie. Each day, Janie generally agreed upon two facts:

1. She was called Janie; it seemed that the world, led by Janie’s mother, had agreed upon this long ago.

2. She was female; there were certain characteristics people seemed to agree females should have, and Janie had enough of them to convince her.

Anything else was *always* up for speculation.

This particular day's incarnation of Janie was being led by her roommate, who was frantically tugging her along by the hand, toward the costume shop.

"I can't believe you waited 'til the last minute!" Janie's roommate cried, "Why did I even invite you?"

Janie didn't have an answer; she had been asking herself the same question for a month. When her roommate invited her to the party, Janie didn't feel like going, but she considered that perhaps some late October incarnation of herself might. Also, her roommate never asked her anywhere; Janie had considered that if she declined, she may never be asked out again.

The pair reached the costume shop and Janie felt the cool air of the shop's interior rush past her, as a man who had been walking slightly ahead of them held open the glass door and invited them to pass with a grin. Janie couldn't help but wonder about him; he was wearing a bow-tie. No one Janie knew wore bow-ties.

Janie's wonder was interrupted as her roommate suddenly dropped her wrist and said, "Just... go. Find something! I'm going to pick up some vodka for the party," and with that, she disappeared out the glass door.

Janie stood in the doorway, bewildered not only by the enormous size of the costume shop, but also by its emptiness. The shelves looked like they had been picked clean days ago, but Janie decided to browse anyway. There were a few spooky rubber masks in a nearby bin, several half-empty rows of children's costumes that several mothers were leading their children through, a wall of assorted accessories, and a single adult-sized skeleton costume in an ocean of empty racks. Taking one last look around, Janie approached the phony sack of bones and considered the costume.

“I don’t think that one’s right for you,” came a voice from behind. Janie turned to see where the voice was coming from. It was the man in the bow-tie, who was standing uncomfortably close to her; so close that he caused her to take a step back and accidentally disturb the rack.

The bow-tied man took a step back himself, “Sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I’m the owner of this fine establishment, and I’m afraid I must apologize again for the state of my shop. You would not believe how busy we’ve been this year.”

Janie paused and considered him for a moment before speaking, “It’s okay,” she decided to say, shaking her head before continuing, “It doesn’t matter if this sack-o-bones is right for me or not, it doesn’t look like I have much choice.”

“Appearances are not always as they seem, miss.” The bow-tied man shifted his glance, Janie’s own glance following, toward a black door built into the wall of accessories, half obscured by a selection of wigs. “Let’s go see what’s left in the back.” He started toward the door and Janie followed.

“After you,” suggested the bow-tied man as he unlocked the black door, pulling it open with a loud creak.

Janie crossed hopefully into the back room as the bow-tied man flicked a light switch and the room flickered to life. Disappointed, she only found a dusty store room with several stacks of boxes and a single rack of costumes.

“There’s not much, but feel free to browse,” offered the bow-tied man. “Most of these were returned and haven’t been restocked.”

He didn’t sound very optimistic, and her hopes had already fled in terror at the sight of the storeroom. Half-heartedly, she began to rummage. Most of the returned costumes were designed for men, not girls like Janie, and were nowhere near Janie’s size. After a few moment’s sorting through the rack to see what might fit, Janie decided she would much rather be a skeleton than a werewolf or mummy, and considered her fate decided.

“I don’t think any of these are right for me either, don’t you have anything else?” Janie remarked as she turned to look for the bow-tied man, only to find him seemingly missing.

“Hello?” she asked, and received no reply.

Scanning the room, Janie looked for the black door and was surprised to find it closed. *It creaked when he opened it, she thought, I would have heard it close.*

Feeling suddenly claustrophobic, Janie rushed to the black door: Locked.

She felt her chest tighten with anxiety and pounded on the door with all her might, “Where did you go?! Let me the hell out of here!”

She persisted for several minutes, but no one responded; neither the bow-tied man nor any of the customers were coming. So, Janie turned to explore the rest of the room, hoping to find another means of escape. She examined all four walls, scrutinizing them for exits; she even checked the ceiling and floor. Nothing; only the one black door.

There was no way out.

Beginning to panic fully, Janie began pushing over stacks of boxes one-by-one, hoping in vain for some secret exit to reveal itself.

That was when she found *it*.

It wasn’t the exit she was hoping for, but the effect it had on her was so dazzling that she forgot her predicament entirely. Pushing aside a stack of boxes had revealed a single costume; the most beautiful ball gown Janie had ever seen, draped over a solitary mannequin. It reminded her of the sort princesses wore in all of the movies and had all of the same accessories, including the crown. However, this ball gown was somehow better than the ones in the movies; somehow more captivating. Janie had a strange feeling, as if she had seen it before... but no... that wasn’t it... it was... her’s. It was her ball gown; it was made for her. It belonged to her. It was perfect. It couldn’t be any other way. Hastily, she peeled the gown off the mannequin and slipped it over her head.

Perfect fit.

Slipping into the costume felt so right. It was like wearing her own skin for the first time. Everything about it was perfect, and by

wearing it, she too was made perfect. Quickly, she gathered up the gown's accessories and donned them as well.

Suddenly, Janie noticed a mirror in the center of the stock room that she didn't remember being there before. Excitedly, she hurried over to it to look upon herself in all her glory.

Janie was transformed by the gown's perfection, and experienced for the first time, a true crystalline image of herself. All of her speculation melted as she looked into the mirror. The gown had brought everything into place; all of Janie's amorphous features were brought into perfect focus. For the first time in her life, a category that wasn't simply "female" or "Janie" fit her.

Princess.

Janie was a princess.

She smiled at herself in the mirror as the store room went suddenly dark. Stretching out her arms, she felt for where the mirror ought to be, but felt only empty air. Stepping forward, she felt a rush of sensation that she had only felt before while falling and then- nothing.

Part II:

The princess awoke from her slumber at the edge of a wood. It was dark, apart from a nearby lantern. She wasn't sure how she had gotten there, or how long she had slept, but she felt well-rested and perfectly at ease. Brushing some loose grass from her gown, the princess noticed a light in the distance. Picking up the lantern, she began moving toward it. As she approached the distant light, a large house revealed itself as the source. The light of its interior flooded through its many windows and lit the entire countryside. The princess paused to consider the house for a moment, then continued on.

As she neared the house, she noticed that there were other figures approaching it from another angle. They were only a myriad of shapes to begin with, but as she approached, the figures took form. There were skeletons and ghosts, witches and vampires, goblins and faeries, angels and demons, animals and humans, and more, all moving together, in one great

collective, toward the interior of the house. The princess was puzzled by this eclectic gathering, but she was not deterred. She did not feel out of place whatsoever. In fact, she felt as though she was right where she belonged, among the grotesques.

The princess was now close enough to the light that she no longer needed the lantern to see, and left it behind to approach the entrance of the house. As she approached the wide stairway leading up to the entrance, the company of figures that had been moving toward the entrance themselves stopped, turned, and stared at her as she ascended. The princess continued her approach, and the figures parted the way, respectfully moving to either side and bowing their heads as she passed. Smiling and waving to them, she made her way through the entrance.

The inside of the house was warm and inviting, with a whole swarm of grotesques like the ones outside. Each was unique, yet they all blended together so well on the dance floor that the princess couldn't tell where one ended and the next began; a reverie of opposites. Among all of the grotesque diversity, only one truly stood out to the princess. It was the prince.

The prince rose from his throne and raised a fist, signaling the music, as well as the revel, to stop. All focus turned to the princess as the prince moved gracefully across the room to her and bowed his head, as the rest of the figures followed, bowing their heads in unison. "My lady," he said as he extended his hand, offering it to the princess, "Join me for a dance."

The princess smiled, took the prince's hand, and was led to the dance floor. The music began to play once again, and the room's occupants began to move and blend once again in chaotic harmony. The prince and princess blended together like the rest, but the others courteously kept their distance. Their movements became the model for the rest of the grotesques; every motion was copied by them all. All was as it was meant to be.

Time itself seemed to blend with them; seconds blended into minutes, minutes blended into hours, hours may have even blended into



days, none of the grotesques could be sure. Eventually, it all came to an end. The music quieted, and one by one, the grotesques left the floor until there was no one left but the prince and princess. The prince took the princess by the hand and led her upstairs. Together, they ascended the stairs; together, they turned down the hall; together, they approached the black door.

“After you,” suggested the prince as he unlocked the black door, pulling it open with a loud creak.

The princess crossed the threshold. Inside was a candle-lit wonderland made for them to share. The princess felt the prince’s hand touch her shoulder. She turned to him and smiled. He was holding two drinks, and offered her the second. He took a sip; she followed.

“I trust it is to your liking.”

It was.

She took another sip.

And another.

And another.

Then one last gulp.

“My,” began the prince, sipping of his own drink as he watched, “Someone was thirsty.”

“Yes, but much better now.”

The prince grinned and took her glass, placing it on a shelf next to his own, then returning to the princess. She looked up at him expectantly as he raised a hand to gently caress her cheek. Leaning together slowly, the pair embraced, and kissed.

*This is the way the fairy tales end*, thought the princess, remembering all of the tales that came before her own. The prince and princess’ embrace is a frozen moment in time that stretches on for eternity, never changing. *Eternal bliss* Their image is a model of being that the rest of the grotesque kingdom can only hope to imitate, but never be. *For us to share* There is power in their union; through it, they will transcend prince and princess to become king and queen. *My King!* Their rule, like their union, will be perfect. *Let me be your Queen.*



But this isn't a fairy tale.

The kiss ended, and the princess opened her eyes to find not her prince, but a peculiar man in a bow tie. Grinning, he stepped back into the shadows and disappeared. Bewildered, the princess called out for the prince, but received no response. Suddenly, the princess began to feel a bizarre heat against her flesh. Clutching at her torso, she felt the heat creeping slowly but surely up her body. As the heat crept, a mysterious mirror emerged from the shadows in front of the princess.

The heat began to intensify and burn as the princess looked upon herself. *No! Not my gown!* Her ball gown was glowing with a fiery light. *Burning! My gown mustn't burn!* She couldn't stand it. Clawing at the gown, she ripped it up and over her head, but found no fire underneath. In fact, there seemed to be no 'underneath' at all; the princess saw herself in the mirror, still standing there in her gown, just like before, just like she was meant to be. The burning sensation returned, and again the princess tried to remove her gown, and again it remained with her. Again, and again, and again she tried to escape her burning garments, but the gown remained.

The burning sensation transformed into a pain that swallowed the princess whole. *My prince.* The sensation was no longer coming from outside herself, but inside, permeating her entire being. *I'm scared.* She could not move, her limbs were no longer in her control. *Where have you gone?* All she could do was watch as her image flooded the mirror with fiery light, then burst into a blinding white. *Save me*

Then the pain was gone, but so was the princess.

In her place stood a mannequin in a beautiful ball gown; a perfect model of a princess. The man in the bow tie flicked a light switch, and the store room came to life. He approached the mannequin and caressed its fiberglass cheek, leaning in to whisper, "You make a lovely princess, miss; it would be a shame to lose such a perfect model."

He gathered up the mannequin and placed it alongside another that was fully arraigned in a prince's garments. "Just like every horror

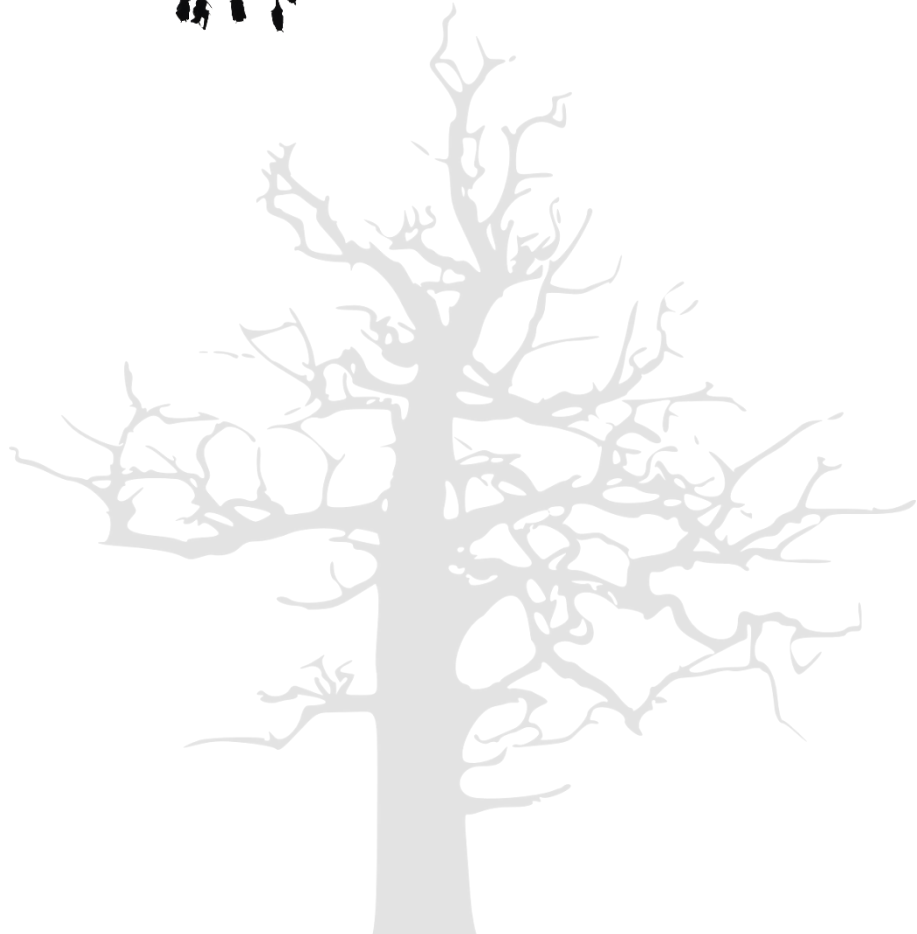
tale should end,” said the man in the bow tie with a laugh as he repositioned the two mannequins into an embrace. Satisfied with his work, he dusted off his hands and whistled a tune as he left the prince and princess to their embrace and switched off the light on his way out of the room.

“I do so love Halloween.”

And so, the princess remained together with her prince, never moving, never changing. *My prince* She never left his side; she never wanted to. *We're united* The girl once known as Janie might have objected to this state. *Be at my side* But not her, not this Janie; she had finally filled her role. *Forever*.

She was a princess and had found her prince.

What else did she need to live happily ever after?



# Biographies

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## **Zechariah Rarey**

Zechariah Rarey holds a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Indiana University Purdue University Columbus. He has dual licensure in teaching English as a New Language and Middle School English Language Arts. He was a contributing member on the graphic design teams of both the English and Feminism Clubs at IUPUC. Zechariah hopes to utilize his creativity and understanding of feminist issues to mold the minds of young students in a manner that promotes social justice and activism.

## **Lori Haggard**

English Major

“I sometimes stop to push the IUPUC globe just because—in those 5 seconds—I was able to move the world.”

## **Jestin Kimmet**

“Jestin Kimmet is majoring in general studies with a minor in Anthropology, and Creative Writing.”

## **Bailey Burnett**

Bailey Burnett is a sophomore at IUPUC with a major in Creative Writing and minors in Women's Studies and Literature. She plans on working as an English teacher and becoming a published author.

## **Shannon Carmon**

Shannon Carman is a late bloomer with varied interests. Starting school in 1990 but waylaid due to various reasons, 2014 finally finds him in his junior year here at IUPUC. He is an English major into creative writing. Some day when he grows up he would like to make a living at writing and teaching others to follow their dreams and talents.

## **Rainan Hash**

Rainan is an English Literature major at IUPUC. When not working as a writing tutor and teacher's assistant, she spends her free time writing sci-fi adventure and fantasy, reading trashy pulp science fiction novels, browsing secondhand shops for Japanese ceramics, spending far too much time on Pinterest and baking entirely too many cookies. Her heroes are Stephen Hawking, The Doctor and Douglas Adams and she lives by the large, friendly letters on the back of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: "Don't Panic!"

## **Brittany Talissa King**

Brittany Talissa King is a senior at IUPUC. She is majoring in English with a Literature minor. She was 2014's recipient of the "Outstanding Student in English Award" and also was 2014's winner of the "Creative Writing Contest". She received a nomination for "Skidmore's Writer's Workshop" in New York by IUPUC'S English Department Head, Katherine Wills Ph.D. Brittany will be graduating this year and will be furthering her education in English-Creative Writing.

## **Celina Mills**

Celina Mills is in her first semester of college and likes to spend her time, when she isn't at work or studying, writing horror novels and poetry. She hopes to one day get published.

## **Jake Jeffries**

Jake Jeffries has been an avid reader all of his life. His mother began teaching him how to read at age three with Dr. Seuss and Mercy Mayer books. At age six he discovered Goosebumps and Animorphs. After that he continued with The Lord of the Rings, The Divine Comedy, The Odyssey, and The Dresden Files among many others.

## **Kimberley Gaddis**

Kimberley Gaddis holds a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Indiana University Purdue—University Columbus. She has dual licensure in teaching Elementary Education and Special Education. Kimber is a member of Kappa Delta Pi, an International Honor Society in Education, and consistently made the Dean's List during her time at IUPUC. She is proud of her involvement in Feminism Club at IUPUC, and as the Executive Creative and Format Designer for *Talking Leaves*, Volume 17.

## **Aaron Kline**

Aaron Kline is a freshman majoring in Biomedical Engineering.”

## **Alicca Rice**

Alicca Rice is a sophomore majoring in Creative Writing. She plans to become an editor for science fiction and fantasy novels.

## **Bailey Moss**

English Literature Major, Women's Studies Minor

Bailey Moss is a graduating senior at IUPUC. She is an accomplished student leader, earning multiple awards as an undergraduate. She is most proud of her work as Feminism Club founder and president, and as Managing Editor for *Talking Leaves*, Volume 17.







