

sps 7·8

The literary magazine of the 7th and 8th grades
Somerville, Massachusetts
presents

Healey Memoirs 2020

Out the Door

Katarina Dvornik

Ouija Board

Jenny Rodriguez

Bootleg Romeo and Juliet

Luna Dos Santos

First Day

Catarina De Souza

Niagara Falls

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Jozee Ray

My First Wedding

Tanika Caradine

Moses's Toses Smell Like a Roses

Lily Thompson

Yes, and...

Ruthanna Kern

Spring/summer 2020

Healey Memoirs

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Teachers and advisers:

Chris Mitchell, English language arts, Arthur D. Healey Elementary School
Roy Gardner, English language arts, East Somerville Community School
Emma Daniels, English language arts, Arthur D. Healey Elementary School
Julie Hughes, English language arts, East Somerville Community School
Emily Alcott, art, East Somerville Community School
Alan Ball, publisher, Happening Publications

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Out the Door

Katarina Dvornik

As soon as I saw it, I was sure something was up. For a while now, I had been feeling like things in my house were seeming out of place, like the rumblings of thunder that rattle through your bones right before an earthshattering storm. I had seen the cryptic emails and loose collars around our house, and every day, I waited for the thickening suspense to burst out like a water balloon, revealing some life-changing surprise, but the day seemed to never come.

On this day, though, hanging in the crisp autumn air was the feeling of discovery, and I excitedly approached the gargantuan plastic container that had appeared this September morning in my living room.

As I walked towards the object, I heard a rustle of movement. Perplexed, I crossed to the other side of the box. And there, staring at me with brown unreadable eyes, was a fluffy-looking, perky poodle, its dustpan tail wagging.

His coat was just a little shaggy, full of corkscrew curls which were a creamy white color, tinted darker near his metal collar. His pooffy afro and ears formed a helmet of fluff around his long snout, ending in a glistening brown nose that perked up as I drew closer. His eyes were a deep, soft, brown color that seemed to penetrate deep below the surface. I gasped, and sniffed in a faint orange aroma.

“Mom!” I hollered, bounding up the stairs to my parents’ room. “Mom, did we get a dog?” I was shocked. Ever since second grade, I

had been begging my parents for a pet, from an Angora rabbit to a miniscule snail to a bearded dragon. They had refused me every single time. I mean, to tell you the truth, I grimaced at the fact that after all my years of hard work and research, of persuasive essays and compelling oratories, the one time I *wasn't* asking for a pet was when they finally gave me one. My mom chuckled, taken aback by my energy, and put her hand on my shoulder.

She walked me back downstairs and told me, “Well, today we are just meeting Salem to see what he’s like. There are a lot more people who might want him too, so we have to play with him for a day and see whether he’s the right choice for us.”

Immediately, I knew I had to have this dog. If I messed this up, if we slipped up *at all*, I might never get to have a pet. Plus, Salem seemed pretty cute. My heart skipped a beat as I dreamt about my new first pet.

“Saaaaa-wem!” my brother, Luka, screeched as he threw himself towards the dog’s back.

I sighed, exasperated. “Be gentle, Luka,” I admonished him as he picked himself off the floor and giggled. “You want him to like you when he’s our dog, right?” I tried to silence the creeping thought that was filling up my head: *What if he’s not our dog?* It was a real thought, one that I would have liked to let wash away in the excitement and bliss of this new opportunity. I just couldn’t enjoy what I had with him now without worrying about the premature loss of it. I was torn away from my worried musings as I snapped to attention. Luka was already preparing another attack on poor Salem, and my stomach churned.

“If we don’t get a pet this year, it’s your fault!” I snapped at him, and immediately regretted it. I had let my worries get the best of me. I trudged away, ashamed, to go do my homework. We were all responsible for this new addition to our family, and Luka, at five years old, was too young to be completely perfect at it. And I, the responsible ten-year-old, just had to work at it until my family had found the right balance that let us be the most accountable dog owners for Salem.

“Okay, kids,” my mom held each of our shoulders. “I have to head over to Market Basket for a few, and I can’t leave Salem on his

own for his first day with us. Can I count on you to be responsible with him while I'm out?"

I surged with joy. This was my chance to prove we were the paragons of dog ownership. I was going to make sure this dog would be mine. I just had to get him through the day unharmed.

"Sounds great, Mom. We won't let you down," I assured her.

She jogged our memories on what to do if the house caught on fire or a burglar broke in, gave me my third lecture of the week on how to do laundry, and then she slung her reusable plastic bag over her left shoulder and called out to us, "Bye, kids!"

As soon as the latch clicked, my brother glanced longingly at the aging laptop that played all of our family games, ran my mom's email account, and, most importantly: played videos.

Our family's Netflix account was largely sustained by my brother's voracious appetite for a new series to live for. From *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* to *The Magic School Bus*, he could latch on to any content and play and replay it for hours. I didn't know how he never got tired of it -- it was always the same few videos preaching the same cheesy morals for what seemed like eternity. Our parents didn't always feel the same way, though. 'Ask permission first' was the strictly enforced backbone of our video morals. And since my mom had just gone out of the house, he wouldn't be able to fuel his passion until one of our parents came home.

"Wa-- wait up!" My brother yelped as he galloped down the stairs. He stumbled a little on a step, but quickly righted himself and threw himself towards the front door. His fingers scrabbled for the knob, then he flung the door open and dashed out still yelling as the afternoon light shone through the open doorway.

I followed my brother outside in my socks to regard the scene that played out before me. My mom rolled down the window of the car and squinted at my brother. "What is it, Luka?"

Luka was beginning to sputter out an explanation when my mother's eyes opened very wide. When she assumed that face, I felt my blood run icily through my veins, like a frozen knife splintering my skin. She explained something in a distraught mumble, but I couldn't quite hear her. Every sound I was hearing was sloshing together into a daunting soup of emotion. I shook my head. She was saying it again, "Salem. Close the door for Salem."

Nobody in my family knew what was about to happen. I ran towards the door, slipping in my socks as I tried to stand in front of Salem, but he was bounding forward with such force that I had to grab at him again before he finally slipped past me. And then he was out, down the stairs and past the sidewalk, barking and panting in glee down the long road.

I stood with my mouth hanging open, my eyes burning and beginning to leak out horrified disappointment. I had let everyone down. We weren't the perfect owners for a new dog if we had a daughter who let the dog run free, especially on our first day with him, when we were supposed to be on our best behavior. If this was my best, we weren't getting Salem. And it was my fault that I couldn't act fast enough to save this dog. I was so selfish, trying to control everyone's actions to my own strict standards, blind to the fact that I was the one who needed to change the most.

I ran towards the car and thundered at my mother, "He escaped! Salem! He escaped!" My mom was already bursting out of the car like a flash. She sprinted down the street towards the dog, who was careening like an out-of-control Frisbee in between cars, up onto people's porches, and all around the sidewalk. Some neighbors had come out onto their porches to watch the fiasco unfold, and one shouted to my mother and I, "Surround him! Come over here!"

I followed my mother as we ran towards the porch Salem was barreling towards. He was panting with a puppy-like glee, almost as if he thought it was a mere game. My mom and the neighbors formed a triangle around the dog, and my mom spoke in a stern voice. "Salem," she solicited, "Salem, come over here." Haltingly, the dubious Salem stepped towards my mom. The mistake was so close to being seamlessly paved over.

I tensed my muscles and squeezed my eyes so Salem's ferociously wagging tail was just a dim blur. I tried to focus on my breathing, grounding myself to stop the nonsensical peculiarity that was clouding up my life. Finally, after a distrustful glare from Salem, the dog finally let up and walked into my mother's leading arms.

I was sure that Salem was never going to be our poodle. We weren't responsible, prepared, stable enough, and I had proved it. I was the canary in our coal mine, and I was sure that there would be more, worse challenges in our life with a new dog, some that would

reform our lives forever. But, funnily enough, we didn't give up. As my mom told me later that week, she had known he would be our dog as soon as he walked in the door. It was our love for the dog that pushed us to become his owners. We were stubborn enough to get through the challenges, be it trying to run away, depleting our bread storage, eating a science fair project, or just hovering near us when we were eating mac n' cheese, and we still are to this day. Our relationship with this poodle is constantly evolving, and I am so grateful that he came into our lives abruptly and helped us learn to be a better, kinder family. On that day, my family fell in love with Salem. We chose a commitment to sticking with him through all the trials and tribulations of his life. And no matter what antics he is up to next time, I won't lose him again.

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Ouija Board

Jenny Rodriguez

The sun was rising and I didn't even sleep yet. I was going to fall back asleep when my sister sprung up from her bed and ran to the bathroom. In the distance I heard crying, so I ran after her. She was crying on the floor, trying to catch her breath.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

I thought the ouija board was just my mind playing tricks on me. I thought the shadows that I saw were my eyes playing tricks on me, the noises that I hear at night are just my neighbors.

My mother was right when she said "Esa niña sola estupideces va aquaverse". She was right. I do a lot of stupid things, but this must have been the most dumbest thing I had ever done. It all started when I was in seventh grade. It was the second last day of school. Suzana and I were hanging out in the Healey back lot. I brought my Ouija board. I also had downloaded a ghost radar app although I knew it was fake, but I still believed we were going to see where the spirits were located. The app will show us where the spirit is at the time. It will show different color dots to warn us what kind of spirits we are contacting. We began playing, Suzana and I were quiet for a minute, we started to move the handpiece in a circle. The handpiece started to move! *Help me!*, it spelled out. At first we didn't

know how to respond, I didn't want to respond. My heart was racing and the only sound I could hear was the beating of my heart. But I also felt some excitement.

"How can we help you?" I responded.

The handpiece started to move again, *Let me possess your body*. My heart was beating faster, I wanted to move to another spot.

"Do you want to move someplace else, I don't feel like staying here, how about near the basketball court?" I asked.

"Yeah sure, I'm getting a vibe, didn't you hear that weird noise?" Suzana responded.

I froze. For a second I didn't know what she was talking about, but then I realized that there was a noise coming from the trees. I thought it was a bird, but birds don't chirp like that. It was like something was growling at us. We decided to move near the basketball court. We started to play again. This time something felt off. I felt as if someone was trying to suffocate me, my lungs felt as if they were on fire.

"Suzana! I can't breathe" I yelled.

"What do you mean? is it your asthma?" She asked.

"No, this is something else. This pain is way worse," I replied.

I began to feel cold all around. My eyes were starting to water. I felt sad and angry for some reason. Suzana and I decided to stop playing and we would continue playing another time. As we were leaving I noticed a group of birds were surrounding us in a circle. Their chirping grew louder and louder. It seemed like we were trapped. I walked towards them and they started to move, but immediately came back to their position. It only took one bird to start flying and Suzana and I started running.

"What the hell was that!?" Suzana shouted.

"I have no idea, hold on, let me catch my breath, my asthma remember?" I replied.

I was walking toward Suzana when I suddenly stopped. I didn't know why I stopped, but I turned my head and looked straight at a rock for no reason at all. I waited and heard a loud bang, then a faint whisper. Suzana and I started to run again.

"Jessie! Jessie!" I shouted my sister's name even though I knew damn well she couldn't hear me.

It was the next day, the last day of school, and I was excited as anyone would be. I made plans to hang out with Suzana so we could continue playing the Ouija board. I told my sister about my experience she wanted nothing to do with it.

“You better not bring demons into this house!”

“I think I already did,” I replied.

“You are so stupid! if Ma finds out about this, she’ll send you to church camp to cleanse you,” argued.

“Relax, I have it all under control,” I lied.

The next day Suzana and I were hanging out in the projects’ basketball court. We put both of our index fingers on the handpiece and moved it around in circles. This time the handpiece was fast! It was going all over the board, Suzana and I couldn’t control it. Eventually it slowed down, and we could make out what it was spelling.

Stop playing, run!

Whoever we were contacting, they were trying to warn us. We continued to play for another 20 minutes. The ghost radar app kept showing a lot of yellow dots around us. When we were done playing I felt pressure on my chest. I felt heavy. That night I felt as if someone were watching me. I tried to ignore the feeling, but I couldn’t. The sun was rising and I didn’t even sleep yet. I was going to fall back asleep when my sister sprung up in bed and ran to the bathroom. In the distance I heard crying, so I ran after her. There she was crying on the floor and trying to catch her breath.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t know, I just felt something weird and started crying” She replied.

I didn’t tell her that I played the Ouija board the day before because I knew she would get mad.

She went to the living room and sat down on the couch. I followed. She explained that she was dreaming that she was on the roof with this girl. The girl had pushed her off the roof. When she woke up, she thought she heard the girl laughing at her. My sister and I witnessed a lot of weird experiences. We always heard footsteps in our room even though there was no one there except us. When we would fall asleep we would feel as if someone were watching us. I would see shadows coming in and out of rooms. I’d been having

more trouble breathing, not because of my asthma. I knew that for sure. It was like something or someone was putting pressure on my chest. I texted Suzana because I had had enough. I was tired from not sleeping, thinking something bad would happen if I closed my eyes.

“Suzana wanna hang out tomorrow? I want to play the Ouija board again”

Bloop.

“Yeah sure, I’ve been having some weird experiences”

“Like what?” I asked.

“I’ve been seeing shadows and feeling pressure on my chest,” she responded.

“Me too! I want to know why, I want to know more.”

The next day I got ready to hang out with Suzana. Her building was not far away from mine, so I got there quickly. Suzana was still getting ready, so I waited for her outside. Minutes passed and I got tired of waiting so I called her.

“Suzana, what’s taking so long?” I asked impatiently.

“I’m sorry. I was doing my hair, putting my shoes on right now,” she replied.

“How long does it take for you to put shoes on?”

“....”

“Suzana?”

“... my door just closed by itself,” she said.

“Was it someone else?”

“NO! it literally closed by itself!” she yelled.

“It was probably the wind,” I replied.

“... probably”

I hung up. Suzana walked out of the building with two trash bags.

“My mom told me to throw trash away,” she said.

“Oh, ok. Should we begin in the projects or at the Healey?” I asked.

“Let’s go to the schoolyard,” she replied.

We walked to the Healey schoolyard and tried to find shade to sit down. We began to play. It happened again, birds started to surround us and we heard the low growling.

You’re back, help me!

Suzana and I tried to respond politely because we didn't want to anger the spirit. I told the spirit that I didn't feel comfortable lending my body in order to help the spirit. The spirit was mad. It was clear whatever the spirit wanted to do was important. Birds started to circle around us and the growling grew louder. I tried to say goodbye, but it wouldn't let me. Something else was trying to take control of the hand piece. I freaked.

"What are you doing, say goodbye!" Suzana yelled.

"I can't! it won't let me!" I shouted.

"What?"

"It won't let me say goodbye! I'm just going to leave it here," I responded.

Suzana and I ran back to the projects. I was out of breath, but I kept running. I stopped running once I was near my building.

"I can't believe it happened again!" Suzana said.

"Yeah, I really wanted to ask about the things I've been seeing and hearing," I replied.

"Yeah, me too. Maybe next time. I'm going home now... Bye, Jenny."

"Bye."

I walked home. I really wanted to know more. I wanted to know if the shadow figures in my house were dangerous or if I should just leave them alone. I started searching shadow figures online. Hours passed and I found nothing useful. The only thing I found out was the meaning of yellow dots we were seeing from the ghost radar. Yellow dots meant caution. It meant something bad or tragic was going to happen.

I was too tired to be shocked. I checked the time. It was 11:30. I went to sleep. That night I had a lucid dream. My dream started with Suzana and I running from something, I heard a scream and everything around me lit on fire. Suzana was gone, I was still running. This time I figured out where I was.

I was in the projects, but it wasn't the projects. There were black figures flying around my building and Suzana's and fire was following the figures. I walked toward the basketball court where I saw a little girl standing.

"... Um, hi?"

"Hi! You wanna play with me?" she asked.

“I’m sorry I’m trying to find my way home,” I responded.

“Haha, you can’t get home silly, you’re in a different dimension,” she replied.

“What?”

For some reason I believed the little girl. It took a moment for me to process what she had said.

“Dad! We are in a different dimension!” the little girl yelled to a black figure behind me.

“Don’t be silly, please ignore this one, she says a lot of crazy things,” the black figure said.

I stayed silent. I had seen this black figure before. The presence felt familiar, and then it hit me. When I was little I was going to the kitchen for a midnight snack. I came across what seemed like a black shadow with a top hat. He waved at me and smiled. His eyes were red, and when I got close to him, I felt a negative vibe. Being a little girl I screamed and ran to my mother’s room. My mother checked the kitchen and told me I was imagining things. She got mad at me for waking her up. I knew I had seen someone that night but no one believed me.

“.. Um, I have to go home,” I replied to the black figure.

I started walking quickly to my building. I stopped and remembered what the little girl said. I am in a different dimension. I started yelling at myself.

“Jenny, wake up, it’s all a bad dream. Wake up!”

The black figure that had been flying around my building was now charging at me.

“Leave me alone!” I yelled.

I woke up mumbling things to myself. I grabbed my phone and texted Suzana.

“I just had the craziest dream, but somehow I knew it was dream.”

Bloop!

“Really, so you had a lucid dream?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was weird. You were there at first. We were running from something.”

“Omg really? Jenny, I had a dream last night and we were running. I heard a shriek and everything lit on fire! Then I woke up,” she replied.

“Are you being for real?” I asked.

“Jenny we had the same dream!” Suzana replied.

“I’ll text you later.”

I couldn’t process anything. I didn’t think it was possible for two people to have the same dream in the same night. Ever since that day I haven’t had any more weird experiences. It’s like it all went away. I felt lighter as the days passed. I stopped hearing the noises. After two weeks I played the Ouija board again. I wasn’t stupid when I played the Ouija board this time. I played with protection. I had my mother’s bible by my side, hoping the whole time I played she wouldn’t notice that it was gone.

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Bootleg Romeo and Juliet

Luna Dos Santos

Ding! My phone buzzed with spams of texts.

“R u almost home?!”

“Eddie wants to see you!”

“Hurry.”

“Come to the green park.”

My friends suddenly rushed me to come meet them. The obnoxious yet exciting sound of my LG rang. It rang throughout my whole ride back from the airport. Finally, the taxi took its last stop, my apartment. I rushed up the stairs, the smell of old yeast and cigarettes filled the ancient building. I was homesick and excited to get back to my third grade class. My friends continued spamming my phone, and I couldn’t wait. I rushed outside, heading toward the green park. All my friends, and I mean all, were outside of Tiffany’s house, Eddie’s aunt. Eddie came up to me and hugged me as if he hadn’t seen me in what it felt like years. His dramatic yet cute hug overwhelmed me and I awkwardly backed away. Eddie was my friend, but in his eyes, I was his wife. Ever since kindergarten, he’d always been obsessed with me. I saw Layla and Andrea, went up to them, and embraced them with a huge hug. Florida had separated me from my best friends.

“Luna, can we talk?” Eddie seemed so confident.

Anxiety!

Anxiety!

Anxiety!

My thoughts bombarded me with different scenarios and different assumptions as to how this could all play out. Surprisingly, I could never and wouldn't ever think it'd turn out the way it did. The misfortune and awkwardness lingered on with the rest of my day.

"Yeah, sure." I tried to sound calm and natural. I thought we'd speak privately or at least not in public. Most of the grade surrounded us. They waited patiently, as if they knew exactly what he was about to say. I was scared, and a sudden cold chill ran down my spine flowing through my toes. I felt my body glue itself to the floor. I was frozen. All of their breathing seemed so loud, the tension in the air was heavy. The trees came alive, they shook angrily and anxiously. They knew exactly how I was feeling.

After a while of me screaming to myself in my head, he finally spoke. "Do you want to be my girlfriend?" Eddie's chest was cocked and his nose was up to the sky.

"Uh...." My uncertainty festered.

"Eddie I'm not sure, Uh.."

Shoot.

Crap.

Omg, omg, omg!

I was so confused and unsure. Everyone stared me down. They expected and needed me to say yes. I didn't want to embarrass him but, he already knew I didn't like him. The determination was cute but also very, very creepy. I ran to the other side of the street and told my friends to join me.

I had to rant, "Listen guys, I don't like him."

Layla was the first one to find a solution, "Then just tell him."

Uncertainty flowed through my voice. "It's not that easy, he's my friend and I don't want to hurt him."

"But, he's so sweet and he loves you!" Tanika exclaimed.

"Omg guys, this is like a telenovela," Andrea randomly blurted. On the other side of the street, the boys were having their own huddle. Talking down every play and what action to take next. Eddie's face was so red, I could tell that his confidence started to fade. Layla's brother came up to me and swooped me over his shoulders. He literally *swooped* me off my feet.

What the hell was happening?!

Omg am I being kidnapped?!

I'm. Going. To. Die!

Yes, my thoughts were extremely dramatic but, I watched a lot of Law & Order. I was very paranoid, and my family always gave me the talk about being kidnapped.

“Let go of me! Let me go! Stop!” I didn’t stop screaming.

It was so confusing, everyone was either laughing or telling him to stop.

Tears rushed down my face as I prepared myself to never eat my grandmother’s food again. I was going to be held in a cage and fed wheat bread, not even the good bread, *Wheat* bread. Andrea was right, this was a telenovela. I kicked and fought Toto. I didn’t know his intentions. He brought me to the side of the street where *all* the boys were.

Eddie continued to ask, “Luna please be my girlfriend.”

Angrily I yelled, “No! leave me alone, I don’t like you. My dad said I can’t date till I am eighteen.”

I ran. I tried to run as fast as I could to my house. So many people were chasing me. I couldn’t breathe and fear took over my body.

“Can you freakin’ leave us alone? I will fight you!” Tanika’s man-voice rose.

“Pendejos, leave her alone,” Andrea demanded.

“Luna, he said he wouldn’t leave you alone until you said yes,” Layla said.

“Guys help me, I don’t know what to do!” I said.

“Just go home, he can’t go to your house, your dad will kill him.” Andrea suggested. The boys were catching up to us. I *had* to do something. I ran to my apartment and hurried up the stairs. Keys in my hand. I was in fight-or-flight mode. I ran. I finally got home and went to my mom.

“Ma! Eddie is outside with so many people and he won’t leave me alone.”

“Huh?” my mom asked with a puzzled look.

“Eddie Miller is outside our house and is saying he loves me,” I said.

“Um...Ok..I’ll speak with him,” my mom said with a puzzled look.

My stepdad was sleeping on the couch and the window was right in front. The last thing I wanted was to involve my step dad.

“Eddie plea--” before my mom could finish her sentence, Eddie interrupted her.

I lived on the third floor, and he was yelling. The whole building heard this embarrassing and regretful conversation. “Please Luna, I love you!”

I wasn’t even the one at the window, my mother was. He mistook me for my mom. He told my mother he was in love with her!

“Um excuse me this is Luna’s mom. Stop talking to my daughter,” my mom said.

“Oh, I thought you were Luna. Can I please go up and talk to her? I love her and I want to be her boyfriend,” Eddie said.

“You guys are in third grade, you should be learning how to read, not finding boyfriends and girlfriends,” my mom said.

Everyone was still standing around Eddie, and then the worst part happened. He started to sing. His voice cracked as he tried to hit every note. Listening to a goat would seem more romantic. He stared up at me and claimed his love for me. He was so convinced we’d be together forever. I was disturbed. He started to cry. He started to *ugly* cry. He was so ugly. His face turned red. He looked like a tomato. I was embarrassed to have to be forced into that position. He looked so ugly, crying was not a look for him. I was so uncomfortable and weirded out, that I just decided to have a private conversation with him. His confidence was impressive. He was so cocky. I let him enter my building and spoke with him. He cried, and once again asked. “Luna, I love you please date me, I promise I will be a good boyfriend.”

“Eddie, my step dad is upstairs and he will kill you. No. I don’t like you and I just came back from Florida, please leave me alone. This has been very sweet and you have been very kind but, I don’t like you. This is crazy. You look crazy. You look so ugly right now. Stop.”

Eddie’s face turned red, and his tears were slowly becoming convincing. I didn’t give in though; he was being crazy. I felt really bad but he put me in such a weird position. Loud angry words I would

not repeat, that no one should ever hear from an elementary school kid, exploded from his mouth.

“YOU’RE A B****! F*** YOU!” Eddie yelled.

Snot started to run down his face, it was disgusting.

“Oh wow um..” I said awkwardly. I honestly didn’t know what to do. He ran out my building with his friends and continued yelling at my window. My dad started to wake up and became curious.

“Luna, what is that outside.” My stepdad said.

“Uh...Nothing, nothing at all! Go back to sleep!” I said anxiously.

I did not want my dad getting involved! My dad went to the window and looked at the group of kids standing in front of our building. Confused and uncertain he stared me down. He gave the “*what happened*” look and I couldn’t resist answering. It was so intense I just had to. Finally I let it all out. “**EDDIE IS IN LOVE WITH ME AND HE WON’T LEAVE ME ALONE AND HE IS TRYING TO ROMEO AND JULIET ME AND I DON’T KNOW HOW TO STOP HIM!**”

My chest felt a sudden weight become lifted.

“I’ll take care of this,” my stepdad said.

“No! It’s okay,” I said anxiously.

“I said I *got* this.” My stepdad didn’t like repeating himself. My dad went outside and from the window I saw an army of ants running as fast as they could. They were all afraid of my tall and fierce dad. Never did Eddie sing to me or stalk me again. The story did not end with a tragic death, but me having to be forced to go to school with my stalker and having to live with this cringey memory until death gives me mercy from it.

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First Day

Catarina De Souza

I was sleeping peacefully until my alarm went off and the first thing I thought was *This is it, it’s today! My first day of school in the United States!* It was hard for me to sleep the night before, but I was so excited that I woke up as fast as I could. I looked at the time and I saw that it was 6:30 A.M., and anxiety ran through my body. My

legs were bouncing, and I had goosebumps all over my body. I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth and I looked into the mirror while I brushed my teeth. Weird thoughts started to pop into my head. *What if they don't like me? Am I going to forget how to speak English? Am I going to make new friends?* Every second that passed, my stomach tightened more. When I came back to my room, I chose my outfit, brushed my hair, and prepared myself for the first day of school. I couldn't really choose an outfit because there was a dress code so I had to go with khaki pants (which I don't like) and a plain white T-shirt.

Everything was almost ready for me to go, but then I remembered that I had to eat breakfast. I could feel that my stomach was empty, but I also didn't want to eat. I was too nervous to eat. Every time I feel anxiety or when I'm angry and nervous, I lose my appetite. *Every single time!* My mom always tells me to eat my breakfast, even if I'm not hungry, because she says that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I knew my mom was at work so she wouldn't know if I ate my breakfast or not, so I decided to not eat my breakfast. I knew I would regret that, but anyway I did it.

I looked into the mirror one last time, and I took a deep breath. I told myself, *It is going to be okay, you are going to go there and face your fears!* It was 7:45 A.M., time to go. I got my backpack, jacket, and my phone. I made my way downstairs and then when I opened the door chills were sent throughout my body. I couldn't give up now. I made my way to school, and I knew that every step I made I was getting closer and closer to my school. The chills, the thoughts, and anxiety were all over me, but I could hide it inside me.

I was walking for seven minutes already when I finally could hear the noise of children playing in the playground. Intense thoughts came into my head, again and again. *What if I get lost and no one helps me? What if I don't understand what they say?* I got closer and closer to my school. I tried to forget about my thoughts, but it was hard. I was outside of my school and I saw some other students, but didn't talk to them because they didn't seem to be in the same grade as me. I thought they were fourth-graders or something, and I was a seventh-grader, so they probably wouldn't know how to give me directions to the seventh-grade class. I tried to find a teacher or

someone that worked in the school so they could give me directions, but I couldn't find any. I tried to go inside the school, but the doors were locked. I was so nervous I didn't know what to do. I decided to stay at the playground, because that is where most of the students were. I sat on a bench for a few seconds. I suddenly heard a beeping noise, then I realized that someone was calling me. I opened my backpack and searched for my phone. Finally, when I got my phone, I saw that my mom was calling me. I answered the phone in a rush.

“Hey, Mom,” I whispered.

“Hi Catarina, how are you? Did you get to school safely? Did you eat breakfast?” My mom asked. I knew my mom would ask me if I ate my breakfast, but she would get mad at me if I told the truth. I didn't want to lie to her, so I decided to tell the truth,

“Yes mom I'm fine, and no I did not eat my breakfast,” I confessed.

“Why didn't you eat your breakfast?” my mom replied worriedly.

“I wasn't hungry Mom,” I explained gently.

“You know that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you should've eaten it,” my mom complained angrily.

“I know Mom, I'm sorry,” I apologized.

“Anyways, I know you have school now, but don't do that again, please! Also, I hope you have a great day at school filha,” she exclaimed.

“Thanks, Mom! I gotta go. I will talk to you later,” I told her.

“Okay, see you later, love you,” she said.

“Love you too, bye,” I said, and then I hung up.

Right when I hung up, two girls appeared from nowhere. One girl was tall with brownish curly hair. The other was the same height as me, but she had straight black hair. They started to ask me questions, “Hi, my name is Haissa, and this is Nathalia. What is your name?” the girl with curly hair asked me.

“Hi, my name is Catarina,” I told her with a smile on my face.

“Hi, Catarina! I suppose you are new to the school, are you in seventh grade too?” Nathalia asked me.

“Yes I am. How about you, Nathalia?” I asked her.

“I am new and a seventh-grader too!” Nathalia happily replied.

“Guys I can show you around the school if you want,” Haissa offered to us.

“That would be awesome,” I responded, and Nathalia agreed with me.

I was so happy that I was making friends. The negative thoughts went away for a while. Minutes passed by and Haissa, Nathalia and I didn't stop talking to each other. My anxiety wasn't there anymore. I wasn't nervous about anything. Suddenly the teachers were calling everyone to go inside the school, so we made our way inside school. When we got inside, we didn't know if we were in the same classroom yet, but we were hoping to be together. My new friends were making their way to the hallway, so I followed them. As I was walking into the school, I noticed every detail and things around the school. Some things were different from a school in Brazil but others were not. I could see the hallways crowded with people and everyone trying to find their classrooms. I was standing there and the anxiety and negative thoughts came back to haunt me. I was still, standing there with a confused face, watching my friends get away to find their classrooms until a teacher came up to me and asked me if I knew which class I was going to. Of course I said no. I had no idea where to go. The teacher asked for my name and grade. When I said it, he gave me a look which I understood as, *I know where your classroom is*. As the teacher gave me directions to my classroom, I watched as the hallway got emptier by the second. I got nervous because I didn't want to be the last one to get in class. As I made my way to my classroom, the negative thoughts took over my head, but I fought it. I found my classroom, but I was scared to open the door. I took a deep breath and then, I opened it. I entered the classroom, and I felt eyes on me. Everyone was looking at me. I still was completely nervous and anxious. The teacher looked at me and asked, “Hi, you are new to the school right?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“What's your name?” the teacher asked.

“My name is Catarina,” I told the teacher.

“Welcome to Winter Hill Catarina! My name is Mrs. Scafidi, I hope you enjoy your day,” Mrs. Scafidi said.

“Thank you so much,” I responded and smiled.

The eyes were still on me, but I tried to ignore them. I made my way to the back of the classroom. I was trying to find an available seat, and then I heard a voice calling my name behind me. I turned around, and I saw Haissa, the new friend I had made. I said hi, and told her that I was happy that we were in the same class. She told me the same. I found a seat next to her, and I decided to take it as my seat. A few minutes passed and someone was at the door. When it opened, I saw Nathalia standing there. Haissa and I were both happy to have her in our class so we waved at her and she made her way to the seat next to ours. The teacher started talking about school stuff. It was boring until she introduced herself, and then it was our turn. I was shocked, and my hands were sweating. I couldn't believe I had to go in front of the class and present myself. I wanted to hide below the table and never leave. The teacher asked who wanted to go first, and of course I didn't say anything. Some people raised their hands and that made me relax because I knew that the teacher would pick someone that raised their hand. It meant that while they were presenting themselves, I could think of something to say, but then the teacher called my name. That was it! I felt eyes on me again. It was too much pressure for just a day but somehow I could hide it. No one knew how I was feeling. I got up from my seat, and made my way to the front of the class very quietly and gently. As I turned around to face everyone I got more nervous, but I kept it in.

“Well, Catarina. Tell us more about you. Tell us your favorite subject, your favorite color, your favorite type of music, anything,” the teacher suddenly spoke. With that, she gave me more ideas on what to talk about. In a matter of seconds, I had an idea for what to say, so I started talking.

“Hi guys, I am Catarina. I'm 12 years old and I am from São Paulo, Brazil. I have been here for three months and my life goals are to learn a lot of languages, to improve my English, and to study at Harvard. I also love to sing, and my favorite color is blue,” I told everyone in the class.

Everyone clapped. I couldn't help but smile. As the clapping sounds became quieter my anxiety was going away. As everyone stopped clapping I made my way back to my seat. As I sat on the chair I was relieved. I couldn't feel the sweat in my hands anymore. My legs were not bouncing as it was, and my heart wasn't as fast as it

was. I was calm and happy. For everyone, that didn't seem to be a big deal but for me it was awesome. Everyone got a turn, and every time I couldn't stop thinking about how confident I was and how my English sounded so good. I was proud of myself. I knew I was achieving one of my life goals. I wasn't expecting for my school day to be that awesome. When everyone finished introducing themselves the teacher gave us instructions on how our school day would be. It was almost time for lunch when the teacher stopped talking. I could hear my stomach growling. *My mom was right—I should've eaten this morning.*

"I should've eaten this morning," I whispered to Haissa as she was writing something down.

"You're hungry?" Haissa asked.

"Yeah. It's almost time for lunch though," I said.

"Oh yes. I heard the lunch is going to be pizza today," Haissa whispered.

"Pizza? I love pizza!" I said happily.

"Me too!" Haissa exclaimed.

The bell rang and everyone got up at the same time. Nathalia, Haissa and I quickly made our way to the cafeteria. As we were getting closer I could smell the cheese pizza from the hallway. When we entered the cafeteria I rushed to get the cheese pizza. Haissa, Nathalia and I got our pizzas. After that, we sat on the table for three. The pizza was delicious. For the rest of the day, the more I socialized, the more I got confident. I got more confident and learned new things. I liked to feel proud. It was like a feeling in your stomach but a good feeling not a bad one. I made new friends. I got to know people that were also from Brazil, which was awesome. The school, the people, the way that things were in the United States were different from Brazil. That didn't mean I couldn't fit in though. The time passed so fast, and then suddenly I realized that the school day was coming to an end and that I had to go home. I was more than happy. My first day of school in the United States was a success.

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Niagara Falls

Suzana Amatyia

“This way guys!” yelled our tour guide. The loud roar of the water was too overpowering for us to hear her. “This way quickly now, quickly!” she repeated a bit louder this time. We hustled down the hill to meet up with the rest of the group. We didn’t want to get lost. As we caught up with our group I took a quick look around to examine my surroundings. The foggy mist engulfed us, smelling earthy and fresh.

As we were walking by, we saw the Maid of the Mist. That was the boat that we were going to ride to see Niagara Falls up close. I was excited. I remember I couldn't wait to get up close and personal to the waterfalls. My sister, however, was not. Her hands were trembling and her face grew paler every second.

“If I die, I’m blaming it on all of you guys!” she warned.

“Oh, stop being a baby and get over it!” I complained.

She gave me a glare, which I completely ignored. “I don't want to ride this! You guys can go on without me!” she exclaimed.

“*No!*” I screeched, so loud that everyone in front of us turned around and gave me a look. I know I couldn’t force her but this was a once in a lifetime type of opportunity. The fact that she would let that go bugged me.

“You’re going on,” said my mom sternly. “Don’t let this chance you have go to waste!” She looked at my dad for some support.

“Yeah! That and we already paid for your ticket!” my dad shouted.

“Come on guys, keep up!” said our tour guide. I grasped my sister’s hand and corralled her towards the front, against her own will.

Our tour guide led us to a big dark room with a movie screen. I was a little confused as to why we were in there, because I thought we were heading to the cruise.

“Okay everyone, before we go on the cruise we are going to watch a movie about the Maid of the Mist.”

We sat there for a good thirty minutes. We learned why the Maid of the Mist was known as the Maid of the Mist. My foot was tapping uncontrollably. I started to shift in my seat.

“Mom, is it almost over?” I asked. She shook her head, indicating that it wasn’t. I gazed over at my sister who looked like she was about to faint. I reached over and squeezed her hand.

“Everything is gonna be okay.” She turned her head to look at me and I gave her a reassuring look.

“Thank you,” she replied.

After the movie was over, which felt like a million years long, we went to a local Native American show, where they performed a special ritual and showed us their culture.

We stopped by the gift shop as well. My sister got to get a beautiful dream catcher that I wanted so badly. But my parents didn’t let me get anything. I was filled with rage. My face began to turn red and my smile slowly went away. *That’s so not fair!* I thought.

It felt like the whole world was in slow motion.

That’s when the tour guide suddenly yelled, “This way everyone!” *Yes!* I thought to myself.

We’re finally going on. Our tour guide led us down a hallway to the place where we would be getting our blue ponchos. Just then, there was a loud honking noise. Our group turned our heads and saw the Canadians were waving at us.

They had bright hot pink almost red, looking ponchos and they had wide grins on their faces. They waved at us and we waved back.

The loud slapping of the water against the rocks down below grated my ears. We could barely hear anyone scream.

It was time to ride the Maid of the Mist. Butterflies began to form in my stomach. I started to shake a bit with nervousness. I glanced over at my sister. She looked as if she had just seen a ghost. Her eyes were open wide and she began to bite her nails.

“Hold up please!” shrieked my sister.

“Okay,” I answered. My whole family held hands the whole time as we boarded the boat.

As soon as everyone boarded the boat we took off. The wind was fierce. It sounded like wolves howling. As we got farther away from land, my teeth began to chatter and I got chills up my spine.

My sister was freaking out and screaming the entire time. However, I was having the best time of my life. Then, we started to ap-

proach the biggest waterfall of them all, otherwise known as Horseshoe Falls.

As we kept inching our way closer and closer to the actual water I could see why it was called Horseshoe falls.

The whole waterfall itself was in the shape of a huge horseshoe. We were almost there. I could almost taste the water as if I were drinking it.

Then suddenly, the boat made a swift turn straight into the waterfall. *Swoosh!* Gigantic waves splashed on us.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” I screamed. But I could barely hear myself think. It was so loud. My ears started to ring afterwards. The fresh water had splashed all over my face and drenched the rest of my body.

“Let’s get some pictures,” said my dad. As we stood there taking pictures we got more and more soaked.

My glasses were so wet that I couldn’t even see straight. It was as if we were in a huge rainstorm. At that point, everything was blurry and foggy.

Just then, the boat made a swift turn. This made us all uneasy, since half of us lost our balance and caused my sister who was already freaking out to panic even more. We grabbed each other’s hands tightly and held on till it was over.

“Are we almost done?” my sister managed to squeak.

“Yes,” said my mother. I could see a sense of relief form on my sisters face. But I could also see a little bit of disappointment.

Did she actually enjoy this? “Did you actually enjoy the boat trip?” I asked.

“I did, more than I thought I would,” my sister replied.

As we headed back for land, the sun began to shine and there was a rainbow in the sky just above Horseshoe Falls. It was as if someone painted a picture in the sky. It seemed unreal.

Am I dreaming right now? “Wow!” I screeched in shock. I had only seen those types of rainbows in pictures but never in real life till then.

As we went back to land, I could feel myself getting extremely sad. I didn’t want to leave yet. Once we reached land they asked for our ponchos but I kept mine as a souvenir, so I could always have a part of that trip still with me.

“You finally stopped being a scaredy-cat for once!” I teased my sister. She gave me a look of anger and walked away. I laughed to myself.

I just love to piss her off, I thought. Our hair, on the other hand, was soaked. My shoes were soggy and my clothes were also so drenched.

My teeth were still chattering even though we left the area of the Maid of the Mist to go back to the entrance where the foggy mist was.

“So are you happy you didn’t skip this chance to see Niagara Falls up close?” I questioned my sister.

“Yes, I’m happy, even though I still freaked out,” she replied.

“I told you so!” I said with a grin. Just then our tour guide told us it was time to go back to the bus so we could go to our hotel.

“Ughhhhh,” I groaned. We had a long drive in front of us. I grew sad because that meant we couldn’t see the light show at night. During the night show, they would turn on pretty neon lights on the waterfalls. They would also set off fireworks. Even though we didn’t get to see the light show, it was still a great trip.

It was one of the most fun moments in my lifetime. It was also my favorite memory I have of my family. This taught me to forever cherish the time I get to spend with my family and doing something that I had never done before. It taught me to let loose in life and I’m so happy I got to do it with my loved ones.

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Rory

Zoë Albert-Jones

Jill, the hedgehog breeder, unlocked her apartment door after we rang for her. We were meeting a hedgehog. As my mom walked up the stairs, I basically ran up them, my heart racing.

When we came into the apartment, there was a vast assortment of animals. There were birds, fish, hamsters, a dog, a cat and more. In the middle of her coffee table there was a big bin with felt at the bottom. On the inside there was a wood hut shaped like a castle and from the wheel came a soft noise like setting down a plastic cup. I could not believe my eyes when I found the source of the noise.

There was a hedgehog, a *real hedgehog* playing on its wheel. It was large, about the shape of a potato, but bigger.

Behind a screen there was a noise like a squirrel's but softer.

"What's that noise?" I asked, after we introduced ourselves.

"Those are the baby hedgehogs," Jill replied, and added, "The hedgehog on the table is their dad. I will take him out when the other person gets here."

"Can we hold the baby hedgehogs?" I asked hopefully.

"We cannot hold them, because they are too little," she replied in a sentimental tone.

The other person was super late and came fifteen minutes later. After she arrived and we introduced ourselves, Jill took out the father of her hedgehogs and placed him on the couch beside me and the other person. He was really nice. He would walk towards me and crawl inside my large overalls pocket. He would also climb over my leg and into my lap. He was so amazing, and I hoped to have a hedgehog just like him.

"If you are sure you want a hedgehog, I can email you a quiz that I have all the people that adopt from me take. It has questions that determine whether I think a hedgehog will be safe with you or not. After the quiz, I will put you on a list, that is the order that I email people who want a hedgehog, when they are ready. I will email you three days before you come, to pay for and adopt a hedgehog, we will figure out a time that day that is best for you to come. If you can't come, I will put you on the list for the hedgehogs that will be ready by the end of summer, and if you don't respond to the email then you will also have to wait," Jill explained. "Any questions?" None of us had any questions and we all left.

When my mom and I got home we already had the email. I took the quiz and emailed it the next day. Jill said in her email that the hedgehogs would be ready to adopt by the end of next month. Later we realized that a week-long school field trip was the same week that we were supposed to get the email. My mom and I thought we were prepared.

While I was at the field trip I got the email, but we were not allowed devices on the field trip. I had given Jill two emails on the quiz, my mom's and mine. Jill emailed me and only me, about the

date for pick up. When I got back, it was too late, we were not getting a hedgehog. Or were we?

One day my mom had a site council meeting that ended at the same time my afterschool did. I walked up the stairs from the afterschool room to the library where the meeting was. Once the meeting ended my mom came over to me.

“I have some good news,” she said cheerfully.

“What?” I asked dully.

“Jill emailed me today and said that one of the people getting a hedgehog from her had a family emergency and could not pick up the hedgehog. Jill said that this Friday we can come and pick it up,” she answered.

I was speechless. I thought I was not getting a hedgehog. I was going to have my very own exotic pet!

Later that afternoon I had an end of year Girl Scout meet/party. I was so excited to tell all my friends that I was getting a hedgehog. After the Girl Scouts meet/party my mom and I ordered all of the things we needed for him. The only problem was that it was Tuesday and we were getting the hedgehog Friday. The carrier was supposed to come on Friday, the day we were getting the hedgehog, the cage was supposed to come on Saturday, and the wheel was supposed to come the next Tuesday.

On Thursday Jill sent me a photo of my hedgehog and said it was a girl. I could not believe that I was getting a little girl. I decided to name *her* Rory after Rory a character in Gilmore Girls (a show that I loved then, and now).

Friday came. I could not focus in school all day I just wanted to meet Rory and take *her* home. After school my mom picked me up and we went to Target to get a big bin for Rory to stay in until the cage came, and a felt blanket. We got the felt blanket because my mom had scissors and a shoe box so that we could cut up the blanket and put it in the box, to take Rory home.

Once we parked near Jill's apartment, my mom and I got out of the car. It started raining *hard*. While my mom and I were waiting to cross the street, around three cars splashed us and made our legs soaking wet. When we got upstairs the bin was on the coffee table but inside it was Rory. I was so excited to take her home. Jill took her out of the bin and asked,

“Do you know what you’re going to name him?”

My mom and I exchanged a quick confused look, but we did not say anything, because we did not want to be rude.

“I want to name *him* Rory after a character from a show I watch,” I replied. Even though Rory is not a girl, I thought I would still name him Rory. After we paid for him and had much more small talk sort of conversations, my mom and I left to take Rory home. He was mine.

I was a little disappointed that Rory was male and not female, but I still loved and love him. At first he was grumpy and would hiss and try to prick us when we held him. After a few days he would fall asleep in my lap and in my elbow pit.

Rory is a great pet for me. He is my first pet that is all mine. I care for him, cuddle him, and make his cage cozy and entertaining. Whenever I come into my room he pops out of his little green hut and sniffs around to greet me. Right now Rory is 2½ (about 36 human years); he still has a long life ahead of him and I hope he enjoys it!

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Towards the Plunge

Chris Hopkin

The crumpled and static voice of the captain cut through the thick air of the cabin. “Good evening passengers, we’ve finally arrived and we’re uhh... A little early to say the least. Turns out air traffic control doesn’t have a ramp prepared, so we’re gonna have to ask you to hang in the cabin for just a moment.”

The whole plane was echoing the noises of passengers up and down the cabin. People were anxious to get off the plane, which was understandable. People don’t do so well tethered to a seat for hours.

My mom and I had never been to Hungary, and didn’t know much about what kind of things happened there. As a science writer, my mother needed to travel to the U.K., and decided since we would only be there for about three days, we should do some other traveling around Europe. After our short trip to Germany, we

thought it good to travel over to the not so far away Hungary to see an old school friend.

Her name was Simone and I had known her ever since she came in the third grade. She was unique, always willing to go her own way when needed, very smart, and artistic. The other thing was that she was very quiet and introverted, not talking to many people. She'd never been much of a hand raiser in class.

I have to admit though, I was actually a little afraid. Before this I had spent time with people that I never really hung out with or talked to and people who I didn't even know, and yet, this scared me. The thought of change, the thought that Simone was different now, not the same one that left home, and I barely remember how she used to be and I truly had no idea who she was now. So yes, sitting in my chair, muscles clenched together waiting for freedom from the seat my butt was now ironed to, I was nervous, because when I got out of that airport I didn't know what to expect.

"Ready?" Not being loud, my mother's voice threw my mind off its nervous meandering through what Simone could be like now.

"Sorry, what?" I spoke fast as if something were chasing me in the distance. But nothing was, it was just me and my mom, getting off a plane. "Uh, yeah." My speech came back to me. "Yep. Let's see what's uhh... Out there."

As we walked out, the cool breeze brushed past us and went along the runway. It was around 7 or 8, and the airport was simply surrounded by roads and street lights, the next city a few miles away.

We entered through a big-garage-door like opening leading into the airport, the same relatively modern build as the airport in Germany. We walked through some thin halls with glass windows for walls, letting you see out to the planes leaving, pulling out and off the runway, sending the passengers to different far off lands. From there we stopped at the bathrooms and finally met up with my friend Simone near baggage claim. The moment I saw here I saw a changed person, one who was brighter, and out there.

"Hey, hey! Over here! Hey!" She was for sure excited. She was wearing a yellow top and jean shorts, standing out in front of the backdrop of the dark woods surrounding the airport. She was fol-

lowed by her father, a big burly man, who got our luggage and put it in his unsurprisingly equally big and burly car.

It was awkward inside the car. I now really had no real idea who Simone was or what she liked or anything like that. I felt alone, just me and the now passing city streets, engulfing me sucking my mind into the place I wanted to be, with the bright lights and the elegance of the buildings when I realized, I didn't know where I wanted to be! But I was here now, and so why not have some fun. Right?

"So are you coming back soon?" This was the only real conversation point I could come up with.

"Maybe." This point was a little surprising, because she never really voiced enjoying Hungary. She pulled out her phone to show me the screen saver. It seemed like a relatively old building that could be blown down by a bad wind. It was a triangle to accommodate for it being right on the street corner, and it was made up of lighter grey bricks. Turns out this was the not so far art school that Simone wanted to go to. She then showed me another picture, one of a friend named Miriam, who was about the same age as us, looking like a relatively bubbly person.

We finally arrived after pulling off the main roads and into a smaller town. The place seemed open yet divided, as if each person had their territory, at least, according to all the fences. We walked around the corner to the larger house in the area, one with rusted and aged sheet metal border, so that you could only see over to the second floor, unless you had some sort of ladder or something of the sort. I disregarded the house as being too isolated and too large for the kind of house Simone and her family would live in. But that thought flew away as Simone's father stuck in his key and opened that big yet thin steel fence.

When we entered the house we were introduced to Simone's mother, along with Miriam and her father, two Americans living with Simone and her family in the house. The floors were nice and shiny but that sort of clean neatness didn't seem to reflect outwards. There were multiple chairs surrounding a crowded table full of books, a couple laptops, and people. A bunch of people. From the entryway there were stairs leading up to most people's rooms and

the surprisingly large bathroom with an equally surprisingly large tub.

You could also move toward the table and choose to go left to a surprisingly clustered and small kitchen with a fridge pouring out with leftovers and ingredients, or you could go right to a big living area with a couch that curved around the walls of the house, and behind it large windows looking out into the town. In between the couch backed to the wall and the TV in the corner was my surprisingly nice air mattress.

The next morning was easygoing and way too hot. For breakfast it was bread and good cheese, (like spicy goat cheese and olive cheese) and I was able to meet the family's feral cat friend Tim, a black and grey cat. I was also able to make a new friend in Miriam, who was really nice and sweet.

After attempting to cool off and take up as much space as I could on the couch Miriam, Simone and I decided it best that we go out into town. After hopping on and off the bus for a short one stop, we got to the sunny city of cement. The streets were sparsely populated by wandering people and my back was covered in sweat from the now overly hot weather. We headed over to an almost abandoned waffle shop selling a special dessert called bubble waffles, which came wrapped like a snake around other sweet things like chocolate, bananas and ice cream. From there Simone showed us the way to a nice little bakery where Simone got what she referred to as the "good bread." It was nice and homey, the smell of freshness lulled through the air, weighing you down, pulling you back to a place of comfort and of deepness, before we headed back out.

At night we all walked over to take a trolley like vehicle to Budapest, the big city with lights, elegance, and grandeur. Turns out the windows of the trolley were open so you could stick your arm and feel the city and the world fly past you in the crisp air of the night. It was nice, watching worries and reality pull away at such a high speed as you move to a city of dreams.

Getting off the trolley we went to see the Budapest grand palace, a building that just emanated grandeur with its sharp twists and turns, as if the house had been as trimmed and cut down as the bushes outside. There were whites and golds and at night it seemed

like the building of the angels, shining and pushing into the darkness of the sky.

People passed with voices moving all around into the dark, and you could hear their shoes echoing on the sidewalk as the people's minds wandered to the places they were going.

Then we arrived at the true heart of the city.

The restaurants all went in as the water spewed from the pores of the statue. It was one of a lady, the water elevating her stone beauty as the coin in the water below her shined. Looking on, you could see a large cathedral with an outwards curved roof made of wood supported by pillars and beams. It showed God and his angels up in the clouds looking over the lower ones, and it was as if he were to grab the fountain and take it into the heavens above.

We sat on the steps and joked around taking a break from the insane movement of life and the people who populate it. Just sitting and eatin' ice cream, God surveying it all.

I woke up "early" as the adults talked in the living room.

"You're gonna need a card, so uhh... David could yo--" Simone's mother was then interrupted by Simone's father David. My mom and Simone's sat across each other in the living room around the large table, David standing next to Simone's mom.

"Yeah. We got some temporary ones somewhere here, I just gotta find 'em." David then proceeded to leave to go upstairs. "They should be good, so no fines here!"

"Trust me, the bathhouses are quite the spectacle, heart of Hungary if you may please. The one we're going to isn't that far, only thing elongating the trip there is the various points of getting off then on and then off again, but if you get the cards you'll be fine." Miriam's father pushed into the conversation being the farthest away, standing pretty close on the other side of the room near the living area.

"Are they still going to be good by the end of the trip or..?" My mother threw an inquisitive glance around the room.

"You'll be fine, trust me." Miriam's father looked back down at his bowl of oatmeal. "Should we wake the girls? I mean, we should probably leave soon right?"

Simone's mother agreed and Miriam's father went upstairs to their room.

“Tea?” Simone’s mom gestured toward the kitchen. It was now just her and my mother.

“Sure. I’d love some tea.”

The streets hollered as we all walked down. Every step brought upon us more barking and barking, each dog setting another one off like alarms.

We ended up on the trolley tracks of what seemed like an abandoned stop. One in an old movie where you could run away, escape your life whenever no matter who you were. We talked for a little while about authors like Stephen King and Micheal Crichton before almost being pulled off my feet as the trolley cut through the wind at top speed. It was time for a ride.

It took us awhile, between somewhere around three different stops all along the trail until we reached a big brick building, surrounded by walkways, on occasion wet from soaking heads. The building went around in a sort of pentagonal shape, with a steel rim on top shimmering from the sun. Every turn in the building was shown from the outward facing sculpts of elegant and furious lions carved into the thick wall. Around the building people walked along and past the shouting store men set up outside the building with their coolers, stands, and sighs, selling almost frozen bottles of water and burning hot corn.

We were given wristbands that we may move along the inner workings of the bathhouse freely, walking through the thick walls into small wooden changing room, and then down into the excitement of the pools outside. The warm cement outer walkway seemed to be heated like a skillet. Every move one step away from burning. Children screamed out in joy on one side, being pulled by a large circular whirlpool, currents throwing them across the water like a skipping stone.

The second pool was separated from the chaotic first by a nearly empty professional practice swimming pool. On the other side was a warmer area, old men wafting around like abandoned Band-Aids, sprinkled by the large fountain of a woman and a bird. But where the magic really happened was on the inside, in the intertwined passages creating a sort of labyrinth connecting all the indoor pools, spas, and saunas. The place sort of reminded me of the inside of the

human body, moving fast and navigating the unknown vessels all around me, as if when I came back out I would see the big red heart of the place.

We went all around the place, every pool covered with people always around the sides, like a bubbling shrimp cocktail, except for one room. The sign read

PLUNGE POOL

15° C

At this point all the steam was making Simone a little woozy, so she decided to head out, and me and Miriam were heading back outside ourselves.

I paused, “Hey Miriam?”

“Yeah?” she responded, barely stopping.

“Bet I can stay in that there pool longer than you.” Miriam leaned over to look in the window.

We both stood with our feet less than inches away from the edge of the pool. You could feel the coldness floating out like steam from a hot tub, and the walls were sweating. You got shivers just standing in the room, and I suddenly felt a sort of loss of control as the cold steeped inside me. I didn’t know what was in the pool, and who knew if it would comfort me, bring me some sort of joy or happiness, or grab me and shake my bones. I was afraid in all honesty, because like life, I had no way of knowing what was to come, or why I was doing it at all, I just loved the challenge, the feeling of going under, and sinking far, far down just for the satisfaction of coming back up to breathe. You just have to do it, and move along with it, with the changes and with the challenges you just have to keep going because it’s all for the breath, the freedom, up at the top. I looked at Miriam and her face of false determination she hid behind, and I just thought,

“1”

To hell with it!

“2”

To the plunge it was!

“3!”

Time went by faster than it seemed time was meant to. My mother and I sat in the cool cabin of the plane again, and we were

going home. I was excited, happy, and yet sad. A lot of the time we fear new things, or the things we don't know, but maybe we shouldn't. Maybe we should take them in because the experience of that new thing and how we react... Well that's what makes us us right? How I felt in the cold water, and how I came out is a part of me, just like any other new thing.

In the end though, I liked it. Feeling the sensation and numbing tingles the cold water seems to send through my body, it was new. It was something different, and something that made me feel different.

Maybe I learned something about these newer things and acceptance, maybe I learned something about changes and how we react to them, or maybe I learned nothing. Maybe I've come back and I've learned nothing, but I think it's the thought that counts. The reality of pondering. These cloudy thoughts were dispersed as the crumpled speakers hurled the captain's voice around the cabins once more.

"We truly hope you enjoyed your trip to Hungary, and we hope that you'll enjoy your flight back too. Seems like we still have a long way to go. Ha."

And the plane picked off the runway and into the morning skies. Maybe I learned something, or maybe I didn't.

Who knows?

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The Big Day

Jozee Ray

Ding dong! It was a Saturday morning. I looked outside and I saw the mailman leaving, walking down the stairs. I was a little confused why he rang the doorbell, but then I went outside and I checked in the mailbox and saw a letter that said you are invited to my wedding! I saw the picture of my aunt and her fiancé. I was so excited when I saw that my aunt was getting married I almost started to cry.

My mom told me that I was going to be a junior bridesmaid at her wedding. I had to start thinking of what I was going to need to be a junior bridesmaid, like a dress and shoes. The color theme of the wedding was yellow. I had to find a yellow dress! My Nonnie, sister and I went dress shopping to find a yellow dress. We found

dresses for my sister and me that were perfect for the wedding. My dress was all yellow and gorgeous. Then my aunt texted me saying they were going to come early, in my mind I was like why, but then I knew because there was a hurricane that was going to hit Florida. A week later my aunt came to Massachusetts just three days before her wedding day.

My aunt was staying at my grandma's house, and when I went over, I was so happy to see her. I ran and gave her a big hug. I missed her so much. When I went upstairs, I saw my auntie's dress; it was so pretty it looked like a princess should wear it. I bet it was going to look beautiful on her.

Then the day came! Her wedding day. I was so happy, excited and nervous all at the same time. I would have to walk down in front of a lot of people and I felt like, what if I mess up and fall on my face? I had so many emotions! I was so happy for her! This was her big day!

We were about to go to the hotel but before we could do that we had to go pick up cupcakes. The cupcakes were vanilla with yellow frosting. The wedding cake was all white with little yellow flowers on it. We also had to pick up the bouquets of flowers for all the bridesmaids! It took forever to get all that stuff.

After we were driving for an hour, we got to the hotel. The time of the wedding was at 4:00 p.m. and we got to our room at 11:00 a.m. We had to go to our room, put our bags down, and get ready.

I got dressed in my yellow dress and did my hair and my mom helped me. Everyone started to come and get their rooms because my whole family was staying at the hotel. I had to go outside and help. I saw that the wedding was going to be in a big tent outside near the water. It was so pretty, there were chairs outside and a little stage and on the chairs there was white ribbon. It looked so good!

I got to see some of my cousins and uncles and aunts. My mom was the maid of honor and two other people were bridesmaids. We all wore different dresses. We all wore yellow just not my aunt, she wore white! Then it was just about 2:30 when we had to bring the cake and cupcakes to the tent.

The wedding planner set it up and it looked so nice. My aunt's fiancé loves to fish, it's his job. He's a fisherman. He loves eating it

too. My uncles own a fish store so they brought in lobsters and catered the wedding. It was so yummy!

It was almost time for the wedding to start. I was in my room and my two cousins had just shown up. They looked so cute. My little cousin had on a bowtie and suspenders. He was the ring bearer. I went up to my aunt's room. She was getting her hair done. Then she went into the bathroom to get her dress on. When she came out of the bathroom she looked so pretty I filled up with tears. My aunt is like another mother/sister/best friend to me. I love her so much. There was a room where we had to wait, then they would call us down to go but then....

It was time! The show must go on, everyone went to their seats! My heart was beating so fast— I was scared. I started to cry. I didn't want to mess up her big day. Then they were calling everybody to walk down. My heart was beating out of my chest. I kept telling my little cousin Torre to hold my hand the whole time. My mom was before me so she walked down and then it was me. It was my turn, everyone was looking at me! I had a smile on my face but I could have thrown up! My sister was after me with two year old twins who were the flower girls. They were so cute. Everyone was laughing!

Then my aunt was walking down! We all had to stand up and the music started to play. She looked so beautiful in her dress. She looked like a princess. It was funny because she was walking and kicking her dress because she couldn't really walk in it too well. Some people were crying.

When she got to the stage she kissed her mother and she and her fiancé held hands. My uncle was the one who was going to marry them. After they were married we started to party!

Before you walked in you had to write in the guest book. Everyone went to their tables. It was time for people to do their speeches. My mom was one of them, and she did a great job. One of the things my mom said was she was like a sister that I never had. As I looked around my mom made people cry and laugh! We started to eat— there was some good food! There was lobster, chicken, steak and salad. It was also so loud. I have a loud Italian family!!!

It was time to dance and they played a lot of good music like Cotton I Joe. My aunt was dancing in her dress. It was getting so dirty and her feet too! It was funny. We all partied hard.

After everything was over everyone went to watch the rest of the Pats game but I was too tired to go so I went back with my eyes almost closing and once I got into my bed I fell asleep in my dress. I had to get up to change into my pjs and I didn't like it when they woke me up! My Nonnie and Papa's room was right beside our room.

The next morning we all went to eat breakfast together. I was sad that the wedding had ended. It was so much fun and also now we had to say goodbye to my aunt who was going on her honeymoon.

When it was time for her to leave we took her bags and put them in the car. I was so sad that we were going to say goodbye. I was trying to hold in my tears but I couldn't. We took her to her hotel and I was crying when we said bye and she was too. She said "I'm going to miss you," and I said "I will miss you too, have a great time on your honeymoon!"

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My First Wedding

Tanika Caradine

The priest announced to the couple, "You may kiss the bride."

I immediately covered my eyes and ears so I wouldn't see them kissing but I was too late. I was close enough to hear their long wet kiss, "Muuuaah."

My aunt's wedding was the first wedding I ever went to. I was nervous and kind of excited. I was the flower girl and I was working on my walk, deciding if I should walk with class or sass. I was also practicing how I was going to lay the flowers down, and should I lay the flower down gently or let it fall down on its own. I also went shoe shopping with my mom because I didn't have shoes to go with my sparkly, glittery, pink dress and my bow on the top of my head. As you could tell I was ready to get to the wedding and show everyone how I walk down the aisle and how beautiful my dress is.

"Beep, beep, beep, beep!" my alarm clock rang.

I jumped out of bed and ran to turn the alarm off. I had not slept well because I was too busy thinking about the wedding. I quickly hopped in the shower, then got dressed. I was so excited to wear my

new dress (and shoes) because my parents hadn't let me put it on while I was practicing other than seeing if it would fit.

"Y'all ready? Come on, we have to go before we're late," my dad yelled.

As usual everyone was ready except for my mom. She was always the last to get ready. I never understood why. But, we were able to get in the car and head out in time. Thirty minutes later, we were in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by tons and tons of beautiful land: *the grass was bright green, there were bouquets, and a beautiful tree with a beautiful altar.* I was so excited, I could've jumped out of the car and run around to see every beautiful design that was there. Once we were able to find parking, I was the first one out of the car. That's how excited I was. Also, I wanted to show everyone else how beautiful my dress looked, and how I had practiced my walk to get it perfect for the wedding.

When I was walking around, a lot of people said, "Hi!" to me, people I didn't even know existed.

I was picked up from behind. I couldn't see who the person was, it just happened so fast, but I knew it was someone bigger than me and stronger than me. The person who picked me up smelled familiar. That's when someone in a big, deep voice chuckled, "How are you growing up so fast? I only saw you a week ago." It was my uncle Supreme. He and I had a really close bond. He had always been there for me when I was little. He would take me to the park and to get pizza.

After we said hi and stuff like that he asked where my mom was, I said she was over there next to the bouquet of flowers. He gave me a big hug then yelled, "Goodbye."

I continued to roam around and look for other people I knew until I saw my cousin. She was around the same age as me, but taller than me. I ran up to her to say hi, but when I got there, she was holding the same basket as me and almost the same dress.

When she saw me, she immediately ran up and said, "Hi, I missed you so much."

I quickly noticed the flower basket she was holding and I asked her why she was holding it? Are they for me? I quickly asked

She gave me a dirty look and quickly said, "Noo dummy they're for me." I gazed at her up and down.

Then I blurted out, “Well I’m the flower girl so I think you’re mistaken. I’m supposed to have the flowers, not you.”

She said with a proud voice, “Well, so am I.”

My mouth dropped. I was shocked. I thought it was my time to shine, and be the star of the wedding.

My mom saw me and my cousin arguing and immediately came over and remarked, “I guess you found out that you were not the only one who was the flower girl.”

I gave her a dirty look and said, “You knew!”

I was furious with her and my cousin. All I could do was just walk away, so I did.

Forty minutes went past and I finally got my basket of flowers from my sister. The wedding was about to start. Everyone was scrambling for their seats and the cameraman was getting ready to record the moment she walked down the aisle.

“Here comes the bride, here comes the bride,” piano keys played.

Everyone instantly rose and waited for the bride to walk down. The doors opened, everyone turned their attention to me and her but mostly to her dress which was beautiful, glistening with every step, glittering with every movement. The dress was so long and every time the sunlight hit it glowed like the stars in the sky when it’s dark. She walked down the aisle while my cousin and I continued to fill the pathway with white flowers and pink flowers. Even though my cousin and I had argued a lot I couldn’t be mad at her forever. She was my best friend. My aunt was standing on the stage next to her soon-to-be husband, the priest asked for everyone to be seated, and began to have the couple say their speeches to each other about how they loved each other and why .

When they were done, the priest asked them “If they take their lovely bride/groom to be their wife/ husband.”

“I do,” they both said in a soothing tone.

Then, the priest said in a peaceful tone, “You may now kiss the bride.”

Right when he said that, I instantly covered my ears and eyes. But I was too late and a little too close because I was able to hear their long wet kiss, “Mmmuuuaahhh!”

Everyone stood up and started to clap with happiness for the lovely couple, and so did I.

After the wedding, my family congratulated our aunt and her groom. We said our goodbyes to the rest of the family members, including my cousin. I forgave her for being a flower girl with me. There was no reason to be mad at her anyways, so we said, “Good-bye,” and gave each other a big hug, then went back to what we were doing

My mom got our things together so we could leave and head home. But before we could leave someone had to catch the bouquet of flowers. So every girl lined up behind my aunt, including me. She threw it up in the air and everyone went nuts. Girls were pushing each other and pulling her just to get a bouquet of flowers. They looked like wild coyotes. After everyone was done scrambling and we were able to see through the mess a girl that I don’t even know caught the bouquet of flowers.

She ran up to her boyfriend but you should’ve seen the look on his face. It was full of disappointment and sadness. I think he was praying that she didn’t catch the bouquet of flowers but oh well. When that mess was over we headed home, got ourselves ready for bed and called it a day.

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Moses's Toeses Smell Like a Roses

Lily Thompson

I definitely had not absorbed what my mom just said. I just nodded. I could not begin to imagine what life would be like soon. I was so accustomed to this warm presence, I shivered at the thought of its being gone.

Until I was about eight years old my aunt, uncle, and cousins lived in the apartment below me. They lived with their boxer Moses. Our families were very close and I considered Moses to be my dog too. I loved dogs a lot when I was younger, and that love lives through me. My cousins were a couple years younger than me and not as much fun to play with as Moses. I loved to walk, read, cuddle, and play with Moses. I remember sitting in the foyer many times, reading *Where The Wild Things Are* aloud to Moses while he patiently sat and listened.

A few months prior to when it happened I had heard my parents talking about Moses more often than usual, telling me to be more careful around him. I would overhear them say things like, "I don't know how much longer we have with him."

I found this very strange and started to become suspicious of my parents' unfamiliar cautiousness around Moses.

Then one night later, when I got out of the bath, my mom knocked on my door and sat next to me on my bed.

"Honey, Moses is not doing too good," my mom told me, confirming my suspicion that something was up.

My neighbor, who was a couple years older than me and was one of my best friends at the time, had just had to put her cat down. She explained to me that her cat was so sick that it was better to just put her down. She told me that putting an animal down was kind of like putting them to sleep, killing them. I knew what was going to happen, they were going to do the same to Moses.

What would it be like without Moses? Without my time with him? I didn't know; he had been a part of the whole eight years of my life.

I had been noticing that Moses had been weaker recently. When I went on walks with him, and even just around the house, his legs

shook. He moved much slower than he used to. I didn't ever think it would get so bad they would have to kill him.

"They're going to put him to sleep?" I asked my mom. She immediately looked surprised, wondering how I would have known. "Natalie's cat was put down too," I told my mother, to spare her some confusion. She nodded with understanding.

"Yes," she said blankly.

"When?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," she replied with a frown. She brought her hand up to her cheek to wipe away the wetness pouring from her eyes.

"Oh," I said. I felt the misery trapped in the room, like moist air on a humid day. I definitely had not absorbed what my mom just said. I just nodded. I could not begin to imagine what life would be like soon. I was so accustomed to this warm presence, I shivered at the thought of its being gone. It was too much. I wasn't ready to let Moses go. The misery began to dribble from my eyes, and down my cheeks. I don't think that my cheeks were ever dry for the next couple of days.

The next day, I woke up dreading having to live on. My pillow was soaked through and my eyes were red and puffy. This was the day, the day my life would change forever, for the worse.

My family and I stayed home from work and school to say goodbye to Moses that day. We all sat quietly on the couch, not knowing how to comfort each other when death was so near.

My uncle came up the stairs to our apartment, leash in hand. Moses limped up the stairs behind him. It took a while for him to make it up to the landing. When he did, he didn't sit down, he just walked in circles. Whenever he stopped, I could see the pain in his eyes and in the wetness on his cheeks.

"It hurts him to sit down," my mother told me, her eyes becoming red with sorrow.

I had learned that Moses had a tumor in his brain that was making him live in agony. I understood why Moses had to go, but selfishly I wanted him to stay, even though I knew that meant much pain for the dog I loved.

My cousins were too young to understand what was happening and had already left for school. Their parents had probably told them to say goodbye to Moses without giving a reason why. I might

have thought that this was wrong, but I knew that it was the right thing to do.

Moses had been my aunt and uncle's dog since he was a small puppy. He was like their first child. It made sense that the tears came in bucket loads for them.

At the time, I didn't think that I had really absorbed what was happening, but the thought brought sadness... and tears.

I remember counting the tissue boxes we went through, three. I remember the mountain of tear-soaked tissues rested on my coffee table. I remember when I said goodbye forever. I remember watching Moses walking down the steps, walking to his death.

My eyes began to shed lots and lots of tears, without stopping.

I hugged myself until I felt warmth which never came. I pushed my eyes into my knees, trying to create a dam against the tears. This only resulted in very soggy knees. I needed something to do to distract from the fact that he was gone. Being my eight year self the best solution to this was watching TV. My brother and I stared blankly at the large screen for hours and hours.

Later that day I pulled from the wall in my room a framed picture my brother had painted. I opened the frame, took four pictures from a drawer in my desk, placed the pictures into the frame and closed it up. I returned it to its place on the wall, facing my bed. Now when I fell asleep the last thing I would see is Moses's sweet face.

My mom knew who Moses was to me, what a big part of my childhood he was. She, like always, knew what to do. When my mother was very young she had lost her mother, my grandmother, to cancer. She had a small heart-shaped locket with a picture of Helen. The designs were fading away with many years of use and love. She felt that the locket was still meaningful and precious, but she was willing to pass it on to me. She carefully popped open the locket and placed in two small pictures, one with me and Moses sitting together, the other a picture of just Moses lying in the kitchen. I pulled my hair from my neck, an indication for my mom to clasp the locket around my neck. Once she had, I picked it up and carefully opened up the heart to reveal the two pictures. Moses's eyes reached mine for a second. It felt like he was still there, sitting pa-

tiently next to me while I practiced my reading. A wide smile crossed my face.

“Thank you.” This was definitely what I needed.

That night I went to sleep, the sadness muffled by happy memories of Moses.

When I woke up that next morning I walked slowly down the stairs, one step at a time. I was feeling happy enough and I was ready to go to school. I went back to my room and got ready, the locket still around my neck.

When I reached school, all my friends asked me,

“Where were you yesterday?”

“Moses died,” I replied, almost robotic. The fact still brought pain, but it was better now, less. I proceeded to show my friends my new locket, collecting condolences along the way.

I continued the day not yet as my usual self, but better than yesterday.

My mom picked me up that day and told me that we were going to Home Depot. There was a rhyme that my family and I would recite to Moses: “Moses’s toeses smell like a roses.” My mom had a plan to make a memorial for Moses. We would get a beautiful blossoming rose bush and plant it in our yard. To fertilize the plant we would write what we loved about Moses on little slips of paper and bury them with it.

When I arrived home my dad, brother, aunt, uncle, and cousins were already waiting for us on the porch. My aunt was cutting a sheet of paper into smaller slips, and my dad was handing them out along with pens. It was a bright sunny day and rays of light fell onto my house, almost as if the sun were honoring Moses.

I held the pen and paper tightly, trying to find a way to express how much and why I loved Moses. I decided to keep it simple. I wrote, “I love Moses because he always made me smile.” I was so little that I struggled to write, but I would not let anyone assist me. It had to be my words, had to be from me. I carefully folded up the paper, lining up the edges to the best of my ability. Everyone else had already finished their writing and had placed their slips into the deep hole dug earlier that day. I carefully placed my slip down into the center of the hole. A tear fell upon it and I saw the wetness spread throughout the paper.

My mother then lifted the gorgeous rose bush into the hole and started to pat the dirt into place around it. Next, my brother and cousins got the hose from the side of the house and brought it around to the steps. My brother pressed the handle and a steady stream came from the nozzle. He carefully brought the flow of water to hit the bush. I imagined the soil, then the papers being dampened. I imagined our words steeping into the roots, spreading through the plant, bringing life and love with them.

For a while after that I still missed Moses every day, a presence missing from my life. I now realize that death is just a part of life. It's normal to miss someone or feel sad, but in the end their death was meant to happen. Your being part of their life was meant to happen. So, I am thankful for Moses and I am thankful that he was a part of my life. I will never forget him and he will always live through the rose bush in my front yard.

Today, every time I walk by the bush it makes me smile, just like Moses did.

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Yes, and...

Ruthanna Kern

"You've grown so much."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

"How are you?"

"Do you remember me?"

The answer was no. The truth was no. No, I hadn't grown, or at least it didn't feel like it. No, I didn't feel like this was my loss. No, I had no clue how I was right then. And no, I didn't know who you were. You were just another one of those blurry faces and voices fading away in this crowd of strangers. I was sorry, but no. That's all I could think, but not what I replied.

For the record, I don't really lie. There was a fragment of truth in each of the statements with which I responded. I do act, however. I love theatre, and sometimes life is just one big stage. Full of dramatic scenes and unique actors. Important decisions and beautiful relationships. Sometimes, the only choice I have is which character to play.

Let us open the curtain on North Carolina, back in April 2019:

I was on April break from school with my parents and my older brother. We were in North Carolina for two main reasons. We wanted to visit colleges because Eli was a junior in high school and my dad wanted to visit his family. The college tours were pretty textbook and I was only in 7th grade, hardly needing to focus on that yet. I never wanted to go to school in North Carolina, anyway; it's too hot and way too southern.

The family that we had there was much more important to me, even though I didn't know them very well. They were my Nana's brother and his wife, Ralph and Patty. They had come to some family events and reunions, but mostly ones when I was younger. Aunt Patty had had lung cancer recently, and Dad wanted to see the woman who he felt had helped to raise him, and to make sure she was doing well. I always loved Uncle Ralph and Aunt Patty, and knew that they loved me and that they were important to my dad, but they didn't feel like familiar faces. That's why I was excited about going to their home and getting to know them better.

They lived in Davidson, and when we arrived, we were welcomed with open arms. The amazing thing about my family is that the people are so interesting. Everyone seemed wrapped up in layers of mystery. The more stories they tell, the more of their true personality I can unravel. And they talk a lot. I think there must be some trait on my dad's mother's side, Levering DNA, that requires us to have an opinion on *everything*.

The next few days were spent with my family just talking and disagreeing. They spoke about everything from politics to old family legends, from colleges to my National History Day performance and all topics in between. My brother, in particular, loves to debate, to challenge, and he found a reliable sparring partner in my Uncle Ralph. I loved listening to them, and I enjoyed spending my time on that old couch by the window in their living room, learning.

Another important thing to my Levering relatives is hiking and being in nature, especially the mountains. My Nana and Uncle Ralph grew up on an orchard in southern Virginia right along the border to North Carolina, in the Blue Ridge Mountain Range. My dad had cherished memories of the orchard, of traveling there from Washington D.C., right in time for June's cherry season. It was no surprise that my dad wanted to go on a hike when my Uncle Ralph

and Aunt Patty suggested the excursion. They too were avid adventurers. Let's just say that hikes usually weren't exactly my favorite thing in the world.

We climbed along a trail that sort of looked like a maple leaf, curving and turning, following the path of Lake Norman. It was a bit rough, with some inclines and a fair share of declines as well. The water looked so inviting, even in April. I wanted to swim, but I am crazy sometimes. I think the trail was about two miles, and it definitely wasn't too torturous. It couldn't be, given the great company.

"What's that one?" I asked, gazing up at a tall tree that sort of looked to me like a birch. Its leaves, however, seemed a bit oddly shaped. Maybe? I wasn't the expert, though, Aunt Patty was.

She replied, "It's an aspen, and a beautiful one at that."

"It's so green here, much greener than Massachusetts!" I exclaimed, as I spun around and absorbed the feeling of spring. The smell of life, new life— a blanket of green covered the treetops already. I loved the warmth, because at home, it had just stopped snowing.

Aunt Patty identified every plant, every tree, every bird and each bug. I admired her. Her love for and knowledge of this beautiful place clearly shone through her eyes as she smiled. We walked on over more fallen logs as we wound away from the water, then back towards it. Eventually, we got separated from Dad and Ralph, who lagged behind as they talked. I remember that Patty kept up with Eli and me, even after her lung surgery. I had been worried that she might not be doing well, and that my dad would come away from this trip with his hopes for her health ruined, but she out-hiked us and it was great. We thought she was doing *great*.

"What are those numbers attached to the trees? What do they mean?" I needed to know, because I am one of those people who needs to know. I had a thirst for knowledge, just like Patty.

I think Aunt Patty had already discovered that about me when she answered, "I'm not sure. They aren't labeling the trees by species."

I ran a little farther, stumbling over some rocks and placing my footing in others that were unstable. I found the next sign tacked to a tree and looked back at Patty. "It seems to be going down. The one near you is ninety-four, and this says ninety-three."

“Then it probably is telling us how far we are from the end of the hike. We must have ninety-three somethings left.” I wanted to know the unit of measurement, because everything seemed so inconsistent. But Aunt Patty cheerfully created a game out of it, “Who can find the next multiple of ten first?”

That was all she needed to say to send me and Eli off, racing to get to ninety, competitive as we were. We ran along the path, searching, trying to beat each other *and* trying to win.

“They’re so crazy,” my mom half-apologized, “my kids will do anything to beat each other!”

“I had no idea what I started!” Aunt Patty laughed, and so did mom. Then we were all laughing and chatting.

We kept going like that, Eli and I tripping over fallen branches and bickering about who had screamed “60” first, all the way until we made it to zero. Aunt Patty was there, smiling at our antics and seeming so happy, and *so* healthy.

The next four months of my life were filled with moments, with memories. I finished seventh grade. I began my ninth year, my final year at the Healey. I made it to the National History Day competition in Maryland. My cousin and I were the Tweedles in *Alice in Wonderland*. I traveled to San Francisco. My brother became a senior. I became a teenager. And my Aunt Patty died. She died.

She died two days after my birthday, on August 24th. I was in the kitchen baking brownies for my murder-mystery-themed party with my cousin Cyntia. Eli was away at soccer camp somewhere on the Cape. My mom was still at the farmers’ market and her exercise class. My dad was in the woods. He was there when he called me.

I didn’t even know if he was crying, the line was breaking up, but I heard, “Aunt Patty died early this morning.” I didn’t know what I told him, I still can’t remember. All I know is that I walked back into the kitchen and told Cyntia about that hike in the woods, and about Aunt Patty. About how much she loved me, even though I hardly knew her. About how smart she was. About how kind she was. About how loving she was. About how great of a person she was. Ceeta listened and nodded and commented, yet it felt wrong. Wrong to use the word “was” because, somehow, I felt that Aunt Patty didn’t belong in the past tense.

By the time Eli got home from camp, Dad had already made plans to fly down for the memorial service to be held in mid-September.

“Eli, do you want to go to the funeral? I know you might have plans that weekend--”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be, Dad. I’ve been to so many funerals for great-aunts that I didn’t know. I’d be glad to go to one for an aunt whom I knew and I loved.”

And so we went. Flew down to Charlotte on Friday, September 20th, 2019. Saturday was the day of the services, and Aunt Patty’s Tuesday-night contemplative prayer group provided dinner for my family on Friday night. The dinner guests were my dad’s family, a few cousins, some aunts. I knew most of them, and I really did love getting to spend some time with them.

It was bizarre to enter that house without Aunt Patty greeting me as I came through the door. To be in that home, which I can’t help but still call Uncle Ralph *and* Aunt Patty’s. It was the same place, the same building. With the same furniture, the same appliances, and the same pictures. Some photos of my cousins, a few with me, many of Aunt Patty. Her face was everywhere I turned, but so was she.

Maybe that was because I had seen her in each of those places, or maybe because she was still there. I didn’t know. Possibly both? Even though Aunt Patty’s name was not mentioned much throughout the night, we all knew that she was the reason we gathered together. Because even in death she had found a way to unite people as she did in life. The difference was the emotion involved, and this occasion brought out another side of emotion in all of us. The side that hurt, grieved, cried, and mourned.

When we were driving home to our trailer-like Airbnb on the lake, we stopped at a sporting goods store. It was a bit of a shock because, in the south, “sporting goods” are guns and a huge chair for people to sit in the woods while waiting for their victims. I had to do a double-take. Our house was on a lake because I loved to swim, but brilliant me had forgotten my swimsuit. I figured that swimming might be a way to distract myself from the tension that the next day would bring. As they say: when in Mooresville! While I was waiting in the line for the check-out I joked, “Daddy, can you buy me that floaty?”

That floaty referred to a huge set of pink, purple and blue wings whose surface was about two doorways wide. It was huge. So huge, in fact, that we needed to mostly deflate it to fit it in the back of our rental car after my dad bought it for me. It seemed like the craziest thing that ever existed and my family spent the rest of the night joking and trying to maneuver the floaty around. I think there are some times when one needs an enormous, fluorescent floaty, and that night was definitely one of those times, because that night we needed to laugh.

The next morning, we weren't laughing. I don't know what it showed about me, but I had also forgotten my precisely planned outfit for the services. So I wore a light summery dress with a black sweater. We all looked very fancy and very formal when we made it to Davidson Friends Meeting. I loved that the meeting was painted yellow, because it made everything seem so happy and so sunny. I had been to that meeting with Aunt Patty the previous April, when it was a Wednesday and empty of people except for us.

The first service was in Quaker style, though slightly more programmed than usual. Our funerals usually consisted of the deceased's friends and family sharing messages or memories or both. This celebration, however, had some Bible verses and a few songs, and it was all beautiful. That charmingly yellow, almost circular room was full, full of people who cared for her. People who knew her. People who admired her. And she loved every single last one of us so very much. Because that was who she was.

There were meaningful words spoken and touching thoughts shared. My dad spoke at one point. I think that is when I felt the first tear roll down my face. It certainly wasn't the last though. I didn't sob, but I cried, and leaned into my mother on the bench beside me.

The second service was later, that afternoon. It was larger, though many people attended both. That service wasn't Quaker, it was at St. Alban's Episcopal Church. It was also moving, but it was tiring as well. Two services in a day was a lot, and both had many of the same themes. People spoke and people sat. People cried and people laughed. The program ended and we all sifted out into the large room that was basically used for the reception and the re-

freshments. Even as they chatted, I think people kept trying to cope with the fact that she was gone. I certainly did.

She *was*. She *was*. It still felt peculiar, maybe because I loved her, maybe because I didn't know her well enough, maybe because she was such an amazing and important part of my family. Maybe because she should not have been gone.

Why do bad things always happen to such wonderful people? I mean, Aunt Patty wasn't perfect, she had flaws like each and every one of us. But she was still a light, a light that shone into my life, and the lives of others to inspire us, love us. To make us better people, who could do better things, and leave the world a better place than they found it. She didn't need to die because there were so many more things she could have taught me.

And that is why I stood in St. Alban's, eating a piece of chocolate that was basically a fancy Kit-Kat, and felt no, but smiled yes.

"I know, it's crazy. I feel so tall. You know, a doctor once told me I'd be 6'6"!" I joked with a stranger.

"Thank you so much. I'm so sorry for your loss as well," I replied respectfully.

"I am happy to be here, honoring her, with so many people I love." I glanced around at the horde of family and family friends that made up the room.

"I'm sure we've met before! Can you remind me when?" I politely inquired, and waited for the inevitable moment of thought before the person could tell me I had been in diapers.

I smiled yes because it was the right thing to do. I hadn't known her that well and there were so many people that were more affected by her death. I smiled yes, because that is what I needed to do to deal with her loss. I smiled yes, because Aunt Patty would have wanted these services as a time of remembrance, a time for her family to come closer together in the love that we all shared for her. I smiled yes, because I had that April vacation down there in already-springy North Carolina with five people who really cared about me. I smiled yes, because I had the honor of knowing Aunt Patty, however briefly. I smiled yes, because I was, am, and always will be an actress. And in improv, all an actress needs to say is, "yes, and..."