

sps 7·8

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

More Healey Fiction

2020

Manor by the Sea
Lola Andrew-Blondin

Hurricane Tiffany
Ruby Kauffman

Hello, Elaine
Katarina Dvornik

Perfect Isn't Ideal
Lily Thompson

The Actress and the Playwright
Ruthanna Kern

More Healey Fiction

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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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Manor by the Sea

Lola Andrew-Blondin

It's a windy day, and the beach is shrouded in mist. All tourists are shut up in their hotel rooms, cursing the bad weather. Not a soul can be seen through the fog, but Caleb wants to go to the beach, and I must oblige. I can just barely see his blonde head bobbing along the gentle slope down to the cold water of Auror's Cove. I remember when our little seaside town was virtually empty except for its inhabitants, but now it is one of the biggest tourist attractions on the coast.

"Grandpa, Grandpa!" Caleb's voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Yes, what's up?"

"Momma said that I have to make sure that you don't space out. She says old people get very forgetful. Why is that?" Caleb asks inquisitively,

"It's nothing, your momma's just worrying herself for no reason. You know how she gets."

In the short span of time it took me to respond, Caleb has already moved on to the next thing, which happens to be the carcass of what clearly used to be a glamorous manor on a cliff not far off. Though the grand dome has halfway sunken into the house, you can tell that someone rich lived in this old building. The paint is cracked and peeling, in some places you can see that it has completely decayed, showing the rotten wood holding the whole thing together. I can tell that the salty air has not helped preserve this wonder from the golden days. Bandits must have pillaged the estate at one point because many windows are broken, and there are doors missing on the side facing us.

I remember when I was young, how us kids would run in the woods surrounding the ghost of a home; boasting about how one day we would prove our valor by spending the night in the manor. We never did, all of our bravery lost, once we heard how the wind whistled through the big building.

"Grandpa, who lives in that old house? It's really big and ugly."

"Well Caleb, I could tell you, but you'll have to listen to the whole story. You think you can do that? It's quite a tale, you know."

Caleb's eyes widen, as among his favorite things in the world is a good story. Second only to bothering his momma.

"Yes! I can listen! Please tell me the story Grandpa, *please!*"

By now he's hopping about, filling with anticipation.

"Alright, alright, hold on to your pants, you look like you're about to float away!"

"Just start the story already!"

"Kids these days are so impatient. Okay,

It all started in 1875 when a young man hailing from Hiram, Maine, named Alexander Rothschild made a few good business deals and struck it rich in Boston. With his newfound wealth, he decided to invest in the stock markets. Clearly it was a good idea, because soon he had more than three times the amount he had gained in his first few years as an entrepreneur.

He met a beautiful young woman named Marianne Weaver. Alexander fell in love, they got married and had three kids, Benjamin, Rachelle, and Howard. Marianne was determined to give her kids the highest education possible, so she enrolled them all in Du Pont's Academy for Gifted Children, a large and fancy school for the rich and powerful, situated in South Wales.

"This is *boring*, skip to the good part!"

"Caleb, be patient."

Sending them to boarding school ensured that the siblings grew to be very close. With his strong athletic build, Benjamin became the school's star rugby player. Rachelle won many awards for her talents in the choir, her piercing blue eyes and even more surprising soprano blowing the judges away. Howard excelled in his studies, becoming one of Du Pont's most gifted students.

After they graduated, they returned home at their parents' request. Alexander, who was getting a bit older, decided that it was time to move away from the city, for his health. He uprooted the whole family, and moved to Auror's Cove, a cute little seaside town near the New Hampshire border. They moved into a grand manor overlooking the sea from a cliff. It occupied twenty acres and a garden. The manor itself was a royal dark green, and it had two turrets on the side with stained glass that depicted knights slaying dragons and saving damsels.

Alexander spent the remainder of his life in that house, with Marianne, and his kids. After the death of their parents, Benjamin, Rachelle, and Howard became the owners of the manor. Eventually,

Benjamin decided to travel across Europe and Asia, and settled in southern Italy with a smart young lady from a wealthy family, and had several children. Rachele met a handsome man from the south who swept her off her feet and brought her home with him. Only Howard stayed in the manor.

He married a sweet little seamstress named Annabelle. She was not rich by any means, but she loved him, and he loved her. They stayed together in the manor. Sadly, Annabelle died while giving birth to Minerva, the last of the Rothschild family left in Auror's Cove.

* * *

“Ughhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

“Caleb! Hush now. You were the one who wanted me to tell the story so you're going to listen to it. Now where was I? Ah yes,”

* * *

Minerva was the last proprietor of the Rothschild Manor. She would live in it all her life, and she died in it.

Minerva wasn't as lucky as the past generations of her family. Her childhood wasn't bad, it was just sad and lonely.

Howard was a very different man after his beloved Annabelle passed away. Whenever she was near, he was loud and joyous, but after her death, he became quiet, rarely ate and would take long walks by the sea. Howard tried to limit his interactions with his daughter; her face reminded him of Annabelle and he couldn't bear to look in her eyes. But he couldn't send her off to a boarding school. She was the last piece of Annabelle, and he couldn't fathom being away from her. So he hired tutors from around the world to teach his child. Minerva learned algebra, geometry, French, Latin, Italian, chemistry, biology, gardening, and much more.

Minerva grew to be a strong willed, smart, determined young woman. She was often found in the study, or the garden, reading. She made friends with the maids and kitchen staff.

When she was seventeen, she found herself the sole owner of twenty acres, a manor, and fifteen house personnel. Her aunt offered to come and stay to help out, but Minerva politely declined. She started up a gardening club for young women in the area, which took up most of her time. Minerva was also a very charitable person. She was well known for paying off people's debts and helping with education costs. Everyone in Auror's Cove knew Minerva and they all loved her.

For a while Minerva prospered, the money flow was nice, and she lived very comfortably. But then, The Great Depression struck. People were unemployed, they lost their homes, and prices everywhere went down. The stock market crashed, and with it, the Rothschild family fortune.

* * *

“Grandpa, what’s The Great Depression?”

“It was a sad time for America in the early 20th century. Lots of people didn’t have jobs and they didn’t have a lot of money. Now, do you want me to continue or not?”

“Continue, continue!”

* * *

All her life Minerva had never had to worry about money, and she was severely unprepared for this calamity. Slowly, she had to let go of her entire house staff, as she couldn’t afford to pay them anymore. And being left alone in a large house is never a good thing for someone’s sanity.

Minerva was under a lot of pressure. She was getting older, and everyone was having enough trouble trying to keep their own families and fortunes afloat to even bat an eye at her. She frantically looked for a solution to her worries.

One day, she was walking around the backstreets of Boston after trying to retrieve her retirement savings from a bank that had unfortunately shut its doors to the public. Minerva bumped into a lanky, greasy looking man that had a long scar snaking along the right side of his stubbled chin. His name was Slim, or at least that was what everyone called him. This is how she came across Boston’s mafia. Slim worked with the mafia, and he saw an opportunity to exploit a sheltered old woman, so he took it.

Slim may have been skinny and frail looking, but he was very dangerous, as well as a great con artist. He pretended to care for Minerva, flattering her, and giving her *advice*. He told her that the answer to all her problems was to complete one little business transaction for him. He made it out to be a simple, law-abiding plan. Of course, Slim was lying. He wanted Minerva to pay a gang of hitmen some money that the Boston mafia owed them for killing off a rival. Minerva easily complied, too worried about her fortune to take a moment to think about the catastrophe she was getting herself into.

It all went down quite smoothly. Minerva, carrying a suitcase full of what she thought were real dollars, arrived at the meeting point which was an abandoned canning factory on the outskirts of Jamaica Plain, a notoriously dangerous area full of gangsters and thieves. The hitmen arrived ten minutes later, as a signal that everything was well; for now. Without a word, Minerva slid the suitcase over, and walked out. Little did she know, the small case was filled with counterfeit money. Slim had set her up in a trap.

* * *

“Ha Ha! The old lady was tricked!”

“Caleb, I’m almost done, can you hold your comments till the end please?”

* * *

Naturally, the hitmen were pissed, their bounty was fake! So they decided to get back at their traitor. As all hitmen do, these people had informants everywhere. It didn’t take long for them to find out where Minerva lived.

Late one night, they crawled through the windows of the sad manor, no one was alerted, there was only one occupant in the house, after all. Right as the clock struck midnight, a single shot echoed through the walls of Rothschild Manor. Minerva was dead.

It took several weeks for anyone to notice that she had died. Everyone thought she had shut herself up in the closed off estate. No one has claimed the house since, and if they did, they’d have a heck of a lot of insurance issues to sort out.

The End.

* * *

“Grandpa, that was a boring story! And I’m thirsty,” Caleb brings me back to reality,

“Really? I thought it was pretty good.”

“The only part I liked was when the old lady got shot. Bang bang!” Caleb is imitating a gun and is running in circles pretending to shoot gangsters and rich old women.

“Why don’t we go home and see your momma, then we’ll get you a nice drink.” I try to calm him down,

“Bang! Haha, I shot you Grandpa,”

“Caleb, shooting people isn’t polite, you know, your momma isn’t gonna be happy when she finds out about this.”

“I’m sorry Grandpa, I won’t do it again, *please* don’t tell momma.”

“Don’t tell me what exactly?”

I turn around to see my daughter, April, standing with her hands on her hips, trying for all the world to look mad. April couldn’t be serious if her life depended on it. I love her so much.

“April, what are you doing here? I thought you had work to do.”

“I’m done with work for today Dad, and I’m allowed to see my son and his grandpa if I want to,” she says with a smile playing on her lips.

“Momma! Grandpa just finished telling me the worst story ever! And I’m thirsty, so can we leave now?”

“Hey you little rascal, it was a good story and you know it. C’mere so I can tickle you to death!” I exclaim as I run towards him. Giggling, Caleb dashes up the path to town.

“Oh Dad, were you telling him that story about that old lady’s manor? I remember when you told me, I really thought it was true! Such a bummer that the bank took it away from her, they aren’t even doing anything with it.”

April looks wistfully back at the manor, before running after Caleb.

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Hurricane Tiffany

Ruby Kauffman

“And the weather report is predicting a hurricane coming up the East Coast. Residents of the east coast please continue to follow the weather and listen to any updates about this hurricane. This is not something to take lightly. This is predicted to be one of the biggest hurricanes ever recorded on the east coast. Hurricanes don’t normally get this strong and head this far up the east coast but this is climate change for you,” the weatherman announced over the radio.

I snuggled closer to my dog Moby and my little sisters Ava and Ana, on the soft rug that was laid out on the living room floor. I was scared. I hated storms, especially big ones. I didn’t want to think about the storm anymore so instead I gazed into the fire in front of us.

I’ve always loved to snuggle up in front of the fireplace and watch the fire. I lit it today using the sticks Ava and Ana had collected from the backyard and logs that my dad had cut. It was late September and

not very cold but you can always have a fire no matter the temperature.

I felt a little hand move on my side, so I looked down at Ava and Ana. They were four years old and identical twins that had blonde hair and freckles. I have dirty blonde hair and no freckles. Everyone says I looked like my dad and Ava and Ana looked like my mom. We lived in a cute house in the middle of a coastal town of Maine. I went to a public school near my house. I loved it! Everyone was nice including the teachers. There I was a part of the art and cooking clubs. I loved to paint and cook! I also volunteered at the animal shelter, where we got Moby, every Sunday. It was really fun to see all the animals and play with them.

Moby moved in closer to my left side. I reached out to pet him with my left hand, but I had again forgotten I don't have one. I lost my left hand four years ago when I was ten, in a freak shark attack. I had always loved swimming and have grown up in Maine near the coast, so I had been swimming all my life. I hadn't been swimming since the accident, though, because every time I thought about getting in the water, all I could remember was the shark and the pain and the blood. There was so much blood. The blood dyed the sand red and I still remember the sight of my parents standing over me after they pulled me from the water. My mom was crying and holding onto me, and my dad was calling an ambulance, but I tried not to think about it. I don't have a prosthetic hand anymore because I don't like the way it feels. I had adapted to life without a left hand, but sometimes I still forget and try to use it. It doesn't really affect my day to day life that much anymore, so I don't normally miss it. I got Moby right after the accident and I feel like that brought us together, because he helped me get through all my time in the hospital. He was the cutest thing ever, and I loved him so much. He was small-sized with short black hair and a long tail, which was always wagging.

"Olivia, please come in and help me with dinner," my mom yelled from the kitchen, startling me.

"Coming!" I yelled back, struggling to get up from between Moby and the twins.

"Mom, do you think that we will be okay during the storm? Are we going to evacuate or stay here?" I asked.

"To be honest honey, I don't know. I need to talk to your dad. It is supposed to get here on Friday and it's only Monday. Anything could

happen with the storm during that time. For all we know it could change direction or shrink. It will be okay,” my mom comforted. I knew she was trying to reassure me, but I saw the worry in her eyes.

“Okay, yeah I bet it will all be okay,” I said for my mom's sake but I looked down at the black beans I am stirring so she didn't see the worry in my eyes.

Dinner was rice, black beans, and strawberries. We all sat in our normal spaces at the table, mom at the head, dad and Ava on the left, me and Ana on the right, and Moby under the table hoping someone will drop a bit of food for him.

Dinner was quiet except for an occasional noise coming from Ava or Ana. I think my parents were more worried about the storm than my mom let on earlier. I couldn't stand the quiet so I asked to be excused and go upstairs.

I took a warm shower and tried to collect my thoughts.

After, I went back into my room and checked my phone for texts. I had two texts from my best friend Ellie.

“What are you doing?” one read.

“Have you heard about the storm?” the other read.

I texted back, “The storm sounds bad. Want to come over?”

Ellie and I had been best friends since we were babies. She lived right down the street from me so we practically lived at each other's houses.

“Sure! Coming now,” she texted back.

Three minutes later, I heard a knock on my bedroom door.

“Come in!” I said.

It was Ellie, my mom or dad must have let her in. We sat down on the matching navy blue bean bags in the corner of my room. My parents had gotten them for me in sixth grade. They had become Ellie's and my favorite place to sit and talk about anything: crushes, family, girl stuff, school drama, and now the storm.

“So I saw on the news that they were calling it the “Storm of the Century” in Maine because it is supposed to be the biggest storm ever on the east coast! It has been named Hurricane Tiffany,” Ellie blurted out, barely stopping to take a breath.

“Like, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*!” I said, laughing. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was one of our favorite sleepover movies.

“It’s kind of exciting, but at the same time pretty scary. I know there have been a lot of hurricanes in other places this year, but this is the first one that could damage things and kill people here,” I said.

“Are you going to evacuate?” Ellie questioned.

“I don’t know. My mom said she still had to talk to my dad. What about you?” I asked.

“We are going to evacuate to my brother’s house in Wisconsin and try to prepare our house to make sure it gets the least amount of damage possible,” Ellie replied.

“Oh, cool,” I said. We didn’t know what else to say so we just sat there in silence.

We were both worried and so it felt reassuring to just sit there with Ellie, even if we aren’t talking to each other.

Ellie went home a little later and I went to sleep soon after that.

* * *

It was now Wednesday afternoon and school has already been canceled for Thursday and Friday. Dad and I were running to the store to get supplies to prepare for the hurricane. Mom and dad had decided that we are going to stay and try to ride out the storm.

It was crazy to see how barren the store was. It looks like there had been a reality T.V. show in there, where a bunch of people tried to get as much as they could in fifteen minutes.

We had a list of everything we needed: sandbags, plywood, bottled water, canned food, regular food, radio, batteries, flashlights, and a bunch more stuff that we might need during the hurricane.

We both grabbed a cart and walked down the empty aisles looking for everything on our list. We found some canned food so we took basically everything that was left. We got canned soup, peaches, beans, tuna, and corn. We also got chips, bananas, peanut butter, and bread. Luckily there was still a good amount of flashlights and batteries so we got as much as we could. The store was almost out of water so we grabbed all the water they had.

“I am going to get the sandbags and plywood, okay?” my dad asked.

“Sure. I will see if there’s anything else we need,” I replied.

I turned the cart around and started going down random aisles. I found some duct tape and rope so I put them in the cart. I also found some chocolate bars and put them in the cart just because chocolate is so good.

At home we tried to organize everything we got. Mom and Dad were boarding up the windows. I put the food and water in the pantry and the flashlights and batteries in an empty cabinet we had in the kitchen. Ava and Ana tried to help me, but all they did was get in my way.

Just seeing everything that we got was making me more nervous. What if it wasn't enough?

Ava, Ana and I were in the living room doing a puzzle when my parents came back in.

"It's already getting windy outside," my dad announced, "The plywood is all up. We put the sandbags around the doors and a few extra around the perimeter of the house."

"Okay, thanks guys," I said.

I thought Ava and Ana were too little to understand what was happening because they didn't even look up from the puzzle or realize that the windows were all boarded over. It was darker in the room so I turned on another lamp. I thought Moby could feel the worry in the room though, because he came and sat at my feet.

We all stayed inside on Thursday and just played games, like *Clue* and *Sorry*. Ava and Ana were still oblivious to what was happening, but I could tell my parents were really worried. The wind was already picking up more and it was raining. I woke up early that morning and when I walked downstairs, I saw my dad asleep on the couch with the TV still on the news about the hurricane.

The closer the hurricane got, the more worried I got. I really don't want anything to change. For what felt like the first time in my life, I felt like I was in control of my life. I had good friends, a good house, a good school, and a good family. I hoped that the hurricane would come and no one would get hurt, nothing would be destroyed, and nothing would change so that after it was gone, everything could go back to normal. After the accident it took weeks in the hospital to recover and then months to rehab and learn how to do simple tasks with one hand. Like getting dressed, doing my hair, and picking big objects up. Then it felt like my life was tipped upside down but then everything was fine or at least it was until I heard this storm was coming to Maine.

I fell asleep quickly but woke up early again. I looked out my window This was the day the hurricane was supposed to come. The clouds were dark like a bad bruise and the wind ripped around like a lion stuck in a cage. The rain was already falling at a steady pace. We had

already lost power. I went back upstairs to wake my parents to tell them, but they were already awake and dressed.

“We already lost power,” I said.

“I know. We need to keep checking the weather. Right now they are predicting winds up to 100 miles per hour later tonight and up to one foot of rain and three feet of storm surge. I didn’t think it would be this bad,” my dad whispered.

“Can you get dressed and ready and then wake up your sisters and help them do the same?” my mom asked me.

“Okay,” I replied, turning the corner to my room.

I put on a pair of blue jeans and a black t-shirt. When I was ready, I went into the room Ava and Ana shared.

“Good morning,” I sang as I tried to turn on the light, forgetting we don’t have power. I opened the curtains instead which provided us with a little light because only the first floor windows were boarded up. Out the window I could barely see past all the rain.

Ava and Ana sat up in their beds and looked at me sleepily. I got Ava dressed in black leggings and a pink shirt, while I got Ana dressed in black leggings and a blue shirt. Once they were ready, we went downstairs and all sat at the table.

“Dad, want help with breakfast?” I asked, getting up from my chair and walking into the kitchen.

“Sure, we are just having cereal though to use up the last of the milk so it doesn’t spoil,” he said.

I brought in the cereal, milk, bowls, and spoons to the dining room and everyone sat and ate around the candle-lit table.

The hurricane had gotten worse since a little while ago. Thunder claps outside and we could hear the rain pounding against the wood as we ate. Every once in a while the wind would shake the house.

By noon there was already flooding and trees that had fallen down. I really hoped our tree doesn’t fall down because if it did, it might fall on our house. The water was starting to come in the door, so for the moment we resorted to putting towels there.

By then Ava and Ana had realized that something was wrong because they had been really good and had listened to what we said to them. Right then they were in their room watching the storm from their window.

“Olivia come down!” my mom screamed from downstairs.

I looked up startled and ran down the stairs as fast as I possibly could. The floor was covered in an inch of water! And more was pouring in under the door!

I got more towels, splashing the water everywhere every time one of my feet hit the ground. My socks were already soaked. I put them down wherever I saw water but they were not doing anything. My dad was getting Ava and Ana to help him bring stuff upstairs so that it didn't get destroyed.

Then, as a huge gust of wind came shaking the house we heard a loud crack. We all knew what it was as soon as we heard it.

"Get down!" my dad screamed at the top of his lungs.

I grabbed Ana and dragged her under the dining room table where my dad, mom, and Ava were huddled.

Then as we heard a final sickening crack, the tree came down on the house.

The sound was horrible and the entire house shuddered as it came in. I could hear the house cracking and breaking under the weight of the huge pine tree. Then another crack as it broke through the ceiling above us. And then darkness.

I woke up to a howling wind whipping my hair around. I sat up and realized that I was lying on top of the table in a foot of water. I was lucky I didn't drown. I looked to my left and right and saw the walls of my house, but when I looked up there was nothing except a few pieces of the upstairs floor still attached to the top of the walls. The wind and rain still whipped around me and a sudden big splash of water made me realize, where is everyone else? I looked around and saw no one. I moved around on the table by paddling with my arms and feet. I looked around in the water but still I saw no one, not even Moby. I called out the names of my family, but my screams were drowned out by the howling wind and rain.

After screaming, I realized I was bleeding. There was a cut on my cheek and on my shoulder. I quickly took off my socks and put them on my shoulder. My cheek had mostly stopped bleeding, but there was still a slight pounding in my head. I realized that I must have been hit in the head which was how I was knocked out.

I got up from the floating table and walked over to the front door and opened it. As soon as I did, a huge gust of wind blew and pushed me underwater. Outside, the water was much higher, maybe three feet high. I couldn't breathe and I hadn't been swimming for years since the

accident. Then, all I could remember was the sight of the fin and then the pain.

Breathe. I told myself, just breathe. So I broke free from the water and took a huge gulp of air, but soon the wind pushed me under again. This time I fought back and came up yelling for help. It was very hard to keep my footing in the water because the currents and the wind were so strong, but somehow I managed to float over to a part of a tree and hung on for dear life. I yelled out for my family or for someone to come and help until I lost my voice. My shoulder started to hurt again from its digging into the tree, but I still held on. I saw I was starting to float in the current away from my house, but I didn't try to do anything.

After a while, I started to paddle in a direction so that I didn't have to fight the wind. The water was even higher now. I saw some houses, some whole and some in pieces, but I must have drifted farther than I thought because I didn't recognize any of them. Still I paddled, yelling out occasionally for help.

The weird thing was that I didn't see any other people or animals outside. I guess a lot of people either evacuated or were dead. Again, I thought about my family and started to cry. What the heck happened to them?

As the sky got darker and darker, I could no longer touch the street, so I had to hang on to the tree. I was really cold, because I was soaked to the bone. I was also really hungry and tired. My arms ached from paddling, but paddling was my only hope of finding someone to help me.

Soon it all became too much, and I laid my head down on the rough tree bark and fell asleep.

I woke up to the sound of a motor and immediately jerked up.

"Help, help, help, please," I croaked out. "Help!" I yelled again this time it comes out as a yell.

I heard voices and through the rain, I saw a small boat coming toward me! It looked like there was one man in the back working the motor and a woman up front with binoculars. I also saw some figures wrapped in blankets behind the woman.

Finally, they reached me and the woman reached out for my hand and pulled me up onto the floor of the boat which was filled with water.

"I am Bianca. What is your name?" the woman asked.

“Olivia. Olivia Smith,” I replied.

“Here is a blanket,” Bianca said to me “Just sit on the bench and hold on,” she adds. “Do you know where your family is?”

“No,” I whispered trying not to cry again.

She went over to the man in the back and talked to him for a minute. I did what she said and sat down next to a woman holding a baby in her lap. Across from us there is an older woman and man holding on to each other’s hands.

After picking up two more people out of the water, we turned around and head to the Lobsters’ stadium, which was being used as a shelter for people that were stuck in the storm.

I remembered going there once to see one of the Lobsters soccer games with my mom and dad before the twins were born.

When we reached it, we were unloaded onto a ramp and the boat sped away, probably to go pick up more people. We were led up it into the stadium.

The stadium was filled with cots laid out in all directions. There were people and pets everywhere. I went over to an empty cot and sat down to think for a minute.

* * *

“Olivia what are you doing?” Ellie yells up the stairs, “It’s dinner time. My mom made mac and cheese!”

“Coming!” I yell back.

Every day my mind plays back the horrible memories of the days leading up to the hurricane, the day of the hurricane, and the long days of waiting for any news on my family after.

I am living with Ellie, her mom, and her brother in Wisconsin right now and have been for the past year. After staying at the stadium and trying to find my parents for a week, we found them, but not the way I had wanted to. They were found floating dead in the water a couple miles from our house. Ava and Ana were found dead to still clinging to each other stopped up against the house next to ours. Most of Maine’s coast has been destroyed including my entire neighborhood. Moby was never found.

My life has been turned upside down again, and it can never be the way it used to be. I miss my family and Moby so much every day. But at least I have Ellie and her amazing family to take care of me now.

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Hello, Elaine

Katarina Dvornik

Again, you hear a rip as the strawberry splatters spangle your scratchy sweater. Again, you have fallen. Your knobby knees tremble as you scoop up with both arms the mangled paper shopping bag full of fruity wreckage.

You must look like such a fool, you admonish yourself, as you use the Nissan beside you to help yourself up. *You should have asked Elaine for help.*

It feels like a trek across continents towards the distant sculpture of metal and mineral you call your car. No, no, you shouldn't have asked Elaine. Elaine would just tell you that you were such a poor thing, so frail, not even able to walk across the supermarket parking lot. Elaine hasn't seen you before you grew into a senile stick figure, when you were strong and providing and gracious. Elaine only sees this shriveled husk of a man, her husband's father who still acts like a child, who doesn't go outside except to buy his precious strawberries. This weak old hermit, so distracted by reminiscence that he floats adrift from the world around him, so isolated in his memories that his reality has slipped away into a fallacious fantasy of "the way things used to be."

There must be a better way. Some shortcut, maybe? One where you cut straight through this inane, twisting parking lot of age? It had seemed so easy to get in, burdenless and unaware of the choices that awaited you later. All of a sudden, so many possibilities arose, paralyzing you with fear. Potatoes? Corn? If you had chosen two cans of broth instead of three, bananas to replace apples, maybe the baggage you now carry with you would not weaken you so, maybe your steps would be spry and lively and youthful.

Elaine will be worried, you know. Elaine is always worried about something, cooing to you, taking off your sweaters, ruining your cooking with her "healthy" cinches and hacks, confiscating everything that makes you feel strong and providing and gracious so she can feel like the hero. But she is no hero. Why did Samuel even let this smarmy wife into his life? You can take care of yourself without that Saran-Wrap of a daughter-in-law, all sticky and cling-like, wrapping herself around you, choking you, until you have no choice but to cry for help...

The ground. It's getting closer, and your wrinkly, loose hand is shooting out to guard against it, but all it's doing is pushing away the inevitable, for your cheek is brushing against the pavement and memories from years and years ago are leaking into your sight and warping the image of the fading blue sky. Your vision buzzes and blurs and finally draws closed as you writhe on the asphalt.

You gulp in a hasty breath of air as the world falls in before you.

You see yourself, a young ragamuffin grinning gleefully as you cling onto your father's burly frame, his smile weathered from years of hardship and terror in the military, fighting bravely and nobly, but with an insurmountable cost of trauma. You look at his face, begging him to come back from the twisted, endlessly hopeless place he had retreated towards during the war, to stay with you a little longer. You try to reach out to him, but as your hand drifts toward him you feel an aching, sorrowful pain and his face melts into yours, your face scowling in disgust as a lanky young man, Samuel, smiles, just a bit of bittersweet in his eyes, at a faceless woman in white from whom you recoil in disgust. *Elaine*. You know when this is-- Samuel's wedding day. The thought vibrates in your skull like a gong as you register. *His wedding day*. The day when he had almost everything he wanted. The day that should have been so happy, that *was* so happy. So happy, apart from the fact that you didn't show up.

Your eyes flutter open, and hover at the hospital ceiling as you breathe in the scene surrounding you. A tranquil light is streaming through a twisted windowshade, its glares illuminating a slice of your rumpled bedding, and you thrust yourself backwards, squeezing your eyes into tight slits. The sheets smell tart and like chlorine, but you sigh in relief, for the scent is better than the lavender Febreze in whose musk Elaine blankets your room, as she insists the aroma is "rejuvenating." You clear your throat of the mucus and uncertainty your befuddling visions brought you, and suddenly, in the silence that follows, you hear a faint, hushed voice in the hall, accompanied by the click of shoe soles.

"...at least he's not concussed..."

You perceive the soft tones as your son. The voice, shaky yet reassuring, sounds muffled by your chilled pillowcase, yet it seems to get louder. The other side of the conversation becomes audible.

“He shouldn’t have been out there in the first place! He said he’d call so I knew where he was ... I should have been more careful.”

“You shouldn’t worry so much, Elaine. He’s... ”

“Why did he fall, then? We need to support him, to keep him safe! He needs help, Sam!”

“Yeah, and he doesn’t want yours!”

“Is that my fault? I *care* about him, I-I’m being so kind to him! I was *in the lot* when he fell, I called the ambulance for him! You *grew up* with him, Sam! Why can’t you give him what I’m giving him?”

Samuel’s voice has a frustration driving it that you never heard in him when he was growing up as he growls, “Why can’t you just *back off*? That’s the problem with you, you *don’t take no for an answer*! He’s okay the way he is! He *loved* his life before you came along! Can’t you see that he doesn’t want your help--”

Elaine’s voice is slowly unraveling from anger into a mess of confused desperation.

Well--well--”

“*What?*”

There’s a resounding silence between the two, and you can hear your heart beating with trepidation. You have heard their worried musings before, but never in this way. The two are getting very close to your room.

“My father didn’t get to grow old like he has.”

Elaine takes a shaky breath, almost in rhythm with yours. Your head buzzes with emotion as all of Elaine’s story comes together.

“He...” her voice catches, as if grabbing onto a memory. “My father passed away when I was seven. He was thirty-three. Too young to die... I barely even knew him. *He* barely even knew himself. He didn’t get to make all the decisions your dad got. It’s like... like he didn’t even make it *into* the supermarket while Richard is all the way out.”

“Elaine, I... I didn’t... I’m... ”

“Look, when I help him... it’s like helping my dad all over again. It’s like seeing a little glimpse of what my dad might have been if he hadn’t... he hadn’t... I just don’t want to lose him.”

Maybe Elaine means her father, or maybe she means you. Maybe it doesn’t matter. You realize tears are running down your cheeks.

“I can’t let him refuse my help. I had to let go of my dad once. I *let* my dad go. I didn’t even know him and I *let* him go. I’m not making that mistake again. I’m *not* letting Richard go.”

The two are in your room now, bathed in light, and Elaine’s sobbing breaths are swaddled by Samuel’s knowing embrace. You hear his soft whispers, though you can’t understand them.

Slowly, you let your eyes drift open, and you see your son. Your son, whom you abandoned on his happiest day, to whom you didn’t give enough even when he needed it most. And you look at Elaine. For the first time you really look at her. She’s not just a Saran Wrap lady, or your son’s corruptor. You look at her and you see a bit of yourself, a child who let go of their parent unknowingly, still reaching out for their hand though their father has long passed on. You don’t see your bitterness or misery, not yet. You don’t ever want to see that in Elaine. She is trying, really trying, and maybe she needs you just as you need her. Yes, you need her. Who would have panicked and called the ambulance when you fell? Who makes sure to know where you are at all times? Who drives you to and from the supermarket for your groceries? Who cares about you so deeply she sees you as a father? Who will never let go?

Elaine looks at you, a glimmer of sadness pushing behind her eyes like a wounded animal. You look at her and you see a daughter. And for the first time in a long time, you smile at Elaine.

“Hello, Elaine,” you say.

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Perfect Isn’t Ideal

Lily Thompson

I carefully stepped out of my mom’s Lexus and took a deep breath. In... and out.

“Have a nice day at school, Amy!” My mom yelled out the window. *Okay*, I thought, *time to leave Amy behind*. This was part of my daily routine. I left the confinement of my family, left behind being the perfect daughter, and I became Elia. My given name is Amelia Burbi, but almost no one takes the effort to speak it. Amelia is who I really want to be. With my family I am Amy: part of my picture perfect family, one of two beautiful Burbi daughters. But perfect isn’t ideal. I was not par-

ticularly close to any of my family members. We were seen as flawless, but I wasn't sure that was true.

So at school I became Elia, the pretty popular girl who is even less of myself.

I waved bye to my mother and rushed to the bathroom to meet my two best friends: Ivy and Emma. Ivy and Emma had never met Amy; they only knew Elia. I forced a smile onto my face and pushed through the door.

"Elia!" Ivy and Emma screamed in perfect harmony. I reached my arms out to embrace each of them, making sure to maintain my smile. Then in perfect sync we walked over to the shiny mirrors of Killington High School, KHS for short. I plopped my bag onto the counter that contained my sink. There were three sinks, three of us. We took it as a sign of our everlasting friendship. I stared back at my reflection and was immediately disgusted. My shiny blonde hair had been carefully curled into many ringlets. My eyelids shimmered gold and my eyelashes were pitch black and unnaturally long. My lips were coated in a thick shiny substance. All of my imperfections were covered, all of me was covered. I wished I could have wiped it all off.

I quickly regained my composure and began to fix my checkered skirt and tank top. Ivy and Emma both reached for their phones, and I quickly imitated their actions. I knew exactly the purpose of the phones: social media. I brought my manicured finger to press the app and started to smush my lips into a round shape. *The world likes the weirdest things*, I thought. We put our arms around each other and rearranged our facial features to fit beauty standards. We chose the pictures in which we looked best and posted them for the world to see.

Next, it was time for class. I said goodbye to Ivy and Emma and headed for my locker. I smiled again as I saw who was waiting for me. I still wasn't sure if the smile was that of Amy or Elia.

"Alejandro," I whispered as I stood on my tip toes and brought my lips to his. Alejandro had been my boyfriend for about a year now. Since he was part of the group of popular boys, our relationship made sense. Over time I had grown to like him. To me, Alejandro wasn't part of Elia's or Amy's lives, he was Amelia's.

"Ready for math class?" he asked.

Yay! I thought, but I did not reveal my love for math. I slouched down and reluctantly smiled. I grabbed my things from my locker, grabbed Alejandro's hand and started off to Mr. Jankens's class. Al-

most the whole school turned to look at us, attempted to say hi. I smiled at all of them, but all I really wanted to do was become one of them, one of the normals. I wanted the simple life that allowed me to be my true self, to be Amelia. The social standards, the hierarchy the world is based on, that I was a part of, needed to be destroyed, starting with my high school. They were restricting me from being who I truly wanted to be.

About halfway through math class I decided today was the day to begin the destruction.

Almost every day for the months before I had been adding to my grand plan. By now it was developed enough, and ready to put into action. It didn't have to be perfect, I knew that the people at KHS were unsuspecting enough to go along with it. The school year had about one month left, and I had calculated that this plan would take around the same amount of time. Even better, I could request to make a speech at the end of the year. Ivy, Emma, Alejandro, and I were big parts of this plan; the only difference between us was that they did not know their involvement. The last page of my notebook titled "PLAN" read:

STEP 1: Expose Ivy and Emma. Break them up with their boyfriends (Jacob and Jack) and post the many videos of them bullying our classmates that had been sitting in my camera roll for much too long.

It wasn't that I didn't like Ivy and Emma, but they were the only people in the school that I could use to execute my plan. On many occasions I had seen Ivy and Emma bully our peers. I didn't want everyone at KHS to end up like me, hiding themselves. I also knew that Ivy and Emma's relationships were just for show, so I didn't feel bad about breaking them up. My expectations would be completely exceeded if Ivy and Emma would exchange boyfriends.

STEP 2: Sit with many people at lunch, talk to everyone, and live without beauty standards.

By now the whole school should be in chaos, feeding off all the drama. Maybe Ivy and Emma would have a big fight in school, too. If I could get Alejandro in on it, everything would work very smoothly.

\ **STEP 3:** Make my speech at the end of the year.

This speech had been written for a while now, but I had always been too nervous to present it, until now. This three step plan had been completed to fulfill my every need. And as they always say, good things

come in threes! It was time to put the first step into action. I already understood what we were learning, so I silently took out my phone and hid it in the desk.

I pressed on Ivy's name first and began to type:

"Ivy! I'm just making sure you heard what Jack said..."

"What?! What did he say?!" Ivy responded almost immediately.

"You really want to know?" I needed her to know that this was extreme.

"Yes."

"He said that he would rather be dating Emma. I'm so sorry, Ivy."

It took awhile for her to respond, but once she finally did, all she said was, "Oh."

I didn't feel bad about what I did. I knew that the end result would outweigh anything throughout the plan.

Next, it was time to do the same with Emma, but with Jacob instead of Jack. For extra precaution I texted Jacob and Jack individually and told of the many times that the opposite's girlfriend had talked about them, and how much they longed to date them. They didn't need to know that it was all part of my grand scheme.

For the video exposure I chose a short recording of the two girls making fun of Betty. Betty was that one girl in the school who everyone made fun of. She had been added to my list of friends to make once this plan was executed. I posted this incriminating video to a public account I had made solely for this purpose. I also sent the video to a couple of the gossips, just to make sure it got around.

By the next week both the once happy couples had broken up, and the whole school was talking about the video. Betty, who once had no friends, was now part of the gossip, which resulted in many new friends. The week after, Ivy and Emma had successfully exchanged boyfriends, and gotten into a large and loud fight in the cafeteria. The whole school was in chaos—they lived for the drama. I had successfully accomplished step one, but I wasn't sure if I could complete step two alone. I decided now was the time to recruit Alejandro.

That day I went over to his house.

"Alejandro, I have something to ask you."

"Shoot," he replied.

I calmly pulled out my battered notebook and placed it onto his desk. My heart was pounding out of my chest. *What if he reveals my*

plan to the whole school? I thought. I quickly dismissed my hesitation and continued.

“I want to cancel the popularity contest at school,” I said quickly so I wouldn’t have to even think about it. I continued to explain my plan, and introduced the three steps that I thought guaranteed success. By the end of my explanation, Alejandro sported a very wide smile. He reached under his bed and pulled out a similarly beaten up notebook. On the first page “PLAN” was scribbled in a dark blood red color. I snatched the notebook from his grasp, I was so intrigued. I needed to see its contents. Towards the end of the book Alejandro had written a plan very similar to mine. It was clear he had not been working on it for as long as I had. His plan was not as well developed. He had written that he would somehow cause chaos, and he too had planned a speech for his last step. I grinned as I placed the notebook on the desk, right next to mine.

“So, when do we start step two, Elia?” he asked. I was positive he had noticed my rain of chaos from the past days.

“Tomorrow,” I replied, my smile had grown even bigger now. “And one more thing,” I added, “you can call me Amelia.” He smirked as I left with a little spring in my step.

My heart was still pounding with anticipation when I got home. I quickly got ready for bed. I knew I would need the rest for the next day.

When I woke up the next day I was completely out of sorts. For years I had begun my day according to what people expected of Amy and Elia, but today it was Amelia’s turn. I pulled on a long yellow dress covered in blue flowers, and a gray cardigan. I brushed out my hair, but left it in its natural wavy state. I looked at myself in the mirror, “Hi Amelia,” I whispered. I left my face bare except for some lip balm, so for the first time since I could remember my face was in its natural state and did not glow with beauty. I slipped my bag onto my shoulder and headed downstairs for breakfast.

“Good morning Amy,” both my mother and sister, Rosemary, said.

“You can call me Amelia now.” They both looked shocked, but after a quick look at my appearance, they realized something had changed. I grinned quickly at Rosemary while grabbing a waffle from the toaster, and noticed something I hadn’t before. Rosemary never wore makeup, never dressed or acted according to what other people

expected. At that moment I realized that all this time Rosemary had been my true role model.

At home, my family and I did not have many interactions. We would sit down for dinner together every night, have normal family discussions, but there was always a few awkward pauses. From the outside we seemed like a happy loving family, and I guess that was true. We were happy and loving, but there was a hint of something else behind it. I guess my family dynamic was a big part of why I hid Amelia.

When I arrived at school Alejandro was already waiting for me. He was dressed in long jeans and a sweatshirt. His hair framed his head in a floppy mess. He was the most handsome I had ever seen him.

“Hello my beautiful Amelia,” he whispered. I could not keep my joy concealed, a wide smile spread across my bare face. I grabbed his hand and entered the school. Not a hint of nervousness existed in my being. That is, until I entered the school.

Jacob and Jack were throwing punches while Ivy and Emma stood by crying, consoled by the others. I knew it was just for show. The whole school was cheering the fight on. The results of step one had exceeded my expectations. My speech would be in a week.

Once teachers broke up the fight, all eyes turned to Alejandro and me. They searched our faces for reasons, signs of mania. It was the perfect reaction. Alejandro and I smiled. We didn’t have to exchange words to know exactly what the other meant.

This went on for the next few days. We ate lunch at different tables daily and greeted everyone we saw. We dressed and acted as we wanted, and ignored the dirty, confused looks. We were Amelia and Alejandro, the most normal and happy couple on the planet. We walked through the halls normally as everyone else whispered or fought, all living for the drama.

Tomorrow would be the last day of school, and that meant that it would be time for my speech. The edges of the paper that contained the words were wrinkled and the ink started to splotch after many months of being read over and over. I was ready.

“Next up Amelia will be presenting a speech,” the principal spoke into a pitch black microphone, his words echoing inside my head. I had been waiting to hear them for so long that they almost startled me. Alejandro brought me back to reality, took my hand, and guided my eyes to the podium towards the front of the gym. Although Alejandro

had been a big part of putting this plan into action, he knew that it should be me to present the speech.

I pulled the paper from my bag and began.

“Hello, my name is Amelia Burbi. Today I would like to discuss the social dynamic at our school. A few weeks ago I started an experiment on all of the students. I created so much drama that I knew not one of you could resist getting sucked in. I also knew just the right people to execute this experiment: it had to be the popular girls, the girls I had at one point called my best friends. You would not have taken notice if it had been anyone else, but that is only because you do not have a window into anyone else’s lives, and their dramas. I was Elia at this school. I hid my true self because I thought that you would enjoy a different version better. I believed that you would like me better, but I ended up liking myself less. I was pressured to fit into this dynamic, so much so that I had to develop a plan to get out of it. So now I encourage you to stop ranking yourself among the people at this school and to show us who you truly are.”

As I went on I saw the faces of the people I once looked down upon light up. They nodded and smiled. I think I even caught a quick grin from Ivy. I told them of my plan, and how I wouldn’t have been able to do it without Alejandro. I slipped in a quick apology to anyone I hurt along the way, cautiously making eye contact with Ivy and Emma. I convinced my peers that our ways needed to change, and now. And I introduced my true self, introduced Amelia.

I stepped off the stage. I had no idea what to expect, but what happened was nowhere near expected. Everyone just kind of sat there. Most people wore wide eyes, some even gave me dirty looks. I understood their frustration, I had played them all. I only hoped that they would come around and realize that my only intention was to benefit them.

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The Actress and the Playwright

Ruthanna Kern

Amanda

That man, the one with the furrowed brow and a cell phone to his ear speaking a mile a minute, was Elliott Wilden, and he was getting the news from his coworker at the toilet paper manufacturing company that

his secretary, Jimmy, had contracted pneumonia. And that woman, she walked slower than the rest of the crowd with a slight limp on her left leg, her name was Michelle Conway, and she had broken her ankle while rollerblading with her two excitable nephews.

Amanda Caldwell sat on a park bench in the town center with her legs crossed, right over left, shivered, and watched the people walk by. There were so many different people with so many possible intriguing stories circling Amanda as she sipped a Chai Latte and observed the world. She jotted down the new people in her old fashioned, blue tattered notebook with the silver lace detailing where she kept her stories, then glanced back up at the bustling town.

Besides the people, Amanda could also see Pendaly Town Hall, the gray skies, and her breath. She could hardly say that her favorite thing about her new home was the Minnesota winters. In fact, she wouldn't say that at all. She definitely couldn't say her new school was her favorite either, no offense to Pendaly High. Amanda shivered again, only partly from the cold as her phone started playing "Defying Gravity."

Great. My "Stop daydreaming and walk to school already!" alarm, Amanda thought. Just perfect.

Savannah

Savannah Emory regretted having taken a pass on those crappy gloves she had found at GoodWill for 10 cents as she walked onto Pendaly High's property. When it was this cold, even crappy gloves were better than no gloves. Savannah bolted toward the school's front door, accidentally elbowing a few stragglers to get inside quicker. Who cared anyway? They were trying to be late to first period, why not help them out a bit? Savannah laughed and some of the kids gave her a funny look, that girl who had no friends to laugh with. But Savannah saw those looks and she laughed some more. She laughed all the way to geometry until Mrs. Peabody told her to stop.

Mrs. Peabody had been teaching at this school since Savannah's mother was born, and Savannah could hardly do the math to figure out her age, but she couldn't really do math that well anyway. That might have been a contributing factor in Mrs. Peabody's iron stare, and then Savannah wanted to laugh more, but she didn't. Savannah knew how to control her actions, all good actresses did, and Savannah had every intention of being a good actress.

“The Geometric Mean Altitude Theorem...” Mrs. Peabody began to lecture. Savannah had thought there was no way to make geometry more boring, but Mrs. Peabody had found one. Her voice was so monotonous that Savannah often felt tempted to give her an acting lesson on variety of tone and its positive effect on teenagers’ interest levels.

“Who can tell me what this means?”

Nobody responded.

“Who can tell me what a mean is?”

Nothing.

“Altitude? Theorem? Do any of you even know what geometric means? It’s November! Midterms are in a month! I won’t guarantee that I will offer a make-up test after each and every one of you fail!” Mrs. Peabody looked as if she had never been this disappointed.

Savannah sighed. This was going to be a long class.

Amanda

Amanda pretended to be paying attention to biology. She wasn’t. She was scribbling in the second section of her notebook. She wasn’t making up stories for the people she saw anymore. Amanda was new to Pendaly High, but she already felt as though she understood her classmates. They were all so showy, so loud. Amanda couldn’t make up stories about people she understood.

The second section of her beloved notebook was where Amanda wrote her play. She couldn’t even remember why or how or even when she had started writing, it just sort of came to her. Maybe writing was Amanda’s coping mechanism. Maybe making up stories about people helped her to forget about her own. Or something like that.

But Amanda never thought of it that way, because she loved writing and she poured all of her emotions, the ones she didn’t feel comfortable expressing out loud, into her play. This play was Amanda’s masterpiece, and sometimes she just started writing and couldn’t stop.

“Miss Caldwell!” Amanda looked up at Mr. Harrison, the only teacher in all of America that still insisted on calling students by their last names. “What are you working on? Am I right to guess that it is not the science assignment?”

“Yes, Mr. Harrison,” Amanda admitted, somewhat meekly.

“Then, Miss Caldwell, I must request that you hand me that book of yours immediately.” Amanda stiffened. She looked at Mr. Harrison, her eyes pleading and beginning to water.

“Please sir, please. I can’t give this to you.” Amanda’s voice was beginning to break, weaken. “I just can’t!” Amanda loathed feeling weak, and she had no idea why she acting was so childish. She shouldn’t be this protective of an inanimate object, but Amanda couldn’t bring herself to hand the little book over.

“Ooooh, Amanda has a diary!” Vicky Jackson squealed. Her voice turned honey smooth as she suggested, “Mr. Harrison, you should read it aloud to all of us. I’m sure Amanda wouldn’t mind.”

“No! No, please, no,” Amanda whimpered.

“Who do you like, Amanda? Who? Does that book say? Can I borrow it for a second? I promise it will only be a second.” Then Amanda felt them, hands touching her arms, reaching to grab her most precious possession, one of the things she loved most in this world. She didn’t even remember her piercing scream. Or pushing Vicky off her. Or running out of the classroom with her notebook. Or slamming the door.

At this point it was just Amanda’s instinct to run when she felt threatened. She ran down the hallway without a clue where she was going, she just needed to get out of this school. She needed to go. There was something in her way; she couldn’t quite tell how far away it was through her tears. Amanda found out when she crashed, fell, and was helped to her feet by a somewhat tall, red-headed girl who, with true concern in her eyes asked Amanda,

“Are you okay?”

Savannah

Savannah hadn’t seen the girl coming; she was a rocket as she turned the corner and practically flew forward. Savannah had fallen over along with the girl, but she was quicker to recover. When Savannah reached to help this girl up, she could feel her hands trembling.

“Are you okay?” she questioned once more.

The girl didn’t respond at first, she just wiped the tears from her eyes. She had long, dark brown hair that looked too thick for its hair tie. It was the type of hair that would be really fun to braid. The girl’s eyes were also brown, a warm shade of brown that seemed inviting and was set to contrast against the rest of the girl’s upset features. There was something magical about those eyes, and Savannah felt the need to stare at them, to explore. She was a kind person, Savannah was sure of it, and she wanted to know more about her. *Sorry Mrs. Peabody, Sa-*

vannah thought, *I might not be coming back from the bathroom any time soon.*

“Come on.” Savannah led the girl to a window seat at the end of the hallway, and they both sat down on the specially designed Pendaly Penguins pillow.

The girl managed to stutter, “I am so sorry if I shocked you or hurt you or... I’m just sorry.”

“There’s absolutely nothing to be sorry about, I’m fine.” Savannah felt her concern grow. This girl’s voice was so scared, so weak. And Savannah detected something in her tone that made Savannah think she was ashamed. “And you haven’t answered my question yet.”

Amanda thought she saw the girl smile, but only for half a second. Still, half a second was a start. The girl answered, “I’m fine,” her voice a bit more steady.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Alright, I’m not fine.”

“Okay. Why?”

“A lot of reasons?”

“That’s fair. I’m Savannah Emory. I’m a freshman. You must be one too, though I don’t think we have any classes together because if we did, I would know your name. What is your name?” *It would have been impossible to forget this girl.*

“Amanda Caldwell and, yeah, I am a freshman. We don’t have any classes together, but I think we have the same lunch.”

“Lunch! Now I want lunch! Lunch is a truly delicious thing.”

Amanda looked like she was beginning to defrost, almost. “I definitely think lunch is the most important meal of the day, so take that ‘Team Breakfast!’”

And that’s what broke her, but in a good way. Savannah knew that Amanda wasn’t broken like she was before, the painful kind. It was that like the dam Amanda had built was falling down, and all of the water was rushing through as Amanda laughed, “I’m ‘Team Lunch’ too.”

Savannah waited for a few seconds before asking, “So who are you?” Savannah was really curious about this girl. Savannah was curious about a lot of things, but Amanda somehow piqued her interest. Savannah decided that she would have to spend a considerable amount of time with Amanda, but only to make sure she was really fine, of course.

“I’m Amanda.”

“I know that part.”

“The rest is a pretty long story.”

“Great. I love stories.”

Amanda

Amanda wasn't quite sure why she liked Savannah. Normally people who talked as much and had as many emotions as this girl stressed Amanda out, but Savannah wasn't doing that to hide who she was, this was really her. Also, Amanda could tell that Savannah had read her. In one glance at a girl lying in the middle of a school hallway with blotchy eyes and tear stained cheeks, Savannah had seen what no one else in this school had bothered to look for in the last three months. She'd somehow known that Amanda wasn't that miserable shadow of a girl. She was so much more. She was a hurt person, but still a person. Amanda desperately wanted to know how Savannah had discovered that, and what she had been through to be able to recognize Amanda's multitudes of emotions on sight.

“Well?” Savannah tilted her head playfully. Her cherry-red hair was just past her shoulders, and it was as wavy as hair could get without being labelled “curly.” Savannah's eyes were greener than Amanda had thought possible, but Amanda was already aware that Savannah was someone yet to be studied to understand completely.

“I guess we'll start at the beginning,” began Amanda. “I was born in London—”

“Wow, that is really cool. Why don't you have an accent?”

“I said was born there, not that I grew up in England. My family moved to Virginia when I was six months old. I'm pretty sure that my mom's job made us move to America. She was a banker. My dad taught French to high schoolers. I had two sisters, Natasha who was five years older than me and Rosalie who was two years younger than her. We lived in Richmond until I was eight. Then, they all died. I moved in with my grandfather in Philadelphia. He died this summer, so I moved to super-cold Pendaly, Minnesota, to live with my aunt. And now I am here.”

Amanda wasn't sure how Savannah would respond to this. She ran through what felt like a hundred possible reactions. Somehow, Savannah did the only thing Amanda didn't expect her to do, she reached forward and took Amanda's hand. She gently squeezed it, then spoke in a voice that was confident, but not too forceful. Her full lips formed a soothing response that was not mournful or mocking and was some-

how exactly the sound that Amanda had always needed to hear: “That sounds pretty hard.”

Then Savannah wrapped her arms around Amanda and Amanda began to cry. Not the fierce tears that had been torn out of her earlier that day, but a softer, calmer cry. Amanda thought it was that last bit of sadness inside of her needing to seep out before she could be the real, happy Amanda again.

Savannah

At lunch that day, Savannah found Amanda sitting by herself in the farthest corner of the cafeteria which was closest to the large, panoramic window that showed the school’s powder-dusted courtyard. It had snowed lightly the night before, about three inches. Savannah’s mom always claimed, “Pendaly only stops for more than eight and a half feet of snow, we ain’t no wimps!” Savannah didn’t exactly agree with her mother’s philosophy, but a few inches never hurt anyone.

Amanda wasn’t looking out the window, though. She was writing ferociously in a small, sky blue, well-loved journal that she had been carrying the day before. “Whatcha working on?” Savannah smiled as she dropped into the seat next to her new friend and placed her spaghetti with meatballs on the table.

“My...” Amanda grunted that word out, trying not to break the trance that had her scribbling so productively, “play.”

“You’re writing a play? Of course you are writing a play. That’s so amazing! What’s it about? You know, I’m an actress, or I want to be one. I’m mostly self-taught, but I was Angel Two in my church’s Christmas pageant. And not to brag, but I think I did better than Angels One and Three. They were twins and they peed their pants right before opening night, so I went on as Angels One, Two and Three! I had memorized their parts during rehearsals and, if I do say so myself, I did a wonderful job!”

Amanda chuckled, “How old were you again?”

“Six,” Savannah admitted and they both burst into laughter. *Well at least I’m not laughing alone anymore*, Savannah thought. She could not help the smile of pure happiness that appeared on her skin, and was glad to see that Amanda was glowing too.

“To answer your original question, my play is about an orphan who wants to be a Broadway dancer and actress. It’s about her struggles and

how she overcomes them and becomes a star. I've been working on it for a few years now."

"Really? That's a lot of work. How long is your script?"

"Really. And it's about an hour, I think. I've never actually shown it to anyone or even told anyone about it before. It's sorta a one-woman show and I'm no actress, so I've always just thought of it as a writing project and nothing more than that."

Amanda crossed out a few words, replacing them with more interesting ones, and Savannah studied her while she worked. Amanda was so focused, so intent on her script that Savannah didn't want to break her out of something that brought her joy. So, she just ate her spaghetti and marvelled at how a single hair tie was holding up that messy bun. Later she would have to ask Amanda what brand she bought. That strength was seriously impressive.

"Savie, what do you think of..." Amanda murmured, then trailed off, back into the depths of her mind.

"What did you just call me?"

"Oh! I'm sorry." Amanda looked nervous, scared even.

But Savannah realized that having a friend was so new to Amanda that she was apprehensive to cross a line and offend, possibly lose, her.

"No, no, no. No more apologizing. I just like that name, Savie was it? My name is the absolute worst. There are hardly any cute nicknames! I know there is Anna or Annie, but my parents obviously don't know how to name a kid because Anne is my middle name. I can't be Savannah "Annie" Anne Emory, but I like Savie. It makes me sound like I'm tech or math savvy, which I'm not. You could ask Mrs. Peabody."

"You have Mrs. Peabody too! I'm not a math girl, but I don't normally hate it. She makes me feel like I do sometimes."

"Oh my god, same. You know, she gave me detention for missing the second half of class. Outrageous, right? And as for math, I won't say I like it. I'll say I don't not hate math!"

"Gotta love those double negatives, Savie. Actually, there are double negatives in math and English!"

"Yay! Words! Speaking of words," Savannah laughed at her own pun. Amanda might have rolled her eyes. After she gathered herself, Savannah continued, "What should your designated nickname be?"

"My aunt calls me Amanda. My sisters called me Mandy when I was little." Even though she was talking about a tragic part of her past, Sa-

vannah noticed that there wasn't a note of sadness in Amanda's words. She looked happy to remember that sweet pet name that had been hers and theirs, before things got complicated. Savannah didn't know what had happened, but she didn't push Amanda. She knew her friend would open up when she was ready.

"Mandy it is!" Savannah cried triumphantly, as if she were announcing that a contestant had just won a free car on a game show, while toasting with a fork full of spaghetti.

"And Mandy it will forever be!" Mandy continued, mimicking Savannah's tone and actions.

With a more serious voice, Savannah declared, "So, Mandy, when can I read your play?"

Amanda

"Mandy, Mandy, Mandy, Mandy, Mandy, this is incredible!" Savie exclaimed as she joined Amanda at their lunch table for the third day in a row. Amanda had given her the script, with a lack of reluctance that kind of shocked Amanda. The last time someone had tried to take Amanda's book, it hadn't ended too well. When Amanda, escorted by Savie, had returned to Mr. Harrison's classroom, he had given her detention. So Savie had given herself detention, even though she already had to serve Mrs. Peabody's on Friday, and used the time to pester Amanda into letting her read the play. Savie was very persuasive.

"I mean, you're a genius writer, I didn't even know that was possible at fourteen. And this character, she's like a perfect balance of funny, and emotional, and smart, and charismatic, but not too overpowering. Side note, can you tutor me in English? And the story is just so beautiful and motivating!"

"I thought I had done a good job, but thanks for confirming!" Amanda teased. Savie pretended to be offended that her opinion was unnecessary, but Amanda could tell that it was pretend, so she grinned and ate her salad.

"No, seriously, Mandy," Savie's voice had changed. It hadn't sounded like empty praise before, but now it was definitely genuine. "You should stage this. You could direct it. I could be your assistant director and run around yelling at everyone who ignored your orders and—"

"Nope," Amanda cut Savie off.

“Why not?” Savie looked a little hurt, “This is brilliant, you’re brilliant. Why wouldn’t you want to present it to the world. Or at least, the world of Pendaly? I’m not lying just to make you feel good, I swear.”

“That wasn’t what I was saying no about,” Amanda’s eyes were shining even as her friend’s became more confused.

“Then what? I don’t have to yell at people if you don’t want me to?”

“You won’t be yelling at anyone, because you are going to be the star.” The look that passed over Savie’s features was priceless, but not in the way Amanda had expected. Why was it that this girl was constantly surprising her? And why was Amanda not upset and scared every time Savie did something unexpected? Those were just two of the many questions that Amanda was unable to answer.

Savie looked raw for a second, then her emerald eyes glazed over into a stare of complete denial, “No.”

“Now I’m the one asking why not, Savie. You’d be—”

“No. I can’t possibly be this character. She is so much more complex than Angels One, Two, and Three. I have to face it, I’m not an actress. At least not yet.”

“Then my play will be your first major role. And I will not take no for an answer, Savie. I haven’t seen you act and I don’t need to, I already know that you are the perfect person for the role. You are probably the most charismatic person I’ve ever met, and I’ve known you for less than four days,” Amanda insisted.

There was something in Savie’s eyes that started to frighten Amanda, because Savie looked weak for the first time since Amanda had met her. She seemed vulnerable, and Amanda thought that she might have discovered Savie’s kryptonite. Amanda had always wanted her work to be respected and to be taken seriously as an artist, but her life had never revolved around that. Savie was different. Even with her limited experience, everything depended on her achieving this dream, exactly like the character in Amanda’s play. Amanda almost laughed. Savie had no idea how perfect she was for the role.

“You really think I’m good enough, Mandy? I’ve never been good enough before,” Savie whispered timidly, but there was hope in her words.

“I think you’re so much better than good enough.”

Savie started crying and laughing at the same time, more laughing than crying Amanda noticed, but still both. Then she grabbed Amanda

in a hug that somehow managed to be a bear hug even though Savannah really wasn't any bigger than Amanda. This girl and her constant surprises. Amanda would have laughed, if she could breathe.

"Now, how do we put on this play of mine?" Amanda smiled.

Savannah

"Well," Savannah released Mandy, then wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her stretchy Christmas sweater. "Pendaly High doesn't have a Drama Club anymore, so we couldn't get them to sponsor us. We used to have one of the best in the state. They would put on the most elaborate plays and win awards for their musicals. When I was eight I came to their production of *Into the Woods*. Everyone was so talented and it was so magical, practically everyone in the audience was in tears when they sang "No One is Alone." But then something changed. The mayor basically ran on an anti-arts campaign and he got elected, so they basically pulled the funding from all of our programs. We only have two art teachers in the entire school and Ms. Davis is out on maternity leave. They didn't even bother hiring a long-term sub!"

"How is that legal? Are they trying to stunt the creative minds of Pendaly's youth?" Mandy questioned, confused.

"Yes, exactly that." Savannah nodded. She was going to figure this out because once she decided to do something, Savannah could hardly sleep until she figured it out. "We do have an auditorium from back when this school had a soul. Do you know any super rich people? Or any super persuasive people? Because we need some of both..."

Savannah knew she was becoming agitated, and Mandy, kind as she was, was trying to settle her, "Where do we start? What's our first step?" Logic. One thing after another. That would be the only way to get this done. And Savannah really wanted to get this done. She didn't just want it for herself so she could get a lead role, she was not that selfish. When her dad had left, Savannah had watched a lot of videos about dealing with loss, and she knew that Mandy had been through so much more loss than her. She felt that Mandy had written this semi-autobiographically. Savannah wasn't sure if someone could ever fully recover from all of that grief, but she thought that staging this show, sharing it with others, accomplishing something that was so important to her, might help Mandy to heal.

"I think that would be getting permission from the principal. He doesn't like me."

That statement seemed to take Mandy back a little. “Why wouldn’t he like you?”

“You could ask him yourself when we go see him to discuss our play. Or you could not.” Savannah gestured at the tall man in a black suit and a black tie who was stomping across the cafeteria. Mandy looked confused and raised an eyebrow at Savannah.

“Savannah Emory!” The man was still four tables away but his booming voice seemed to barrel towards Savannah at the speed of light. When he reached his target table he finished, “This is your official reminder that you have detention today.”

“Thanks, Jennings. Where do I get to spend my Friday afternoon this time?”

“One of the old storage rooms in the basement. Enjoy your time with the mice.” The man didn’t smile.

“I sure will! And this is perfect timing, my friend and I were just wondering if we could see the principal. Do you know if he’s free?”

“As a matter of fact, he is. I’m sure he’ll be very glad to see you.” The sarcasm was so obvious that Savannah could almost feel it. The man looked at Mandy’s salad, then at the door, “Finish up.”

Savannah leaned towards Mandy and whispered, “He meant finish up, fast.”

Mandy chuckled, the man glowered, and Savannah smiled, but felt apprehensive. Together, the three of them walked out of the cafeteria, down the hallway to the administration's rooms, and entered the principal’s uninviting office.

Amanda

Amanda looked at Savie. She glanced at Principal Branstoll, then back at her friend. It was some sort of stare off between wild animals, like those documentaries about alpha males in nature deciding who could get the land. Amanda had never seen Savie defiant, but she instinctively knew Savie had two kinds: Principal Branstoll defiant and everyone else defiant. Amanda was very, very glad that she was not the recipient of that glare. She knew that was a position that she never wanted to be in with Savannah. Apparently, Principal Branstoll could only handle it to a point.

“Savannah.”

“Principal Branstoll.”

“Detention again? Your mother will be so disappointed.” His tone was gruff, he grunted out the words. He was sitting behind his desk, but Amanda could still tell that he was short. Really short. She wondered why she had never seen him before. She’d always thought that the man in the suit was the principal. *Oops*, Amanda thought.

“I’m sure she will. Now, my friend has a request to make.” Savie sounded like sugar. No. Honey. Her voice was smooth and sweet and far too much for the principal to stand.

“Does she now?” The principal leaned forward as if he was about to share a life-changing secret. “I’m assuming that she knows I might be tempted to not grant it because of her association with you.”

“Excuse me, sir, I’m sorry,” Amanda interrupted, “but that doesn’t seem entirely fair.”

“So you really do have no idea about Savannah’s past. Or her father. Interesting,” Principal Branstoll snarled. Savie stared at the ground.

Her father? Amanda thought, *What happened to her father?*

Apparently, both the Principal and Savie noticed Amanda’s puzzled reaction, because he glared at her instead of Savie and Savie looked even more mad at him because of it.

“Let me tell you a very interesting story, little girl.” The principal’s tone when he added that last part was meant to belittle Amanda, but she didn’t even blink. Savie, on the other hand, looked like she was going to lunge at the principal. Maybe that was why Jennings moved forward blocking the most direct path to his boss. Amanda hoped that Principal Branstoll wouldn’t anger Savie any further because she knew that Savie couldn’t be stopped if she was furious enough. Nothing would stop her if he hurt Amanda.

“Once upon a time,” Branstoll continued, speaking in a mocking tone that seemed to even annoy Jennings, “There were two happy families. In one, the father was a principal, and his wife was a stay-at-home mother to the couple’s only daughter. They lived very happily. Then, the second family moved next door and ruined their lives. This family also had one daughter, who was a few years older than the other girl, but much meaner and uglier. This father was a writer, and the mother was a drunken wreck who ran the convenience store on the corner, when she wasn’t asleep in an alley, of course. Then, one day, the principal came home to find a note that his wife had written, explaining that she and their little girl had left. They had run off with the writer and

both of them were hiring divorce lawyers for separations from their current spouses. The principal was very upset. The drunk mother drank some more. One year later, the newly-married couple had a baby boy and the writer's daughter started at the high school where the principal works. The end!"

The principal glowered. Savie grimaced. And Amanda couldn't hide her shock. The story was awful and Savie was very strong for surviving through those hard times. Amanda couldn't even imagine being in Savie's shoes. She was about to comment on the situation when Savie looked at her with wide eyes, a warning.

"So," Savie sounded stronger and smoother now. Amanda was taken aback by her confidence, and mentally congratulated herself for such a wise casting choice. Then she realized that Savie had remembered their purpose. "Amanda Caldwell would like to make a request."

Part of Amanda knew that when Savie had said, "I've never been good enough before," she hadn't been talking about acting. She was talking about her father, and her life. She had scars too, they were different from Amanda's, but they still ran deep. Amanda knew that Savie needed to be up on a stage and under a spotlight. She needed to be a star and be appreciated for it, for who she was, in order for those scars to fade away.

That's why Amanda mustered her best fake smile and began, "Yes, Principal Branstoll. I was wondering if I could put on a play I have written here. I would need use of your auditorium and some funding, but I assure you it will not be much. All I need is some time and I can put on a show like this school has never seen before."

"Will Savannah be involved?" The principal looked intrigued.

Savie shook her head, trying to stop Amanda from responding, "Yes she will." Amanda had thought that would make the principal immediately reject the proposal, but it had the opposite effect.

"All right. You can take whatever money or resources you need. Jennings will handle the funds, of course." Jennings nodded as if it was his most solemn duty as the principal added, "Today is November 30th. You have three weeks, your opening night is December 21st."

The principal beamed because he thought that putting Savannah Emory on that quick of a deadline would scare her, or make her rush and ruin the show. But Amanda smiled because he didn't know Savie or that a little thing like time could never stop her from achieving her

dreams. Amanda looked over at her friend, whose eyes were shining, and whispered, “We got this.”

Savannah

“The great thing about this show is that we don’t need that many other people!” Savannah announced as she strolled down the stairs to her assigned room. Mandy followed shortly behind. Savannah knew that Mandy was a better student than she was, and that the detention she got for running out of class after that meanie Vicky Jackson touched her was her first. Therefore, she did not fully understand the Pendaly High detention policy. But Savannah could recite it. After five detentions, a student punishment became cleaning the basement. With the mice, of course.

“Are you saying I should be proud of myself for not writing a show with a twenty person ensemble?” Mandy joked. Savannah stopped, turned and looked at her straight in the eyes.

“Yes. That was very forward-thinking of you.” Savannah complimented in a proper British accent that made Mandy try to hold in a laugh. She failed. They had reached the bottom of the stairwell so Savannah look at the little turquoise tag attached to the brass key and read, “Room B14.”

“Right there!” Mandy seemed happy that she had been the first to spot their destination as she pulled Savie down the corridor, then stepped aside so Savannah could unlock the door. “Open sesame!”

“You know that’s not really how it works, right?” Savannah giggled and inserted the key.

“I know,” Mandy confirmed, “but sometimes a girl likes to believe in magic.”

Savannah winced when she turned the key. It fit, but the sound of metal on metal rang out in a large screech as the door seemed to protest being opened. When Savannah pushed harder and gave it absolutely no say in the matter, it submitted, but not without one final creak. The room that lay behind was beautiful, in a chaotic way. Savannah had always figured that the school couldn’t just erase its theatre program. But she never thought that they had kept it all in an enormous room stacked nearly to the ceilings with treasures. Savannah walked forward as if in a trance. Like there was a magnet at the center of the room that way pulling her into the space, towards the legacy that had been abandoned, like her.

“This place. It is like a theatre graveyard,” Mandy whispered in awe, “I’ve never really been one for graveyards but this is amazing.”

“I can’t believe it. How did I not know this was here? I was obsessed with the Pendaly High Theater Company, like really, really obsessed.” Savannah’s mouth hung open as she reached down to pick up a program, coated in dust. She pulled on the sleeve of her Penguins Pride sweatshirt to uncover the words beneath the years. It was for “Into the Woods,” 2012.

“Do you think we could use this stuff?” Mandy asked, spinning slowly to fully absorb the atmosphere, while watching her feet to make sure she didn’t trip.

“Branstoll did give us a chaperone and limit on money...” Savannah trailed off.

“But he never specified which resources we could use and which were off limits...” Mandy continued musing.

“So, technically, we can use anything we want from this room,” Savannah smiled at Mandy and finished, “so let’s get this place organized!”

An hour and a half later, Savannah and Mandy had made it so a person could move around the space at a normal speed without tripping over electrical cables, old sword props and a box of confetti simultaneously. They had also set up a few work tables in the middle of the room. One was for costumes, one for sets and props, and one for anything else that needed to be worked on. The girls sat at the third table in a couple of unique chairs that were from a musical that Savannah swore was on the tip of her tongue.

“Okay, so let’s make a list of priorities,” Mandy began their brainstorming session.

“You know the story best,” Savannah admitted. “What do you think needs to happen first?”

“Probably costumes and lights. This show is basically just Britney explaining how hard it is to get a part in a Broadway show. The life of a struggling artist who keeps auditioning and auditioning but always gets cut. She is explaining all of this to the audience and there won’t be very many setting changes, because there aren’t any other characters to interact with, so sets shouldn’t be that high on the list. We could probably do with what is here already. Do you know anyone who can run a lighting booth?”

“There is one kid in my gym class, Emerson Blaine, who’s really good at lights. Next semester he is transferring to a performing arts school so he can train to be a professional lighting designer. I’ll try to convince him to help out.” Savannah took out her two-year-old phone with a faded rose colored case and typed a quick message to Emerson.

“The auditorium doesn’t have a sound board and I don’t think we’ll have enough money to buy a quality one, so you’ll have to be loud.”

“That’s fine. I’m naturally pretty loud, and the space isn’t that big, so we’ll survive.”

They went on like that, planning, thinking, and planning some more until it was almost six o’clock. At that point they had finished the list, taken Savannah’s measurements, and recruited Emerson to deal with the lights. They had written down what each scene needed, and had figured out a way to cross almost everything off that list from what they discovered in the piles of supplies. Savannah felt accomplished and joyful to be on the way to actually fulfilling her dream. She could tell that Mandy was excited too, by the way her friend’s eyes seemed to get warmer, almost amber, whenever she thought of a new idea. Mandy was happy, and she didn’t look at all like the broken girl Savannah had found in that hallway, just two days before.

The next two weeks and five days passed quickly, but Amanda and Savannah lost all sense of time. They spent all of class writing notes about changes that could be made to better their project and puzzling about the problems they faced until there was a clear solution in their minds. If they got detention for daydreaming and not paying attention in class, no problem, they could just go to their basement room. During their third week, they moved most of the stuff to the auditorium, chasing each other up and down the stairs, making it into a competition so they wouldn’t get bored of carrying boxes.

Principal Branstoll hadn’t bothered to monitor them, and Jennings had taken a liking to them and their show, so Amanda and Savannah were free to do what they wished with the budget. It wasn’t much, a couple hundred dollars, but the girls had gotten almost everything they needed from the storage room’s treasure trove. So they spent their funds on smaller things: make up, programs, a fancy curtain that Amanda could pull open on Savannah at the beginning and close on her at the end.

They didn't talk much about their pasts, either one of them. They just enjoyed the present, the show and each other's company. The other kids at the school noticed that Amanda Caldwell and Savannah Emory were becoming best friends, but, for the most part, they didn't really care. And when Vicky Jackson played some pranks and teased Amanda at lunch, Savannah would jump to her defense and they would ignore her as she laughed at them. *Just wait till she sees our play, they would think, then we'll be the ones laughing!*

Amanda

December 20th was a Thursday. It was also the day before the performance, which meant that it was the dress rehearsal. Amanda was proud of her show and of the fact that she felt more excited than anxious. She should have been terrified that her writing and therefore, her life, was going to be so exposed. She should have felt the pain and the loss that this play was about weighing her down, dragging her back to the memories that still haunted her. But she didn't because, whenever it felt like the darkness was closing in, Amanda could look up at that stage and see Savie's shining eyes and sunny smile. The life and joy that seemed to radiate out of that girl was so real, and so special. Amanda's friends in the past had mostly been from when she was young, before the accident, but none of them had ever cared about her as much as Savie did now. So, Amanda felt safe.

"Great job, Savannah!" Emerson yelled, exiting the lighting booth and walking down the aisle as Savie took a quick bow. Jennings sat a few rows behind Amanda, trying to hide his snuffles.

Savie was bouncing as Amanda and Emerson joined her on stage and the three of them sat down, "So how was I? I'm so sorry about that part about halfway through where I messed up. I really hope it wasn't too obvious."

"Where did you mess up? It wasn't on any of my cues," Emerson wondered. Savie had learned her lines in four days, which was amazing because she had every single line in a sixty minute show.

Amanda added, "I didn't notice either, Sav. And I have been staring at that script for two whole years!" She reached out to grab her star's hand, trying to be encouraging.

"I said 'it was hard' instead of 'it was difficult'." Savie wasn't kidding, she really felt the need to get all of this perfect, and Amanda sensed that she was doing it partially for Amanda.

“You were fantastic and utterly flawless.” Amanda squeezed Savie’s hand. “Now, let’s talk technical. Is there anything we need to fix, Emerson?”

“Not really. All the lights are working and, you,” he gestured at Savie, “project very well, so we’re good on sound. Overall, it was a good run. Now Amanda, what time should I be here?”

“I can’t believe I am saying this, but curtain is at seven tomorrow. It’s really tomorrow!” Amanda may have squealed, “So be here at six-thirty. I’ll buy some pizza for dinner. You’re the best team I could have ever asked for.”

“Aww, I’m gonna miss you two. Will you come if I send the dates for the shows I do the lighting design for once I transfer?”

“Definitely!”

“Of course!”

“Then I’ll see ya tomorrow!” Emerson got up, grabbed his bag and walked out of the auditorium, comforting Jennings who was still bawling. He waved to the girls as they left, then closed the doors.

Savie, who was still in her final costume of the show, sunk down to the ground, tugging Amanda down with her. As she lay on the stage where she would be performing in front of an audience the next day, Amanda thought that Savie looked worried. Maybe some of the self-doubt that Amanda had first seen when she had given Savie the role was escaping again.

“You know you were wonderful. You don’t want to admit it, but you know that’s true,” Amanda told her as they stared up at the colored lights that illuminated the stage.

Savie didn’t respond for another ten seconds or so, and when she did, she spoke quickly and anxiously, “Thank you. Not just for all the compliments, but also for letting me be Britney. You have no idea how much it means to me. I--”

“Savie, shhh. Let me talk for a bit. You’re my best friend. You’re my only friend. There’s absolutely nothing that I wouldn’t do for you. And it doesn’t hurt that you are the most talented person I’ve ever met. Those aren’t empty words, Sav, I swear.”

Tears formed in Savie’s eyes. They couldn’t run down her face because she was horizontal, but Amanda could see them in Savie’s emerald eyes. Then Savie turned onto her side to face Amanda, and the tear dropped to the polished wood stage.

“You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me, Mandy. I hope you know that. And I wanted to tell you that my mom is excited. Really excited for the first time I can recall. She remembers me as the Angels, and she wants to see me perform again because she knows how much I love it. So I--” Savie’s voice was breaking and more tears were falling, “so I told her that she had to be sober for a week to get to come. She was mad at first, but she agreed.” Savie’s words gave way to sobs.

Amanda had never really been the one to initiate contact before, but she reached forward and put her arms around Savie, stroked her hair, and let Savie cry. Amanda knew that, for the time being, one of them always had to be strong. Savie had been there when Amanda was weak, so she needed to return the favor.

Once Savie had composed herself she pushed away from Amanda a bit, but she was still closer than they had originally been when she spoke, “You never did tell me how your family died.”

Amanda thought that the statement was a bit random, but she was surprised when she didn’t feel upset or uncomfortable. She just told Savie the truth, her truth, “A car accident. I was still in an extra-safety car seat at eight, because my parents were super protective and a bit paranoid, but I guess it did save my life. Another car hit ours and Mama and Papa died due to the impact or something. Then the car crashed around a bit and my sisters were killed. Rosalie first, then Natasha. And I just sat there, safely buckled in, while everyone I loved was dying around me. I remember that when the police arrived on the scene, they pulled me out of the car, but I couldn’t leave. I fought as hard as I could against the hands that took me away from my family. I knew they were gone, but I still wanted to be with them.”

Amanda’s voice wasn’t stone cold like it had been when she had told the simplified version to Savie three weeks ago, but she wasn’t falling apart either. Amanda wasn’t stating facts. She was telling a story, a story that felt fully in her past when Savie reached for her again, and the two of them gathered warmth and strength from each other. There was nothing they couldn’t face, as long as Amanda and Savie were together.

Savannah

Emerson was in his place. The pizza had been eaten. Jennings was in the front row. Mandy had a walkie talkie for some reason and the crowd was starting to trickle into the auditorium. It was opening night. For this show, it was also closing night. *Double the pressure*, Savannah

couldn't help but remember. This was their chance, and if she screwed it up, it would also be their *only* chance.

"I see my aunt!" Mandy was peeking through the newly-installed curtain, "and she's sitting with your mom, Sav. Your mom looks really good."

Now Savannah needed to see, so she joined Mandy at the spot where the two pieces of crimson fabric met and peered outside. Her mother was laughing with Mandy's aunt and she held a copy of the program. Savannah squinted and she thought she saw her mother scribble a star in the program with a ballpoint pen. Then the lights in the house flickered and Savannah stepped back.

Mandy whispered, "The producer is going to say a few words, then we'll start."

Savannah realized that the job of producer hadn't been delegated to her, Mandy or Emerson so she wondered, "Who's the--" Before she was cut off by a booming voice.

Principal Branstoll's voice. It boomed, "Welcome one and all to Pendaly High School! This is an original play written and directed by Amanda Caldwell, with technical assistance from Emerson Blaine. Please keep in mind folks, these students had just three weeks to put together this show. I am sure that if you were to ask the young artists, they would insist that none of this would be possible, if not for me. I am proud to say that I have supported these students through the roller coaster ride that this show has been, and I hope you loyal members of the Pendaly community enjoy the show. And now I present to you, Savannah Emory in *My Path to the Great White Way!*"

"Did he seriously just say that? I was hoping it would be something inspiring," Savannah gulped.

"Yes, he did, but you don't need to be inspired." They both knew that once Branstoll was off the stage, the show needed to start, so Mandy had about twenty seconds for her pep talk, "Just do what you do best."

"Math?" Savannah cocked an eyebrow.

"Exactly!" Mandy stifled a laugh, then walked to the wings and Savannah felt the strength crash over her like a wave. She could do it. She could do anything for Mandy. Savannah watched her arrive next to the rope that controlled the curtains. She looked at Savannah, a question in her eyes. Savannah nodded. The curtains began to part and a single spotlight poured through them, landing in a perfect circle around

where Savannah stood, but she didn't blink or wince at the blinding light; she drew energy from its heat. She looked at all the faces in the audience and pulled warmth from their excitement and their joy. Then she turned to gaze at the person who mattered the most, smiled, and began to act.

The theater's lights came alive again and so did the audience. Not a single person remained seated or quiet as Savie bowed, then curtsied, then bowed again. She dramatically threw an arm out, insisting that her admirers applaud Emerson as well. She gestured offstage, forcing Mandy to walk out and join her in the place they had stood together just an hour before. Mandy reached the center of the stage and joined Savie while the audience marveled at the fourteen-year-old who could already write such a poignant play. Mandy's chestnut hair swayed back and forth as she acknowledged her eager fans, which reminded Savie of something she should have done long ago.

"Hey, Mandy!" she nearly yelled over the commotion.

"What?"

"Which brand of hair ties do you get?"

Mandy threw her head back and laughed, as if that was the most ridiculous question in the world, "Alas, Sav, I'm afraid I'll never tell."

Then, Mandy pulled Savie close and kissed her. The world kept going around the girls, but for those two, time stopped. They could have stayed that way forever, together, after just accomplishing the dream both of them had been striving towards for their entire lives.

But Savie pulled away for a second and exclaimed, "I wanted to be the one to do that first!"

"Well," Mandy laughed, "tough luck."

Savie kissed her this time, and breathed, "That's not really how I'd describe this."

Emerson glanced at his friends. "I knew it," he whispered, yanked the rope, and left the stage. The velvet cloth moved slowly towards the center, drawn to its partner until they came together to, quite literally, close the curtain on Amanda Caldwell and Savannah Emory.

sps 7.8 is the literary magazine of the 7th and 8th grades of the Somerville Public Schools. Current and past issues may be read free online at www.happeningnoweverywhere.com.

All 7th and 8th grade level students residing or attending school in the city of Somerville, Massachusetts, may submit original, previously unpublished writing to happeningmagazine@yahoo.com. Students entering 7th grade in September, 2020, are among those eligible to submit now. All submissions must be accompanied by full name, email contact address (either student's or parent's), school and grade.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic emergency, Volume 5 of *sps 7.8* to date consists of work from one school whose prolific writers submitted early. Their publications include the following.

Healey Memoirs

Healey After Dark *mature language and content: be advised*

More Healey Fiction

Healey Poetry

We will return to a periodical schedule as submissions are received. Volume 5 will be open through the summer of 2020 and Volume 6 will begin in September.

You and younger readers will also enjoy *Kid!* magazine, online at 12zine.com.

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