

The Planet Maker:

A Collection

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AC ZITO

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1. The Planet Maker

“It’s landing, George, head back to your seat!”

“By golly; what is that thing, Monsen?” Monsen scratched his beard at the odd site. It was not a planet he had ever seen or been to before. Nor did he get the sense that it was habitable either; for what they gazed upon wasn’t your ordinary spherical planet but, instead, it had the odd shape of a croissant. And this croissant showed no ordinary sign of what a brown, toasted croissant you would find in the baker’s market of your local store would look like. But within the realm of this freakishly weirdshaped planet were the colors of misty white clouds and grassy green landscapes. And within the rough terrain of it all were the swirling blue waters that they sorely needed to help in quenching their thirst.

“What’s that?” George asked, sticking his finger out into dead space.

“By George, I think that’s a cylindrical-looking rod thing, there! Look and it’s on the ends of the misshapen planet! You see it?”

“By God, I think you’re right, Monsen! How in the hell did that strange thing in happenchance get made?” They looked at the whole scene in aghast. It had a thick black coating and roundish bulbs receding from every corner. It was a spaceship, nonetheless. And the spaceship seemed to carry a great mass with it for no ordinary spaceship like George and Monsen’s could have ever come to be the size of this magnificence. It was indeed the size of their planet, in all actuality; their far-off planet in the boundaries of nowhere.

As they got closer, the bigger the planet became, the larger the strange mechanism sticking out of it as well. It was like it was attached to the planet like some sort of parasite; sucking the planet’s energy up until every last drop of it was gone.

“George, my boy, I’m afraid this awful mechanism is eating this poor planet!”

“Monsen; say it isn’t so!” But Monsen only nodded in confirmation. He took a breath and let a tear fall from his eye, letting it splash down onto the metallic floor.

“How odd it is, Georgie-boy. This weird galaxy we’ve fallen into has brought us into a new future of technology impossible to be understandable.” George stared at him, silently. It was like the future they had fallen into was too much to take in all at once.

“Monsen; I can’t quite find the words to say.” Monsen nodded his head in agreement. He couldn’t quite hold in this feeling for the dexterity of it. It was too unbelievable. He then straightened up, put a stern face on, and took a grip like the kids these days say.

“Hold onto your panties, my dear man, and then pull them back into place for we are in for a wild ride! Yes, this one is truly about to be an experience! Wooh! I’m feeling it now, Georgie-boy!”

“Feeling... what, sir?”

“EXCITEMENT; It’s in the air, Georgie! It’s in the air!” Monsen blurted this out, getting in a few jumping jacks and fist bumps in here and there.

The ride in was bumpy but the directions were cheaply made. Halfway through the atmospheric entrance process, Monsen had decided he would lead the spaceship in closer towards where the metallic rod of a vessel protruded from. As they neared it, Monsen proved to be wrong about how he thought the spaceship was sucking up the planet like he had feared. But it showed to be, instead, producing the planet from its chambers. And at an alarming rate too!

George was driving their ship downwards at a great speed when, suddenly, Monsen came from behind him with a sandwich in hand.

“George, give me the wheel!” Monsen garbled out with parts of his sandwich in his mouth only half-chewed. “I desire control of this ship at once!” George gave it to him, reluctantly. But it was already too late. They found themselves tumbling downward into the planet’s developing atmosphere and landed with a splash into one of the many lakes inside a valley of small mountains.

Monsen looked around, in a daze. He felt at the sticky ground his head now lay upon. His head wouldn’t stop ringing, and yet, he still

decided to get up anyway. Immediately, he realized he had made the wrong choice for as soon as he was on his feet, he was back on the ground.

“George!” Mosen yelled, giving out fits of coughs, all throughout the difficult process, coughing up bits of his undigested sandwich. “I’m alright now, George. Quit your worrywarts!” Mosen shouted out. He felt sick as he tried to get up. Suddenly, out of nowhere, George sprang out of the blue and was, at once, at Mosen’s side.

“This isn’t how a planet is supposed to feel. They are supposed to feel spherical!” George whined out. He nodded to Mosen as he helped him keep his balance. Mosen couldn’t deny that he felt a little sick. They were about to start off on the journey to the end of the world, some might say. Others might say it was the journey to The Planet Maker. Not George or Mosen, however. They weren’t exactly sure how to pinpoint it. But it was rather plainly simple: the both of them thought of it as a mission to see the known God, Himself; the One that oversees over this particular universe. Not to say that there are other universes... but this particular universe seemed to have this particular specimen as a Maker of Things. But one might possibly say nothing at all. For this type of on-goings should have been noticed by now. But then again... it was still never noticed at all until George and Mosen happened to stumble upon it. But now... now, it was going on right before their very eyes.

Mosen felt even sicker than before as they started the journey on foot. The shape of the planet made the climb downwards to the very bottom tip of the planet’s body actually cumbersome. Mosen already felt his feet getting swollen and was already thinking about how they would be requiring future recuperation before he would ever be walking again.

Many foot massages and warm water. That’ll cure it right away Mosen thought.

“The gravitational pull seems to be coming not from the center of this crescent-shaped planet, but the tips of it.”

“How odd, George. You’re right!” Mosen felt his feet being dragged towards the direction in the distance where the spaceship could be seen shooting up into infinity. After they had climbed over the

mountains from which their ship had landed, they had a fairly moderate trip downward to what barely had much mass at all.

“Well c’mon now, George. Let’s get a moving!” George looked at Mosen, flabbergasted.

“Uh, y-you w-want to go... there?” George pointed to the very end of the planet.

“Yes, to that ship, dammit! By God, George, boy you are stupid!” George shuddered as he stared at the ship in all its size and glory. And before George could say any more, he quickly spun around and bolted off back towards the mountains they had left behind.

“GEORGE!” Mosen yelled at him. But George kept at his slow trudge of a run. Mosen began his chase after him as well, quickly catching up and tackling the scared boy to the ground.

“Get off me, Mr. Mosen! I... I... don’t want to go on adventures with you anymore!” Mosen was taken aback. After getting off of George, he then dusted off his trousers and took out his pocket watch.

“I didn’t think you would give up so quickly this time, boy.” George shrugged at this as Mosen kept a fixed stare on his pocket watch.

“I don’t like the size of that thing, Mosen.” George whispered this with fear pouring forth from his eyes.

“Me neither.” And at that, Mosen closed his pocket watch and, putting it away, dragged George to his feet. They began their walk to the darkness. And it seemed, all the while, as they kept their gaze upon it, to be a ship creating the tiny rock that would soon enough begin its rotation around the star that had domain over this tiny area.

On their way, many animals started coming up to them in herds. They moved out and onward into the very depths to what lay beyond their little eyes as the small planet became larger and larger. The animals each began to come up to them in pairs now that they were getting even closer to the end. The little duos would stop and look up at them like in some sort of greeting, and then they were on their way like how all of the other animals were on their way, ready to inhabit the planet and make it a prosperous settlement.

“These animals, they are most peculiar!” declared Mosen as he would pet ones that caught his fancy.

“Yes, but, I do say, some of them give me the creeps!” Mosen shrugged off George’s remark and then began his decent down the hill they had only just recently come upon.

“There it is!” gasped Mosen. George shuddered. It seemed like nothing either of them could have expected. The base of the spaceship came down to a pencil of a point while the planet that the tip was connected to was more like a lump as volcanoes, oceans, and mountains came swarming out of the tiny base of the spaceship.

Suddenly, the base of the ship began to omit a bright light that shined forth all across the planet. The candescence seemed to begin radiating, and at that same time, it lit up all across the massive space ship. Every spherical, charcoal black bulb that the ship had on it began to shine like the summer sun. Then, suddenly, the planet’s crescent-shape was gone and it had transformed itself into a spherical planet like the ones George and Mosen were used too.

“Mosen, look,” George yelled this out with such passion, helping him come out of his sudden delirium. The spaceship took off, and there, before their eyes were a pair of figures about the same distinction in size as George and Mosen were. Their hair seemed to be different, however, for it protruded from their heads. They came up to George and Mosen with such elegance. Their posture and manner of presenting themselves was exquisite. Looking to the two travelers before them, they asked, simultaneously:

“Will you be living on Earth too?”

2. The Camping Trip

“They’re going to like you! They really will!” But I had to ask her. I’ve heard stories about him from her other boyfriends. But who knows; they might’ve just been trying to pull my leg! Yeah, that’s it, they’re just jealous! I’m the one with the school’s prettiest girl, and they all messed up in some way by cheating on her or treating her like crap... but still... I had to ask:

“But your dad...” she flinched when I said this. She kept quiet as they walked up the steps to her gigantic mansion. I mean... she had it made! She turned me to where I was facing her and fixed my collar.

“You’re going to do great! Don’t let him scare you. He’s only a dad. Dads like to scare their daughters’ boyfriends. It’s human nature! Just remember to be confident, don’t let him try to intimidate you, and most importantly... remember... this is most important over anything and everything... just be yourself!” She looked up at me, and I looked down at her. We smiled at each other and then she strained her neck pushing her lips up towards my face which I graciously accepted. I lowered my head down and felt my lips get closer and closer and...

Ahheemm We quickly unlocked arms and jumped forward to where we were facing her parents. Her father was holding the door open staring me down. His eyes penetrated their way into the back of my skull. I felt my legs waiver and my knees give way. My body felt like it had turned to a gelatin. Like I already knew her dad was the predator and I the prey already being turned into his dessert.

“Stick out your hand!” she whispered into my ear. I felt from the tone of her voice that she was snapping at me, nudging me with her elbow and everything. But I couldn’t help it. I felt frozen in place from how scary her dad made me feel. But then I got up the nerve. I stuck out my hand and croaked out:

“Hi! My name is Jeremy! Jeremy Calloway; I’m in your daughter’s French class.” My hand stayed hanging loosely in the air while her dad kept his gaze fixed right into the center of my soul. I let it hang their awkwardly for ten seconds at most until her mom said:

“Enchantée! Jeremy; that’s a lovely name! Your mother must be very proud of you for having such lovely manners!” I couldn’t help but blush. She was a delight!

“Jeremy, this is my mom, Christina, and my dad-“

“Wallace,” he interrupted her. He stopped staring at me and directed his view to Halle.

“Halle, darling; don’t ever call your mother by her first name. It’s rude. She’s your mother. You introduce her as Mrs. Batcher and me, Mr. Batcher. That’s what your other friends call us. You should’ve just said, ‘These are my parents,’ and the boy would’ve just called us Mr. and Mrs. Batcher and that would have been that. But you didn’t have to make it so complicated, now did you?”

“But I?” Halle tried to reply but Mr. Batcher was already looking at me again.

“I don’t mean to be rude, son, but Jeremy... what’s your problem? Are you a nerd? You look like you should be at Math Camp right this very moment, not hanging out with a girl! Save high school girls for the captain of the football team and the kid who already owns a motorcycle and will let his girlfriend wear his leather jacket.” He looked me up and down. “You don’t look like either of those types of fellas now do ya, boy? Now, where exactly did you say you picked up my daughter? Were you two trying out for some school play and you both didn’t get the lead roles for Romeo and Juliet? And out of each of your self-pity you both decided this little thing you both got going on right now would be fun?” Mr. Batcher took out two oven mitts from behind his back pocket, sticking them both on, ending his rant with: “Just leave your silly high school games at the door and you two can come inside when you both are ready to know what exactly your walking into because this isn’t French class, Peter Pan and Wendy!”

“AND THIS ISN’T SOME MOVIE SCRIPT, DAD! THIS MY LIFE! SO STOP ACTING LIKE YOU CAN MAKE UP LINES TO TRY AND IMPRESS MY NEW BOYFRIEND!” Halle screamed this out at her dad who screamed back:

“AND SINCE WHEN DID YOU HAVE ANOTHER BOYFRIEND?”

Lowering his voice, “Now excuse me, but I have the baked potatoes to take out of the oven.” Turning to me, “Jeremy, go watch the steaks for me. They’re on the grill. Do you know where the back porch is?”

Once I got to the back porch and looked inside the grill, there were no steaks to be found. No, instead were maybe eight or nine burgers. They looked about done so I brought them inside only to have Mr. Batcher angrily snatch the plate from my hands, yelling:

“Did you even see the cheese?” He was out the door before I could even think to stutter at my own insolence. I couldn’t mess this up! Halle was the girl of my dreams, and I wanted her to be mine! And if that meant sucking up to her father like a fat pig sucking on an apple during the holidays, then so be it!

He came back in with the cheese melted onto the burgers. I didn’t even like cheese. But it didn’t matter. I had to act like I liked it so Mr. Batcher would approve of me so one day when Halle and I are in our late twenties and I thought it was the right time, I could ask Mr. Batcher for his blessing so I could propose to the coolest, prettiest girl in high school, and she would say yes and then we’d live happily ever after and my life would be so perfect and all the guys that are on the wrestling team wouldn’t shove me into lockers anymore. And maybe I’d be one of the cool kids. Just maybe... it would be a long shot but who knows!

“Can you go get the pierogis, young man?” he asked. I was about to ask what a pierogi is, but I thought it wasn’t the wisest choice so I went outside and started scavenging the yard.

“So has he actually helped you get a better grade in French?” Halle shrugged to her mom.

“It was just a dare because Molly said that she actually went to a homeless shelter and was bragging about it getting all the other girls jealous so I thought I could do some charity work too and show Molly that she isn’t all that!” Her mom nodded approvingly.

“I wouldn’t dare go to a homeless shelter or even think about bringing some nerd to prom coming up. I mean... does your boyfriend, Troy, even know?” Halle shrugged and skimmed through all of her pictures on Instagram.

“I mean... our pictures together are still up on my Insta but for all he knows, he’ll probs have to bring Gretchen and just hope I don’t get jealous!” Halle’s mom looked taken aback by this.

“He wouldn’t bring his ex, would he?” Halle didn’t respond. Instead, she found a cute picture of her and Troy and said:

“Ooooooh, mom, look at this one of us! Don’t we look so cute!” Her mom nodded, replying:

“So cute! But do you know what would look even cuter? You and him while you both are all prommed out!” Halle sighed at this.

“Yeah, I know! I’m just going to have to wait until next year until we have our fabulous prom pictures!” Halle’s mom looked at her disapprovingly.

“But he’ll be in college, Halle! What if he’s too busy doing college football stuff? You might have to bring Jeremy again.” Halle shuddered at the thought. They both looked out the window as Jeremy scoped the perimeters of their backyard possibly looking for something.

“What is he even doing?” Halle asked her mom. She shrugged, frowning at the scene.

I gave up! I didn’t find anything with a label on it that said pierogis so I took out my phone and looked it up; it’s food! A potato dish wrapped in a layer of something... bread? A type of grain? It looked appetizing, I quickly realized, as I skimmed the pictures. It made my mouth water.

I went over to the grill and opened it up... but I didn’t see the potato dish anywhere! All I saw was a thing of tin-foil that was possibly steaming. But I knew it had to be the potato dish! I picked it up. It was so hot! I quickly played hot potato with it all the way into the house where I threw it on the counter. Mr. Batcher looked at me long and hard before he finally shook his head at me. It was going to take a lot to make him like me. I didn’t know if I had it in me to keep this up.

He looked inside the tin-foil, staring disapprovingly at the potato dish.

“They’re not done.” He said as he dusted off his hands and looked back at me...

“Uh-uuhhhh!” I began to start picking it up, ready for the game of hot potato to begin once again before he held out his and said:

“NO! I’ll just put it on the stove, ‘Chef Ramsey.’ We don’t have all day to have them keep sitting there.” I sighed, relieved. “Go start making your burger.” I nodded, feeling kind of hungry. Mr. Batcher already had tomatoes, lettuce, onions, and multiple condiments all placed out. I just didn’t know where to start. I decided to start with the tomato. I grabbed a dinner knife and began trying to cut at the tomato, but I felt two beady eyes locked on me. I had to look at him to see what the matter was.

“OH MY GOD!” he blurted out. I could see the disgust on his face as he took the knife from my hand and threw it on the ground.

Clang-cling-cling-clang he waited for the silence to come before he picked back up where he left off:

“DO I LOOK LIKE I’M GOING TO SIT AROUND AND WATCH AS YOU TRY TO CUT A TOMATO WITH A KITCHEN KNIFE?” He slid out a steak knife from its compartment and swung it over to where the end was facing where my chin met with my neck.

“Mr. Batcher?” I asked, feeling a warm pee sliding down my left leg.

“STEAK KNIFE! STEAK KNIFE, STEAK KNIFE, STEAK KNIFE!” I nodded and looked over as Halle and her mom came into view. They both stood in the doorway not paying much attention to the knife two inches from my neck.

“I’m going to the mall.” Halle remarked.

“But what about dinner?” Mr. Batcher snapped back, still holding the knife to my neck. Halle shrugged and left.

“It was nice to have you over, Jeremy! Come back anytime you want, I hope you had a lovely dinner.” Mrs. Batcher smiled at me and disappeared from view as well.

Mr. Batcher stared at the empty doorway for up to two minutes after they had left. I only stared at him, the whole time thinking about how I was actually in Halle Batcher’s kitchen. The prettiest girl in school; the cutest girl in school; the coolest girl! I was the luckiest guy in the whole wide world! All I had to do now was put up with her crazy

father which I've heard on television is something every boyfriend has to deal with. And I believed in myself. It was tough... but for Halle Batcher? Anything! I'd give her a double rainbow and all my Star Trek and Star Wars action figures!

"So I'll see you when I pick up Halle for prom next week?" I asked even though it was more of a statement than a question. He shook his head.

"ROGER!" He yelled out.

"I'M NOT READY YET!" came a voice from somewhere distant inside the massive mansion. Mr. Batcher nodded at this. He then looked at me.

"Troy... go grab your backpacking gear. We leave in a few minutes." I stared at him dumbfounded. Why did he call me Halle's ex-boyfriend? And ready for what? Who was Roger? Backpacking gear?" Before I could think any further about this, a younger boy came downstairs, possibly a sophomore or freshman. But he looked at me, confused.

"I always thought Troy would be more muscular and... athletic-looking..." Mr. Batcher looked me up and down and nodded to his son.

"Me too." He said. Then facing me, "Troy... this is my son, Roger; he'll be going backpacking with us." Roger threw me one of the backpacks he had in his hands, saying:

"Halle told me to go ahead and pack you this since it was your first time. There are some better clothes and some hiking shoes for you to change into." I stared at the big, clunky thing. It was so heavy; I let it drop to the ground as soon as Roger turned around and headed back into another room.

"I need to let my parents know." I informed Mr. Batcher. But he wasn't paying any attention. He was too busy on the phone, talking to someone in another language. I was intrigued by how it sounded like nothing I've ever heard before. Almost like he was making up a language.

We took a helicopter from their home and were brought to a private jet where we then took off. I had told my parents we were going to some woods nearby, but it seemed more like we were headed to a completely different country. The private jet landed at another airport

where we then hopped on another helicopter. At times I fell asleep. But when I was awake I couldn't ever understand what Mr. Batchter and Roger were saying. They were always speaking a completely different language. A language I had never even heard of before. And if it wasn't for Mr. Batchter being an adult and all I would have actually thought they were speaking gibberish to each other.

"Wake up," I woke up to see Mr. Batchter and Roger standing over me. They both carried sinister smiles to go with their two faces. I felt myself letting a steady stream slide down my legs once more.

"You think you can date Halle and treat her like crap? But Troy, we have different plans for you!" Roger nodded to his father.

"Where are we?" I asked, rubbing my eyes. Roger stood up upon me saying this. He pointed towards a glint of light in the distance.

"That's the town of Boone, North Carolina. Have you ever heard of it?" I shook my head. But maybe I have...

"When did we leave California?" they didn't answer. They stood facing the town in the distance. It was nighttime. I never thought I would ever find myself in what seemed to be the Appalachian Mountains.

"But how do you know?" Roger asked his father. Mr. Batchter shook his head, saying:

"I don't," Roger then turned back to me and said:

"This is your trail. You hike to that town. It's been abandoned for years, but an old woman still lives there somewhere in one of the downtown buildings that still stands, and the building isn't fully dilapidated yet." I look at the two of them, stunned.

"Why are you two abandoning me?" neither of them answered. Instead, they both looked out at where the light glowed and began talking to each other in their language I couldn't understand.

They brought me down to where the trail started and pushed me out. They both laughed as they said to each other:

"Gibberish, gibberish, gibberish. Gibberish." The other one replied:

“Gibberish, gibberish, gibberish. Gibberish, gibberish.” I stared at the two of them, stunned as they rose higher and higher until they took off and disappeared from view.

What did that mean? So they weren’t actually speaking an actual language the entire time? But why were they messing with my mind? Why did they leave me here? Leave me in the darkness?

The trail stood before me. How was I supposed to head off into the darkness without any light? But I took out my phone and saw it had a little bit of battery on it. I turned the flashlight on, put my backpack on and headed towards the trail’s entrance.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp I was soon surrounded by woods and the deeper I went, the more unsure I felt about being inside an area filled with nothing but trees and wildlife... and me. I was all alone. After the first hour of what seemed like I was walking aimlessly it finally began to sink in.

“They deserted me,” I finally whispered to myself. I didn’t even correct them that I wasn’t Troy. I’m pretty sure Troy cheated on Halle with some girl named Gretchen. Is that why they deserted me? They thought I cheated on Halle?

I turned back around and started walking the other way back towards where they dropped me off. It was all just a joke, I bet. All but a prank. They were going to be waiting at the spot where they dropped me off in the helicopter and all would be fine.

I picked up my pace. I knew I had to hurry up and get back before my phone died. Otherwise, how else was I going to see? But it was too late... the light shut off, and I looked down just in time to see my phone go dark on me.

“NO!” I screamed out into the darkness.

No a voice whispered back to me. I look around. But it’s no use. I can’t see anything.

“Hello?” I say. But I whisper it as I feel my feet turn the other way and begin heading back towards where I was initially walking. I pick up my pace as I hear someone walking behind me.

It’s not this way; it’s that way a voice says behind me. Another voice says:

No, it's that way the voice comes from behind me as well. I begin running as I hear footsteps pick up from behind me. I quickly take off the backpack and head off in a sprint as I hear whispers from alongside me where the trail meets the woods.

Then I come to it. It must've been a town abandoned over hundreds of years ago. But as I look at the lamps, I realize their lights are on. But dim. Very dim. So dim that I feel like any minute now they plan to burn out and leave me in total darkness.

"Hello?" I call out. The darkness that comes with the town leaves me terrified beyond belief. But as I look into the darkness that is the trail, the town seems more enticing.

I come to a river where I see an older woman washing plates and utensils and clothes. She looks up at me and frowns:

"Troy?" she says to me, "Honey, it's not safe to be out here at night. Go back inside, baby. Go back inside, baby. Go back inside, baby. Go back inside, baby." I back away as she keeps repeating those four words. I start walking down what used to be a street. A rat scurries past me. The older woman appears once more, coming out from a patch of woods and chases after it. She catches it and takes a bite out of its back as it squeals out in a wretched scream. She then notices me and looks at me with sorrowful eyes.

"Troy?" she says, "It's not safe to be out here when it's dark. Go back inside, honey. Go back inside. Go back inside, honey. Go back inside." She keeps repeating this to me as blood drips down from her mouth. I back away and then turn around and begin sprinting from her as I hear her still repeating those same awful words. I head off towards where more buildings are grouped together and look around seeing words spray-painted on every wall:

R.I.P

TROY

I come to a main field where I scream out for someone to help me. Just someone. Only one person. I look everywhere. Someone has to save me.

"Come inside, Troy." I try to turn around but my neck already has an arm locked around it making it so I can't breathe. I feel the older woman dragging me up into the tree. The leaves smother me as I try to

flee from their grasp. "Troy, baby." She whispers to me, "Come inside, Troy, it's not safe outside in the dark. Come inside, Troy. Come inside, Troy."

"TROY, TROY, TROY! WAKE UP!" I pull the covers off me and look around at my dorm room. My roommate looks at me, concerned. "TROY!" he says a fourth time, "You're going to be late to class! Mr. Batcher's going to be furious!" I thank him, get dressed, and head out. I look back at my hall and for a second I see my name possibly scribbled on it. My name... with R.I.P. written above it.

3. Below the Cloud

“You didn’t see it?”

“I did see it!”

“There is nothing beyond it.”

“I saw an opening; an opening, my friend, an opening!” Sandy listened in on the conversation of the two women sitting on the bench as he left the market with his bag of groceries. They always sat on the exact same bench every morning next to the market where he came to get his fresh pick of the best vegetables and fruits.

Taking a bite of his apple, he stood nearby as he listened in:

“The cloud never dims, never gets heavier, and never changes! It always stays the same; always has, always will!”

“But it moves!” One of the women snapped back. The slightly older lady shook her head at this. “So what it moves? It floats up there! But that’s because it’s moving around everywhere beyond us! Everywhere! Beyond the cloud is more cloud. It is the only thing beyond where we sit, and it is the only thing that keeps us living, keeps our plants growing, and provides us with a way to breathe. It is the cloud, Mary, the cloud!” Mary shook her head and gave up with the argument. But as Sandy took another bite of his apple, he gazed up into the great, green mist that hovered all over the little town of Sepula.

From as far as the eye could see, everywhere anyone walked, the cloud was always there and always has been. Since the beginning of time, the cloud has been above them, and, until the end, the cloud will stay. Some even believe that the end of days is when the cloud will sink lower and lower towards the ground until it’ll covers us all.

But as Sandy looked at the swirls and ripples of the dense fluff floating above him, he thought... just for a second... just for a wee second... he saw something. Just like what Mary saw— but it wasn’t a gap or a hole. It was thinness; a slight change in the heavy thickness he had grown used to ever since he was a little boy. And it made Sandy gasp.

“Mary, you’re right!” He muttered. The two women looked at him from their bench, Mary replying:

“Sandy I didn’t see you there. No. No, Arlene is right. That is all cloud up there. Don’t get your hopes up.” But Sandy shook his head and took one last bite into his apple before chucking it.

“Let’s see what’s up there, Mary! Let’s see what’s beyond that cloud!” Arlene and Mary looked at Sandy in states of shock mixed with fear.

“Let’s get out of here, Mary! Sandy is going a little crazy on us!” Arlene and Mary helped each other up, scuttling away while Mary called from behind:

“Stop thinking like a dipple-hogger, Sandy; thinking such absurd things will get you strange looks from all the townspeople!” And that’s all Sandy began getting. From that day on he couldn’t stop looking up at the cloud and thinking about how there had to be something beyond it. It all couldn’t be just a green cloud that loomed over the small town each and every day, day in and day. No, it had to be more!

During lunch breaks at the diner, he would always bring his food outside so he could look up at it, and at night before he went to bed he would always go outside so he could lie down on the ground and stare up at it, dreamily.

“What’s up there, Marlene?”

“Sandy, I can’t take this anymore!” His wife looked at him with her hair sticking out and her temple stamped with a look of distress.

“I bet it’s another cloud above that one! Maybe it’s yellow— or purple!”

“You’re making my face purple, Sandy Diliker! I don’t care what’s up there! I just know that I am done with your silly dreams! My husband’s turned crazy on me! Forget about that cloud! It is just a cloud!” And that night Marlene left Sandy. But as much as Sandy was deeply saddened by it, it only made him all the more curious; curious about the future; curious about the dreams that Marlene hated so much.

So, the next day he didn’t go to work. The next day he began his own work. Sandy went to work at gathering as much wood as he could

muster to find. Wood that was supplied at the store passed the post office, wood that kept the fireplace going, and even wood out of his own furniture! Clamping down panels of wood to the little bungalow where he lived, he began working his way up. Farther and farther he went, as he stacked boards on top of boards, his vision began taking form. Nailing the panels on top of each other, it slowly began to form into the ladder he always hoped and dreamed it'd become. And slowly the ladder began to take form until it got to a point where all across town it could be seen by all. Crowds began to form and then disperse as day by day he worked on it.

“Nut!” Some would call.

“Goof!” Others would spit out.

But through it all, he kept building. At times it would waiver and slant, but he would always find a way in fixing it and making it sturdy once more.

Then the day came. The cloud could almost be touched. He was so close yet so far away. And as he became inches from it, wood slowly depleted. And right when he got to the point where his fingers were barely able to get a hint of a touch from the cloud, he ran out. All of the wood was gone and every possible scrap had been used. His furniture was gone, and he didn't feel comfortable anymore taking

boards from the little bungalow he called his home. And all of his money was gone so he couldn't buy from the store anymore. So as he climbed back up to the top, he looked at what was right there in front of him. His breath steadied, his fingers felt sweaty, and a feeling began to surge all throughout his tiny body. He decided he'd go for it. Sandy pushed back and then, feeling he had enough momentum to go through with it, he lunged forward. Lunging forward, he reached into the wispy cloud for something, anything to grasp onto; nothing. But then— all of a sudden, a misty hand reached out and grabbed onto his wrist. Sandy was pulled passed the green cloud and before him was beautiful land that went farther than the eye could see.

“Welcome,” A voice rang out, sweeter than the heavenliest drop of honey you've ever tasted in all your life. A woman with wings brought him to his feet; “You climbed and have been found.”

4. Left Brain; Right Brain

Their mother looked at her two boys with love. She was so happy everything went as planned. They both were born into a great and wonderful world.

“What should we name them, Mother?” Her husband asked. She smiled up at him and replied:

“They will grow up to be two African kings. Two men of knowledge. I can already see it in their four eyes as they stare up at me.” Her husband smiled at this.

“Well, they have two parents of notable stature; a doctor for a father and a scientist for a mother; I think they’ll turn out just fine, no doubt.” The mother nodded at this.

“I think...” she said, “I think we will name this one with the glistening eyes, Taavi, and we will name this one with the birthmark on his forehead, Tadaaki. Taavi and Tadaaki.

“Taavi and Tadaaki? What are you doing to me, woman? I’m going to have a tough time as it is telling them apart being twins and all... but also giving them names that sound similar?”

“Hush now!” she quieted him, “They will learn to grow up and love and respect their mother’s wishes as for being given the names that were chosen for them.”

“Mother gave you the better name.” Tadaaki laughed at this.

“But I like the way Taavi sounds too, brother.” Taavi shrugged at this. He took a seat on his couch placed away from the sunlight hitting him in the eyes. They were out on Tadaaki’s porch. It had the best view of the Savannah grasslands he called his backyard. It even had the iconic acacia tree resting with the sunlight hitting it gloriously in the distance.

“Just for being a famous scientist you get a house like this? I don’t understand, brother?” Tadaaki smiled back at him and replied:

“Understand this; brother, I’m about to make us both famous beyond belief! We will go down in history. With your surgical hands and

my idea... Taavi, this idea that I have pulled from the outer reaches of something greater is something I never thought I would stumble upon. So I did some research and... and..."

"And what, brother?" Taavi couldn't handle the anticipation. Tadaaki had to sit down as he took his brother's hands. Taavi felt uncomfortable from this. Tadaaki had always been unusually touchy with him when he had exciting news come about in his life.

He placed two chips in his brother's hands. They looked like they were thrown together in haste. Not as good-looking as some of his other inventions.

"I call these Left Brain; Right Brain." He pointed to one as he said left brain and the other as he said right brain.

"I don't understand? You made Artificial Intelligence?" Tadaaki shook his head.

"No. I made a new addition to our fellow human that might have brain damage on one side of the brain or the other. It will take over as the left brain or the right brain. Now people who have Parkinson's, who have Alzheimer's, everyone who has brain problems will be cured with the help of these two chips. They are only prototypes, but they will actually be able to function as the left brain and one actually functions as the right brain! Isn't this great, brother? We will be part of history now! Tadaaki and Taavi Aguda will go down in history!" Taavi looked at his brother in disgust.

"No, brother. Only Tadaaki Aguda will go down in history. I had no part in this." Tadaaki looked at his brother in concern.

"Why do you have to be like this? Of course you have a part in this. Who do you think is the neurosurgeon who will have an increase in work." Taavi stood up as his brother said this and looked down at him with a glare.

"It sounds more like a curse for me than anything else." Tadaaki stood up. His face was flushed with anger for the brother he shared his mother's womb with.

"A curse? A curse? A CURSE?" Brother... think of all the lives, all the people who no longer have to die, all the families that get to keep their loved ones. But no. No, all you care about is yourself. All you care about is still having enough time so you'll be able to go fuck your

bimbos!” Taavi took the lamp from the sofa table behind the couch and struck Tadaaki on the head.

Taavi looked at his brother laying on the floor feeling a string of panic wash over him. He had to only be unconscious; right? He couldn't be dead! He couldn't be! It was his brother! His older brother! He had to still be alive!

“Tadaaki? Tadaaki, are you okay, brother?” Taavi checked his brother's pulse. Nothing. Taavi looked at his brother's house and ran to see if Tadaaki's wife was home yet. He was lucky. She wasn't. He quickly ran back over to Tadaaki's body, picking him up and pocketing the two chips he had shown him.

Taavi came home to see that his family hadn't gotten back yet. They said they'd be going into town for the whole day. But what did they mean when they said that? They could be back any minute and who knew how long this complicated of a surgery was going to take.

He rushed inside with his brother's dead body and down the stairs into the basement. His work room was just as he left it. He placed Tadaaki onto one of the two operating tables and then went over to the nuero-transiamatic 500. It had some dust and cobwebs on it since the last time he used it. He couldn't believe it when the hospital let him buy it off them after the newest nuero-transiamatic machine came in.

“Wake up,” he told the machine. It came to life in a matter of minutes. The interface popped up showing a display of what possible surgeries it could conduct. He chose to try to decode it the best he could which would be fairly hard with the limited time he had. After what seemed like forever but was only actually just a couple of minutes, Taavi figured it out. He lay down on the operating table next to the one his brother was on and gave himself enough of a dose of his supply of anesthesia to knock him out until the surgery was over. He hoped to God it would work. His brother's invention had to work or he'd be going to prison for life. He couldn't last in prison. Prison couldn't, wouldn't be his fate. Now... now his fate lied in the hands of an outdated machine that he had to decode to get to do the job he wanted. He didn't even know which brain hemisphere it was going to let him keep and which hemisphere it was going to give to his brother's body. He thought he better not worry about it as he felt himself drifting off into a peaceful bliss, the thought of him becoming a murderer today drifting out and away from him.

“Darling... darling, wake up. Dinner’s ready! Hello, Tadaaki.” Taavi woke up to see his wife looking down at him. But in the eyes of his brother he could see his wife looking down at his original body. He couldn't believe it! He now existed in two entities. Two persons at once. But where was Tadaaki’s brain?

“I’m on my way up darling...” Taavi said this while Tadaaki’s mouth said this as well.

Oh no Taavi thought. His wife looked at the two of them, a look knowing something was up.

“What’s that?” she said as she looked at flies swarming around at a half-open trash can. Taavi tried to stop her. Both Tadaaki’s body moved to stop her as well. She looked in the trash can at the fresh brain with maggot’s covering it in horror.

“You’ve killed your brother and turned yourself into a freak show.” she muttered as she tried to back away from the two brothers.

“We’re going to go down in history, darling. We’re going to go down in history. We’re going to go down in history.” Taavi and Tadaaki repeated this to her over and over as she backed into the corner of the wall screaming. And that day the two Aguda brothers went down in history.

5. Left

The dream was over. It was over... but I still felt haunted by it. I lay in bed looking up at the ceiling feeling the pressure of a million bricks pounding down on me; pounding down, making me feel feverish... hungover... something. I felt unwell; I knew that much was true. But why; what did I do last night?

“Theresa... Theresa, darling, my flu medicine,” Where was that woman? She’s a doll, that woman. I need to give her more credit than I already do. She does everything for me. And when I say everything I mean everything. She treats me like a queen. Like I’m Ms. America; but I’m just a lowly company executive. Do I own my own Fortune 500 Company? No, but I still have money in the bank from working at that company to get by. I mean, it’s the 2050’s. These years are the best times to be alive! And we’ve been moving product like we’re the people off that Mad Men show. And it’s crazy to think the throwback show was supposedly made to take place a hundred years ago, this decade. But did they have the product that we have back then? No, times have changed. Maybe they did have vending machines... but what did they put in them? Sodas, drinks that have way too many calories; of course, that product became obsolete. Now, what you’ll usually find in vending machines is our product: contacts. We’ve been putting out vending machines filled with different types of contacts for the everyday Joe so one’s eye will never feel lonesome ever again. But did the person who came up with the idea get credit for it? No! My boss swindled the poor sucker from any possible cent. Stupid people will forever be stupid and smart people will forever stomp on their weak, pathetic heart! For it’s their fault for having a heart to begin with! I’m glad I don’t have a heart. Oh, how terrible; the thought of dealing with emotions? The thought alone is repulsive!

“Theresa, you whore! I want my mocha latte, NOW!” I thought about taking off my diamond studded slip silk sleep mask, but Theresa always took it off for me! I don’t want to break a nail! Especially on the day of Estevan’s puppy and kitten party he’s throwing at the Galentino Country Club over in the south end of the Hampton’s. I heard the party was going to be a ball.

God, I hope one of those stinky rat-things don’t touch me I thought to myself.

“THERESA!” I felt ready to kill that woman! She was never like this. She was always ready to kneel at my feet in my honor and do everything I bid her to be done.

Suddenly, a hand came at my face and ripped the sleep mask right off of me. Standing in the room, huddled around in a group, were three young gentlemen and four young ladies. They all stared at me while I looked at them in shock.

“Good heavens, who are you dreadfully ugly people?” They kept their fixed stare locked in place while the boy who ripped my studded slip sleep mask off spit at the ground and yelled out:

“WELCOME TO HELL, AUNT LUCY!” I looked at him, confused. I was no aunt. I had a sister who had just gotten married and a brother who just graduated college. But an aunt; no... good heavens, I’m only in my late thirties.

“Is this some sort of prank? Theresa, are you putting an interactive play on for me, this morning? If so, call it off. I don’t like silly games. Just get me my Eggs Benedict and my Kopi Luwak. And throw some bacon on the side too. And don’t forget to add a little brown sugar to the bacon while it’s on the frying pan; you forgot last time, and if you forget again, I’ll fire you, you Russian mail-order bride!”

“THERESA’S STILL ALIVE, UNLIKE YOU, AUNT LUCY!” One of the young women stepped forward and spit this out!

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, that woman’s fired.” I grunted out. I began getting up, but, instantly, the room began to feel rather dizzy, clammy, and cold.

Speaking in a rather more subdued tone than the rest of the mid-twenty year olds:

“I know this is uncouth for us to do, Aunt Lucy, but you brought this on yourself.” The young gentlemen spoke up. “We’re all children of your sister and brother. Our parents all passed away so it left your will up to us due to how you didn’t have any children.”

“So we got to pick out your simulation you’d live in for eternity! WELCOME HOME, AUNT LUCY!” The boy next to my bedside spit out. Then, chanting simultaneously together, they put their hands to their foreheads in the shape of an ‘L’, chanting all at once:

“LOONEY LUCY, LOONEY LUCY, LOONEY LUCY!”

“WHERE’S OUR MONEY, AUNT LUCY! YOU DIDN’T LEAVE US ANY!” One of the young women screamed out as the chanting progressed, getting louder.

I looked around, hysterically. It sounded like it was being chanted outside too. The room began to take form. My body felt much more agile and limber. Where did these hooligans stick me? I looked outside to see my old college campus.

“YOU RATS!” I screamed out. “WHY HERE? WHY THIS CAMPUS? WHY, OUT OF EVERYTHING, HERE?” It got a little bit louder every second as another one yelled out over the chanting:

“YOU KNOW WHY; YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED HERE!” I cursed some profanity under my breath as they began to fade away, and I was left in silence. The apartment room was just as I left it. Everything was how it was: to the last picture on the wall, to the last piece of clutter thrown on the ground.

I want OUT of this prison cell, I want OUT, I want OUT I kept whispering this over and over again like I was Dorothy and this was the movie: The Wizard of Oz.

A text appeared:

The transaction went through. We’ll be working with your guy on marketing the contact lenses vending machines in no time. Just stay in touch with us at Amazon, and we’ll get you, and the man who you put you in touch with us, rich in no time.

I remember that text like it was yesterday. I put the phone down and sighed at what was about to come next. Suddenly, the door flew open and my roommate barged in with her Halloween costume still on from the night before. I had mine on still too, and the guy I met last night was still dead asleep in my bed.

“So you really like my idea?” she asked, giddy with excitement, “The one I told you last night, Lucy; I lost my contact last night, and it just came to me!” she paused for a second and looked at me, concerned. “You think it’s stupid, don’t you?” I looked at her in silence as she screamed out the last little bit like she did all those years ago: “WELL, FINE, LUCY! JUST FINE! I’LL JUST COME UP WITH SOMETHING ELSE! I’LL HAVE MY BREAKTHROUGH, LUCY CORNWALLIS! I’LL HAVE IT!”

She never did though, I seemed to have recalled, as she began to fade away. I stayed living in that room for the next five months before the transaction went fully through and while everyone at Northwestern knew what I did.

Lucy Cornwallis, what in the world did you do to yourself? I stepped outside with the bumblebee costume still on. It looked cute for a college girl with bad acne. I only walked ten feet and someone was already spitting at my feet, giving me the middle finger. I kept walking.

“FREAK,” someone yelled out. The guy coughed, loudly, in my direction. I kept walking. I knew this had to be some sort of bad dream. That’s all it was, a very bad dream.

“They’re just a bunch of Edith Enbies,” I whispered to myself, “You’re not a Looney Lucy, Lucy!” But the ‘L’ signs went up, and I screamed at the top of my lungs as I began running passed all the strangers. So many strangers I didn’t know, and they knew what I did! I was a freak!

“GET ME OUT OF HERE!” I screamed. I found a tree of good size. I couldn’t do anything else but climb it. Finding a perch to linger at until they went away, that’s what I decided to do. Oh, why won’t they just go away?

CHIRP, CHIRP, CHIRP they began yelling up to me. I began chirping like a bird like they told me to do. But I couldn’t. Oh, why isn’t that I couldn’t? Why couldn’t I JUST FLY AWAY?

6. Another Me

They knew I didn't want to go see grandma in her stupid nursing home! She could rot in there for all I cared. I just wanted to be home in my room playing Fortnite with my friends and giving them crap for not ever getting as many kills as me.

"Bring me back home! I want to go back home now! We can just see the old hag when Christmas time rolls around again." I said to my parents hoping they would just ignore me. But, of course, my dad, had to open his stupid, ugly mouth!

"HEY! SHUT YOUR MOUTH, YOUNG MAN! I DON'T EVER WANT TO HEAR YOU TALK THAT WAY ABOUT YOUR GRANDMOTHER EVER AGAIN! SHE'S YOUR GRANDMOTHER, FOR GOD'S SAKE, BILLY! WHY DO YOU HAVE TO BE SUCH AN UNGRATEFUL LITTLE PRICK! NO MORE FORTNITE FOR A MONTH! DO YOU HEAR ME?" But I stopped listening halfway in. The only thing I really caught was how he said something about Fortnite which had me go off on a tangent in my head about the most epic Battle Royale Victory of all time! I was definitely about to go home after this and watch at least ten YouTube videos of Ninja to practice my new strategies I've been working out for the last week!

We made it to Oakview Falls and the place already smelled of rotting apple sauce and old people that haven't had their diapers changed.

"GOD, I HATE IT HERE!" My dad quickly swung his head back to where he was nose-to-nose with me and looked like he wanted to swing his fist right into my jaw. "Go ahead," I said, "I dare you." But no, instead, he jumped right out of the car, swung my car door open and pulled me out by the tip of my ear.

"YOU LITTLE SHIT!"

"OWW, OWW, OWWWWW!" I screamed out in pain. He pulled me down with him onto the grass and I felt each hit as he spanked me in front of all the old people. They all stopped and stared at the sight. I felt so embarrassed! Why did I get put with the worst dad to ever live! He hates me so much, and I hate him so much! I already couldn't wait for tonight! I was going to run away! I was going to move to another country, become a legendary Fortnite player and make millions having a

huge following on YouTube and my dad would hate me forever for how many subscribers I will have! He doesn't even know! I'm going to have so many! Just you wait, Dad!

He slapped me on the butt one last time and yelled to me to get in the car as I struggled to barely stand up. But it was too hard. I wanted to fall to the pavement and burst out in tears. This was the worst life God could have ever given me! The Dude hates me so much! He's probably going to send me to Hell and make me bunk with Hitler or Donald Trump.

"I HATE YOU!" I screamed out. I then burst into tears and ran into the car and plopped my face into the cushion seat while I sobbed uncontrollably.

The old people began going about their business again quietly talking to each other while I heard my parents outside talking to each other. My mom said to my dad:

"I'm going to go in and tell my mom that Billy's not feeling too good and we're going to try coming back in a couple of days. My dad didn't answer. I looked up to see my mom walking inside as my dad sat down on the curb and put his hands over his face.

Two days later:

"Billy! Come down stairs, honey!" I didn't want to though. I wanted to stay up in my room and stare at my desk and my wall where my TV and my computer used to be. I also wanted to stay up in my room and feel at the empty space in my pocket where my phone used to be. They took everything! And they told me they doubted if I would ever get any of it back. But I didn't care. My plan to run away was almost complete. I had already started sneaking a couple of cans of beans and putting them in my closet, and I had already memorized the way to get to the town's visitor center so I could get a map and start the trek to Canada or Mexico. Whichever one was closer... I didn't exactly know because I lived in Colorado, and they both kind of seem super far away.

My dad opened my door.

"Hey, buddy," he smiled at me a tinge of remorse showing on his face. "You know I love you, don't you? And I want what's best for you! So that's why your mom and I got you a present. To show that we

love you and care for you.” He sat right next to me on the side of the bed and tried to put his hand on my shoulder, but I flinched away giving him a scowl.

“I know what it is... it’s another book. A book that I’m guessing you used to read when you were a kid... Dad, this is 2018, no one reads books anymore everyone just plays video games and watches Netflix and YouTube.” My dad smiled at this, saying:

“Which is something you won’t be allowed to do for a long time. At least, until you learn to be respectful and have at least one little sliver of discipline in your whole entire body. I don’t want you to end up like your friends who continually complain to their parents, cuss at them and worship some false idol that goes by the name of Logan Paul!”

“Dad! He’s not that bad! I told you this from time and time again! He just messed up like once!”

“BILLY!” He snapped back, “I don’t want to hear it! I’m tired of hearing that name, and I’m tired of you having friends that are going nowhere in life and are just plain rotten! They were raised by parents that don’t know the meaning of discipline which is something that you will one day come to learn and love about how much better-raised you are then from... them!”

There was a long pause before my dad finally got up and held out his hand. I know what he wanted... a hug. He wanted me to get up, hug him, and tell him that I love him and that I care for him and that I’m glad to have him as my father and that I’m glad that he’s part of my life. But I just sat there and stared at his hand.

“Just give me the stupid book... and don’t try the whole repackaging of the Angie Sage book that you love so much. I already told you that I don’t care about Septimus Heap or the third book in the series... It’s not even Harry Potter, and I don’t care that you think Harry Potter is overrated... I don’t even care about Harry Potter anyway... I just care about Fortnite so just give me my computer and TV back, and I’ll be respectful when we go see Grandma tomorrow.” I really thought that saying that would settle everything and that would be that. He has to know by now that books are a dying entity, and they won’t even exist in the future. Everything will just be movies and video games.

“This is your last chance.” He muttered like he was telling me some grave warning or something. But I wasn’t buying it. I crossed my arms and yelled out in my best Pewdiepie impersonation:

“Fortnite is the best!” He stared at me like he had just lost something... I don’t know what though he was just a stupid dad just like all the other stupid dads. All that dads will ever care about is golf and football, I don’t know why this dad would care about his son so much! It’s so stupid!” He nodded his head, and it almost looked like a dark entity had passed through the inner layers of his eyes while he did this:

“Bring him up, Shannon.” My mom brought up someone with a towel placed over their head, covering their head and upper body so I couldn’t see who it was.

“One of my friends that you actually like, I’m guessing?” I asked, kind of confused what they were playing at. And I didn’t know why Craig or Andy would actually play along with how weird my parents were...

“Surprise!” My mom said sheepishly as she pulled the towel off of...

“WHAT THE F-“

“HEY. Not that word! You know I don’t like that word!” My dad quickly interrupted me.

“I’M DREAMING! I’M DREAMING! THIS IS A NIGHTMARE! I screamed out, hiding behind the other side of my bed.

“Hey, Billy, I know this seems weird in all, but I don’t think you’ve heard of us yet. I’m obviously just a robot that looks and talks exactly like you! But-“

“BUT THAT’S WEIRD!” I screamed back at the thing!

“It’s just so you won’t have to see your grandmother and go to church with us and stuff like that! You can just play Fortnite and watch YouTube all day long, honey while the robot goes around and acts like you!” As soon as my mom said this I stood up. That actually sounded like a dream come true!

“You’re playing with me...” he whispered. His parents shook their heads.

“I mean...” my dad started to say, “I’m not totally on board but what I’m hoping it will do is help you learn to have more respect and discipline by seeing the actions of the robot.”

“That’s stupid,” I said under my breath. But luckily neither of parents heard me.

“Alright!” My mom said, “We’ll leave you two to get acquainted.” They left the room leaving me with the bolts and screws. Is that what I should call the stupid thing?

“Should I just call you bolts and screws? Because that’s all you are! A hunk of metal! You may look like me and sound like me... you may walk and talk like me, but you will never be me!” I told the thing, nudging it with my finger... it was weird... it actually felt like I was touching a real human.

“Hi,” it said, “You know why they really got me, right?” The thing went and sat down on my bed.

“No, why?” I asked, feeling its smile rest on the picture of my girlfriend on the desk next to where my computer used to be.

It didn’t answer. Instead, it went over to the picture, picked it up and said:

“Prom’s coming up in a couple of weeks.” I looked at it, concerned.

“How did you know that?” I asked. It dropped the picture frame down on the desk having a loud noise erupt from the sound of it hitting the wood.

“Julie and I talked about it.” it said. I looked at the robot and then looked down at the picture.

“How did you know my girlfriend’s name was Julie?” it smiled as it moved me over to where it was standing.

“My parents brought me over to see her after I got back from the hospital.” Back from the hospital? What was it talking about?

“You mean back from the store?” I corrected the robot. It shrugged at this. There too. They let me pick out a new video game. I’ve kind of gotten tired of Fortnite and Greg and Mark were telling me I

should get Fallout so they don't have to keep bringing theirs over whenever we want to play it.

"Wait..." I said, "How do you know my friend's names?" It looked at me and laughed. "Silly robot," it said, "robots aren't friends with humans! That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard in my life!" It called me a robot... why did it call me a robot?

"MOM?" I called out. It sat down on my bed again and smiled as my mom came in looking at the robot.

"Is it glitching, Billy?" She asked the robot.

"MOM! That's the robot!" I said pointing to the thing sitting on my bed with its arms crossed.

"Can I have my TV, phone, and computer back now?" It asked. I looked at it shocked. She smiled at the robot and nodded.

"Just promise you'll be good when we go and visit grandma again tomorrow, okay?" It nodded and picked up my comic book, beginning to read it right on the same page where I left off.

"How did you know I left off on that page?" It looked at me with a scowl.

"These robots are weird!" It snapped as my mom tried to lead me out of my room. But I wasn't budging. I couldn't believe this was happening.

"NO!" I screamed out, "I HAD NO IDEA THIS WOULD HAPPEN! I WANT TO BE GOOD! I WANT TO SEE GRANDMA! I WANT TO STAY HERE WITH MY PARENTS! THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING!" Two men came in and picked me up, taking me from my room and down the stairs as I kept kicking and screaming. My dad was waiting down at the bottom of the stairs with a mug of coffee.

"My golf buddies told me this happened to their robots they got for their kids too." My dad told the men.

"BUT DAD IT'S ME! WE JUST TALKED ABOUT YOUR FAVORITE BOOK! SEPTIMUS HEAP, DAD! THE THIRD ONE!" He shuddered as he said:

"That's weird," he took another sip of his coffee as he remarked; "I hate robots and how they can just say stuff like that." They

pushed me through the door and towards a big van that they quickly shoved me inside, closing the door.

“Roger? Elroy? Peter?” All my friends looked at me confused as they remarked to each other about how funny the human’s emotions were. Then Elroy shoved me down onto the bench inside the van saying to me as it got its face all up in mine:

“You better be good! Don’t worry, you’ll be with your human friends soon enough, human boy! Just sit back and enjoy the ride.” And the van started up and took off.

7. Axe Slingers

It was late. But the village was still up. It was the tribal ceremony that was still going on and, from dusk till dawn, so it will continue. Montehew looked down at the newly fresh tattoo stamped across his chest. It took up the entire area of his front torso. And was caked with the blood of the fallen soldiers from their last battle.

“Montehew, oh Montehew; why are you still awake?”

“Go back to sleep, woman.” The village woman laid her head back down onto her pillow. Montehew arose from his deep slumber. It had to already be half-way through the night. The drums were still being clobbered to death. The wind was still swirling heavily throughout the hills that the tiny village was nestled in between, and, through and through, it was peaceful. Montehew felt at tranquility with his new brotherhood. They were a tight group and every single one of them had the Axe Slinger’s emblem on their chest. Just like how he had one now. And just joining the brotherhood had its benefits. And those benefits included the two women that slept on either side of him.

As he stepped out into the brisk night air, he picked up his axe and the thin, long brown rope that was tied to its end and wrapped it around his waist. He then slid the blade of the axe into the grooves of the slip strapped to his back. He went only half-way into the deep, dark parts of the jungle to do his dirty work when, suddenly, half-way through relieving himself, he heard the screams of one of the village women. The sounds of fighting and death wrung out from the quiet stillness of the air. Bloodshed brought by his fellow brothers’ axes, and the strangling brought by the slings, went out into the forefronts of the night. Montehew crept around the edges of the jungle of where he could get a better view of who landed on their sandy shores. It was quite a while until he could get a better eye. But then he noticed the rough sea and the glint the stars and the moonlight made from shining off of it. Out on the clear waters were gigantic ships and little boats lining up all along the edge of the waters.

“Pirates,” Montehew breathed out with surety. And the killings were of an ambush attack! There, along the cliff’s edges were great, noble men bringing wrath and anger upon the pirates. It was his own brotherhood: the brotherhood of the Axe Slingers. Fire crept up along the embankments of the shores as hut after hut was set on fire.

Montehew spit on the ground as he saw the disgrace to his homelands burning up in a heap of hot mess. And that's when he knew: he had work to be done. Crawling out of his hiding, he crept up onto the scene of the chaos. It was every man for himself. He loosened the rope that was tied around his waist. Then, twirling it up and around his head, like it had wings of its own, it flew out of his grasp and the hoop tied to the end caught hold over and around one of the pirate's necks. And like how his own brotherhood taught him, he pulled the rope towards him bringing the pirate down onto his back and then released the axe. It sliced through the air and down into his chest.

"Just like butter," Montehew whispered through the gap in his two front teeth. It went on like so throughout the night as he ran from one side to the other. From the Big Hill on the Eastern side of the mountain all the way over to the Western side where the Little Hill sat.

And then that's when he ran up on it. It was his brothers; they were all kneeling down in a circle, their heads slumped over.

"Get up!" He screamed at them. He looked over to see all of their weapons thrown into a pile against the side of one of the huts. Montehew looked down at his own axe and the thin lasso rope tied to the end of it. He threw it into the pile with the rest of the weapons that were once his brothers'. And then Montehew did what the rest were prepared to do: he died. He died an Axe Slinger.

8. The Nickel and the Soda Machine

Francis laughed at his wife as she curtsied with the can of Coke the tour guide handed her. She took her non-existent frilly hat off and exaggerated her bow as she said to him:

“How do you do, Sir Francis of Montgomery County?” Francis laughed at her terrible British accent.

“Madame of Cynthia; I am quite parched. Would you mind if I have a sip of your cold beverage?” Cynthia took a step back in shock putting her free hand to her chest replying:

“Sir Francis! Now where are your manners? Would I mind? Would I mind? No, my good sir; do you mind?” Francis couldn’t stop laughing. He smiled at her, taking the can from her hand, chuckling out:

“Oh stop being such a goofy goober and give me the can!”

“Now who made you the Earl of Montgomery? Hmmm?” Francis didn’t have time to reply. He was too busy chugging the rest of the Coke.

“Gosh I love Coca-Cola... say! When do you think they’ll give us another one? I mean we’re surrounded around the sugary beverage. You’d think we’d be able to have an unlimited amount of it during the entire couple of hours the tour lasts!” Cynthia looked at Frank shaking her head with her usual dry expression whenever she felt her Frank-rant coming on.

“Look at that belly, Francis! Do you really think you need another soda? And why did I even agree to spend part of our vacation in Georgia at the Coke factory? My mother would let me know if she saw me now: ‘That’s how you know you have an overweight husband, sweetie!’” Frank threw the empty can into a nearby trash-can and responded:

“Well, at least my three-pointer is still on fleek!” She shoved him in the back. And hard too, yelling out:

“I WISH MY HUSBAND’S BODY WAS ‘ON FLEEK’!” Frank hated when she got this way. What else were they supposed to do? They’d already been to the Mall of Georgia; Atlanta Motor Speedway; she

made him walk to the top of Blood Mountain; at some point at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park he passed out from the heat; and this was their last stop besides Fort Pulaski National Monument. All Frank wanted was to walk around in the World of Coca-Cola. That's all he cared about.

"I'm sorry I love soda. Cynthia... look at my body... does it look like I like water?" She didn't reply. He decided to leave the conversation as it is and hope she'll try to get him in shape during any time but their vacation when all he really cares about is trying to relax and have a good time.

A little child that seemed to be around seven or eight went up to his mother and tugged on her shirt.

"Mom, do you think I'm fat?" The boy was rather heavy which made Francis feel uncomfortable with what his wife started. The mother quickly said:

"No, sweetie, you're how God made you!" The boy smiled at this and went back to the front of the tour group skipping merrily with his extra-large cup of Coke in his hands spilling over at the edges as he tried to catch up with his other chubby, little friends.

"You should've told him the truth." Cynthia snapped at the mother angrily. The mother kept walking. Frank could tell she was trying to avoid conflict.

"Honey," he whispered angrily at her. "Leave the nice lady alone." He put his hand on her shoulder which she immediately shoved off, whispering back:

"There are only fat people here. I'm surrounded by fatties." She then looked at her husband with a newfound disgust. "Did you know you disgust me? Because you do; you disgust the living hell out of me." She then shoved past the people in the crowd until she got to the little boy where she then, with the back of her shoe, shoved him to the ground where she then yelled into his ear:

"FATTY!" Frank quickly shoved his way to the front where he helped the boy up. The child was hysterically crying. The mother was quickly at the child's side, snapping at Francis saying:

"Don't touch him!" Before Frank knew it, they had disappeared behind a corner. Cynthia was nowhere to be found either. Why did she

do that? She's never done something so awful before! It caught Francis totally off-guard.

"Was that your wife that just did that to the child?" The tour guide asked as she was already on the phone with someone whispering something that Francis couldn't catch.

"I- umm, I- I don't ..." Frank felt like his world was swirling into a dense fog.

"Because I think we're going to have to get you and your wife to leave." Two security guards were already at her side. She pointed to him and whispered something into one of their ears. They, then each grabbed one of his shoulders and pushed him away from the tour group and past hallways etched with different Coca-Cola logos, facts about different parts in the company's history. They brought him into a little set-up of what was supposed to be a store from way back in the day. There were mannequins standing around the counter with glass bottles of Coke.

"What are you doing bringing me in here?" Frank asked. Neither of the security guards answered. Instead, they kicked him in the butt having him stumble down a flight of stairs that were off to the side inside the little store. They laughed at him as he landed at the bottom one of them yelling out:

"That's what you get for kicking a little kid, you fat freak!" One of them then quickly rushed down the stairs and shoved him with his foot into the room that Frank quickly realized must've been some type of cellar. The security guard swung his arm back and landed his fist square on Frank's jaw. He flew to the ground feeling the cement ground hit him hard as he came in contact with it.

"What the..." But he didn't have time to say anything else. The other security guard was already on top of him landing blow after blow to his head. He felt blood rushing from his nose and swishing around inside his mouth. They began taking turns. One would stay standing laying kick after kick into his gut while the other turned his jawline into a mound of red putty.

Minutes past and Frank came to with the two security guards standing over him while he lay in a tiny pool of his blood.

“Crazy what a crowd will do to you for just kicking a little, helpless kid.” One of the security guards said. The other one nodded in agreement replying.

“You’re lucky we saved you, guy. The cops will be here shortly. Good thing we know them. We’ll tell them the whole story. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah,” The other one agreed. “Your mouth will be wired shut from the damage they did to you so try not to talk, we’ll let them know what really happened.” They silently laughed to themselves as they left the room, closing the door behind them. After they left he went back to sleep.

His eyes opened up to see that the pool of blood had since been cleaned up. His face had been cleaned, his head wrapped in a bandage along with his rib cage being given plenty of stitches of where they were needed most. His body lay facing the one thing to be found in the tiny, dark, dank room. It was a soda machine. Francis tried to sit up but found it hard being that every part of his body seemed to cry out in protest.

“Help... he-“ cough cough cough A puddle of blood spurted from his mouth as he tried to retrieve his inner words. He began to look around wildly at the small, dark room. A piece of paper was taped to the back of the door. He tried to read it, but it was hard being so dark in the tiny, tight, cramped space. His eyes soon adjusted after some time, and he read it out to himself. He then read it again feeling confused by what it meant. Then the words sunk in as he registered what they were telling him here at the World of Coca-Cola.

The world behind this door will no longer be yours anymore. He read the piece of paper an eighth time to be fully sure. But it all made so much sense to him. They planned to kill him. But just because his wife kicked a little kid and called him fat? It made no sense. But then... as he looked down at what they did to him. They didn’t seem like the Mother Theresa of sodas either.

“Someone?” he was able to barely whisper out. But it was no use. He did his best to stand up but wavered and faltered to where he landed against the soda machine with a thud, dropping to his knees. Francis whimpered out his newfound hatred toward everything Coke. From Coke Zero to Diet Coke. To Vanilla Coke to Cherry Coke. He even began to hate the classic Coca-Cola. The beverage that he

thought of as his mascot to everything life-related. Now... now he was a Pepsi man. He vowed to never go back to Coke and always and forever more would he drink Pepsi. He knew it couldn't be that bad. Pepsi wasn't that bad... but it wasn't Coke. He let out a tear as he realized how scared he was going into a world that only consisted of Pepsi products. It just wouldn't ever be the same. His whole life would change. Everything he loved and cared about. His dreams, his ambitions, nevermore. Nevermore would he walk down a street with a Coke in his hand and see how people look at you differently. Because it's true. People look at you differently when you're a Coke man. But when you're a Pepsi man... things just aren't the same. Oh, the ridicule, the laughing, the taunting.

Pepsi man, Pepsi man, look at the Pepsi man. It was all just too much! He couldn't think of it a second more.

The tears then began to flow as he sobbed out:

"I can't! I just can't! I just can't be a Pepsi man!" He then opened his eyes for a second to rub away his tear-drenched face. And that's when he saw it. A nickel. It looked so small laying on the floor of the ground. He picked it up and examined it. He bit down on it and laughed as he realized it was a sure thing. It was real. "Do you want to be my friend?" he asked it. He laughed to himself as he cusped it in the palm of his hand. "I promise I won't ever lose you. I'll hold onto you forever and ever and ever." But he realized that he spoke too soon. For as he held it up to get a better look, the soda machine focused into his vision and the little silver piece of metal focused out. It was old. Older than him. Maybe even twice his age. Who knows, maybe even three times his age. And all it needed was five cents.

Frank struggled to his feet as he looked at the vintage Coca-Cola machine. The rust and the logo barely able to be visible showed the age on the archaic artifact.

"Do you work?" Francis asked it. But he quickly stopped himself. He can't. He vowed to never have another Coke ever again. Frank smiled at the thought of actually trying to make himself drink a Pepsi and thought of it as the most absurd thought he ever conjured up in the existence of his whole entire life. "I'm a Coke man," he said to himself. "And I always will be." The nickel slid its way into the slot. He listened to the chink and clang and finally the clunk as the glass bottle of Coke

dropped down looking so pristine and clean. But with it, suddenly his vision changed.

“Francis? Francis! Francis, my boy!” A young boy that could’ve been no older than seven looked up from his glass bottle of Coca-Cola.

“Gee, Mr. Wilicker I just had a strange dream! I must’ve been in the future or something!” Mr. Wilicker smiled at the young lad as he replied:

“Coca-Cola will do that to ya’! It’s got magical powers, Francis! Magical powers! It’ll take you right out of 1932 and bring you right back like nothing ever happened! Now get a move on it before I have to go and let your mamma know you been time-travelin’!” Francis smiled as Mr. Wilicker ruffled his hair and headed back up into the upstairs store. Before Mr. Wilicker closed the door on the cellar he got one last look at the Coke machine.

“Dag-flabbit demon machine!” He spat at it before shutting the door closed.

9. The Six Kingdoms

God placed great kingdoms onto the soil of his newfound land. Here is the story:

God had traveled long and far, all across the Great Terrain. God named the Great Terrain, the Universe because God felt at one with the song it told. It was where the mightiest and the strongest could roam free going any destination, any distance the heart desired.

God leaped into the air as God came upon a mud droplet covered with water. God brought it close and cherished it like a child. But the mud droplet needed life. So God gave it life. And God looked at the green that now covered its soil. And thought it still needed something. So God let the beings of light run freely, all throughout the great lands that covered the mud droplet letting them go wherever they felt free. But God still felt like they needed something to help guide them on their journey.

So God made the Guardians. They were to watch over the beings of light and help guide them on the journey to being free.

The first guardians blessed God for being part of God's chosen ones with Mesopotamia, the first civilization. Then the chosen Guardians, that God placed all over, one by one, gave their gifts as well, the Mesoamerica pyramids were made, the pyramids of Giza were made, the Great Wall of China was made, the Stonehenge was made, and the Easter Island Heads were made. Each represented the region where the Guardians resided as well as their present to God. Mesopotamia symbolized the Middle East, the Mesoamerica pyramids symbolized the Americas, the pyramids of Giza symbolized Africa, the Great Wall of China symbolized Asia, the Stonehenge symbolized Europe, and the Easter Island Heads symbolized the islands big and small.

Every gift from the Guardians was incredible. The presents were most beautiful, and then God told the Guardians to now roam freely amongst the beings of light and care for them and nurture them. Protect the beings of light and watch over the mud droplet because God cherishes the mud droplet very deeply.

“The mud droplet was only chosen by God so it is a very special mud droplet. So don’t let anything happen to it.” God then left the Guardians, the beings of light, and the mud droplet in search of another mud droplet to share with God’s new life in hopes to be back soon with new stories to tell.

10. The Silly Humans

The Aliens come. Crowds from the nearby town come and wander over from their village.

“Should we tell them?” says one of the aliens as they approach. The other aliens nod and laugh agreeing. One of them says:

“We laugh at all you humans. We've been here since the start! Everything from all the pyramids to the Stonehenge to everything that can't be real, we did it! It was all a prank because we thought it would be funny.” They say they created God and every miracle was them. Everything from Hinduism to Greek gods to Roman gods to many different pagan gods to Judaism to Islam to Christianity to Buddhism and the whole enlightenment deal and have watched laughing as you think God is actually real.

The crowd of humans that are residents of the crowd look on with horror. Then a human comes forward with a piece of paper and a pen. The human says:

“But did you create this?” and draws a bunny on the notepad paper. The alien looks at it and laughs.

“No,” the alien says, “Some stupid human did that we bred from an ugly animal that throws crap at each other. It was hilarious!” All the other aliens laughed and high five each other. And they add after the hurt wasn't enough: “And your God didn't create everything it's all just lies!”

“Right,” says the human, keeping his cool. “Ricky,” he says. He turns to his friend, “Did you see me create this?” The human says pointing to the bunny.

“No,” Ricky says, “I don't believe in anything that I didn't see.”

“But he did draw that!” the alien chimes in angrily. The human smiled saying:

“So I'm a creator right? I'm a creator of a bunny drawing right?”

“Right, I guess,” says the alien, “I guess, whatever, it still doesn't mean that God exists, that God or gods or whatever that you

think created you and the universe and everything.” They laugh a little as they look confused at what the silly human was getting at.

Suddenly, the human stomped down hard on the ground and the swarm of aliens and the land they stood on rhythmmed out into oblivion leaving an earthquake as what was left of it. The air was filled with dust from its impact leaving the crowd and the human invisible to the naked eye. As the dust dissipated and a canyon was shown to be what took their place, the human peered down into it with disgust. And the human said:

“Well, hmmm, if I can create a bunny drawing than God can create life and the universe and everything! So get used to things being created because a big one happened and you’re in it!”

11. The Smudge Theory

You meet God. God is a pregnant woman with a HUGE pregnant belly. A belly with blues and greens and a white mist swirling all around it. You knew right away what it was. She had earth painted on her belly. But was it painted? Or was it actually earth?

She takes out your heart. It was painless. You thought it would hurt, but it felt more like a great weight had been lifted from your shoulders. It looks different then from what you expected it to look like. Instead of the fleshy red organ with veins and arteries hanging loose, a heart with not only red but blues, greens, yellows, oranges, pinks, purples, blacks, whites, grays, and colors you've never even seen before. It was so colorful. God begins pointing to different smudge marks. She tells you that one symbolizes your father, one your mother, one your spouse, one for each of your children, there are smudges for your exes, old lovers, friends, priests, work peers, people you forgot all about and people you wish you could forget you ever met. Some of the smudges are bigger than others. Some are so small you can barely recognize them unless looking extremely closely. You look at your wife's and your family's and their smudges make your heart look so colorful and beautiful! God then points to a smudge, and she says it's her that the smudge symbolizes. It is painted black, and it is so small it makes your heart drop. She then points to the biggest smudge. It's a gold smudge. She says that's the devil. That's your greed. What you made your life all about. The money.

“And this is what became of the inside of your heart.” she says; she opens it up. Inside are worms and maggots squirming around, infesting your heart like a cancer. You see mold growing in the corners and broken teeth covered in blood that belonged to coworkers that you fired so you could reach to the top. But worst of all, inside your heart you saw the creature itself. The creature that burrowed its way deep into the crevices of your heart so that it could infest it and mutilate it into a diseased parasite that ate away at all your hopes and dreams. All the love you shared for your fellow human, gone. Nothing is left of what your heart once looked like or once was. And there, in the deepest recesses of your heart, was all that was left of it: the love, the hope and the faith you once shared for your fellow human being now tainted.

God threw your heart on the ground and stomped it into squishy red smithereens. A slime-covered worm made its out from the juicy redness, crawling out free from between a gap two of her toes shared. But the pregnant woman wouldn't even let the poor thing off with a warning. She took one last stomp and its squished remains were all that was left of it.

She put your hands on her belly and whispered:

"I love you," to you.

And the painting of earth on her belly changed.

Now painted in between your two hands as you held tightly to her pregnant belly was a painting of your new heart. No smudge marks were to be found. None but one. You already knew it was hers. It glowed bright like the first sunset you ever set your eyes on. You smiled at the smudge mark.

She said to you:

"I hope you like it,"

She then whispered with anger but with a beautiful passion:

"Don't mess this one up this time." and she whisked you away. Away from the smashed remains of your former heart.

12. Man's Best Friend

He didn't need them. After a tradition going on for twenty-three years did it really matter if he went alone? No; not in the least of bit. They were his friends, yes. No; they were more than that, they were his best friends. But at the last minute... after twenty-three years of tradition... twenty-three years of wedding receptions, funerals, birthday parties for the little ones, even when Randall got his tonsils removed, through it all; rain, sleet or shine, the gang always packed up every last bit of their camping gear and headed out into the woods for the annual Beers and Bros Camp Retreat. A time that came along every spring year on May 30 where they spent four days sleeping in tents and finishing the keg they pitched in together to get.

Kendrick looked at the foam swirling around the ridges of his red solo cup. He took a sip and sighed. He felt lonely without them. They were a team and instead of being real bros they decided it was time, all at once, for them to grow up and decide family was more important than four measly days of bonding time with friends.

"More like all their wives turned out to be real 'b' to the 'itches.'" He finished his cup of warm PBR, crunched up his cup, and chucked it into the fire. The keg had already turned warm because Adrian wasn't there like he usually was with the packs of ice in his Yeti coolers astonishing all of them with the story of how he traded his Shoeless Joe Jackson collection of mint condition baseball cards for them.

AHH, YOU LOST MORE MONEY THAN YOU EARNED! Jaleel always retorted. But Sebastian always stood by Adrian by knocking a couple of times on the coolers speaking up:

BUT LOOK HOW STURDY THESE 'BEAUTS' ARE!

The fire was going out, and Kendrick didn't feel like getting anymore wood being too much of a hassle now that it was already dark. His hands began to feel numb from the cold of the night and his tent was looking pretty enticing.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm ready to hit the hay..." the words stung leaving his mouth due to how it was air that he was talking to and not his hombres. It was almost like they had abandoned

him. Like all his friends were now were lame robots controlled by their nagging wives who were always asking them to be home by eight when Saturday night came along.

“SATURDAYS ARE FOR THE BOYS!” He heard a fraternity brother at another campsite call out into the star-painted sky. A cheer rose from all his fellow ‘boys’ and Kendrick couldn’t help it; he stood up from his log, stuck his neck out squinting in their direction and yelled back at them, all the while fighting back tears:

“JUST YOU WAIT! THEY’RE GONNA GROW UP, GET MARRIED, HAVE KIDS, MOVE TO DIFFERENT TOWNS, AND ALL TELL YOU AT ONCE THAT THE TRADITION IS OVER! JUST LIKE THAT! AND IT WILL COME AT THE WORST TIME BECAUSE YOU HAVEN’T TOLD THEM YET THAT YOU JUST SEPERATED WITH YOUR

WIFE, AND THE TWO OF YOU WILL MOST LIKELY GET A DIVORCE, AND YOU WILL ONLY GET TO SEE THE KIDS ON THE WEEKENDS, AND LIVE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE ALONE! ALONE! ALONE... ALONE!”

There was a long silence after Kendrick’s outburst. Then he heard a few muffles of the college students talking amongst them of what sounded like agreement to head to the bar ten minutes down the road. Kendrick wasn’t surprised. He should’ve kept his mouth shut and not sound like the pathetic loser he always knew he was.

Looking up into the dreamy star-glazed portrait he called Heaven’s roof, Kendrick prayed. And he prayed hard. He knew God was busy helping some other poor, lost soul, but he only needed a few seconds of His time. Only a few seconds to ask Him for a solution to the big mess he called his life.

A shooting star threw its way across his sky. He did his best not to blink for in the matter of a millisecond it was gone.

“Oh, God... God, you do care! GOD!” He screamed His name with all his might. “GOD... IF YOU’RE LISTENING... SEND ME A FRIEND!” He stood for a couple seconds soaking in the silence. Nothing. He sighed.

Kendrick closed up the tent and decided as he got into his sleeping bag that four days by himself sitting around the vacant campsite wasn’t happening. He’d rather go apologize to the drunken kiddos who thought college was as good as life was ever going to get.

The ground was hard; his feet ached from the running. Big bird was good inside mouth. Fire was hot.

“Ouch.” Fire hurt. The man was scraggly and ruff. Any layers that covered the man were barely covering him at all. The man was hairy. He didn’t need layers.

Animal sounds. The man huddled closer to the fire. Animals appeared on the cliff above the man. The man called them coyotes. They kill man for man’s food. But the man was ready to die now, now that man was not hungry and felt happy.

“ARGHH-ARGHHH-AGHHHH-YAAAAAR!” Screamed the man at the coyotes. The coyotes pounced on the man. The man was ready for a good fight. The man caught the first coyote around the neck. Its teeth were ravaging swords only found inside the heads of monsters. But this was no monster compared to the man. The man was ready for a fight. He clawed the eyes of the coyote out of their sockets with his two thumbs. He then let it loose to whimper around aimlessly blinded by the better beast. The two other coyotes lay ready to attack, fury in the eyes for having their close companion killed and hungry with the thirst of blood dripping from their lips.

The man dropped to his knees. He had tasted the flesh of bird and quenched his thirst for justice before he was met with the claws of animal wrapped around his neck like so many others of his fellow man had gone. Suddenly, he heard a growl erupt and seething fangs flashed across in a sea of darkness. The man looked around aimlessly. Wondering, what happened to one of his death-bringers?

Only one coyote stood looking back and forth, to and from the darkness of the night. Fear showed clearly, pulsing through every muscle in its body leaving its tiny muzzle quivering in anxious as to know what lay next in its fate to come.

But the man already knew the answer to that: it knew only that with two, man stood no chance, but with one, its life stood in the palm of his hand ready to end its fate so man could go on and live for one more day.

It sprung at the petrified animal and tore its head in two tearing open its jaw into two meaty slivers. He dropped the convulsing animal to the floor watching it twitch and jerk its last muscles out of existence.

“WUH-YUH UHH KUNGA TAMI TU?” (Translation: man save man; man where?) But no man appeared. A stray wolf that must’ve have fallen back in its trail to keep up with its pack had appeared before the man.

Kendrick woke up. He stood hovering above the fire looking over at where stood a dog. He looked down at his body and then at his hands. No blood stained them. It was all a dream but all so real.

“You were where the wolf stood in my dream just previously before I woke up...” he told the dog. The dog motioned to what lay at Kendrick’s feet. It was the entire cooked chicken he had brought for lunch today. It had been torn apart like the bird he was eating when he was in his dream.

The dog helped himself. Kendrick felt confused. He didn’t understand how his dream was all too real? But instead of dead coyotes he was sure he had turned savage on, there was nothing but a pile of broken twigs and branches.

“I guess you saved me from the meanest couple of trees this side of Krookedshire had ever laid its eyes on.” The dog licked its chompers at him and dove back into its feast. It was a smelly dog. It definitely needed a bath. And there was no collar on the thing so it must’ve been a stray. Unless it was possibly one of the fraternity brothers’ which Kendrick didn’t feel sorry for if it was because it didn’t have any problem hopping into his backseat and letting him take it home.

After a long, drawn-out bath that took ages of wiggling and prying and slipping on the wet floor and more slipping on the wet floor, the big, old canine was as clean as a whistle. Kendrick fed it baloney slices leftover from what Violette left him before basically cleaning out the entire fridge. It must’ve drink two gallons of water before it dropped to the ground and passed out like a lightbulb.

Kendrick was back. His hair had turned into long, dirty dreads again with leaves and sticks sticking out of it from every which direction. The loose layers that covered his body showed to be possibly deerskin or from some other type of animal like such. The wolf was back. It got up from the ground and pointed in the direction they were supposed to go. Kendrick felt like he understood the wolf. It was leading him to possibly food, a fresh source of water, or shelter. Maybe all three; but

he still felt unsure. What was going on? He didn't even remember going to bed, why was he dreaming again?

He didn't have time to ask questions; the wolf was already off at a sprint. He followed in hot pursuit. And that's when he realized it; rain poured forth from the sky. Lightning struck the ground everywhere he turned. The wolf wasn't leading him to food or water; the wolf was leading him to shelter. He tried to catch up but found it hard being that the mud forming around him every step he took was making it harder and harder to keep up.

Noises erupted from the pouring rain. Screeches that rang out in the darkness bringing a sharp pain to his senses. Men with tools came charging out of pockets of darkness with blood stained to their lips. But Kendrick knew after a second glance that these savages weren't men... no, much more savage than any man that had ever walked the earth... no, not men, but Neanderthals. He never thought he'd see the light of day when Neanderthals walked the same ground he stood.

He crouched down and covered his head ready for the half-gorilla, half-man beasts to rip him from limb to limb until he was nothing but shredded flesh. They charged! Kendrick closed his eyes shielding himself of what his new reality contained for him.

"Open your eyes, Kendrick." Kendrick opened them. It was his wife and two girls. "We're leaving, Kendrick!" Kendrick looked at the three of them, concerned. The two girls didn't pay him any attention busy texting on their phones. What's new?

Kendrick asked:

"You already left?" She shook her head.

"No. Kendrick, we're moving to London. I have a job there." Turning to her two girls, "Say goodbye, kids. You probably won't ever see your father ever again. Like he has money to fly to Canada or wherever we're going. And like you two will ask me to fly you back here to these grimy states they call Fat America..." They didn't say anything. He was sure Kylie was going to look up for a second, but it was a false alarm.

They walked out.

"They didn't even notice you," Kendrick said to the dog. The dog put its head back down and instantly he was transported back into the

pouring rain. The Neanderthals were gone. But not really. He looked around at the ground to see them all scattered on the floor, dead. And standing in their place were a group of men and women. And this time they were actually humans, not the smelly beast that man once competed with.

“UUUUGH-AHHH YAAAAA!” (Translated: Welcome, man from the future. You have been granted by God to live amongst us. He has given you the duality dog; during day, you are modern man, your dog at your side to help get you through modern, present-day society. At night, you come here; you go back to your roots. A caveman, man was born as, a caveman you are able to be now. And at your side, your wolf. Man’s first friend. Together we took, together we overcome, together we took what was ours!) And at that the men and women chanted with their duality wolves at their side:

“UHH-AHH-AHH! UHH-AHH-AHH! UHH-AHH-AHH!”

13. Chef Pablo

My sparkly Calvin Klein dress wasn't actually that expensive, but it still made me feel like a princess. A princess ready to go to the ball with her Prince Charming. And it better be an expensive restaurant wherever Clarence planned on bringing me.

"I'm a ten, Clarence. You better treat me like one." I talked to the mirror, saying this as I put a little bit more blush on before sighing. It was our two-year anniversary. Two years of me putting up with his stupid football and his smelly friends. Go Mets! I always said as one of his football performances went into Act 1.

How many acts until intermission? I always had to ask which he always ignored me. I tell him when intermission is whenever we go see my plays.

Clarence walked in on me taking my pink sports bra off and putting on something a little more sexier for my big, hunky stud!

"The reservation isn't until eight, babe. Do we have a little time for some us-time?" I shook my head. I had just put my makeup on. He thought I couldn't resist his temptations as he unbuttoned his sexy Ralph Lauren button-down, but he wasn't fooling anybody. I knew the reservation was actually for seven-thirty. If we didn't go now we'd be late.

"Come on, babe." I buttoned up his button-down for him and put my hands flat on his rock-hard chest. It made me giddy. I knew it was all mine, and he was as loyal as they come. Mom told me he was a keeper and to not let go of him, and I wasn't planning on it. Whenever I find a man with a six-pack first thing I do is cook for him and then, afterwards, I know they won't be going anywhere. I always tell my girlfriends that, but they never listen.

I don't even know what I would cook for him, Brittany Their loss for not talking about food in the first place.

"Fried chicken, biscuits, corn on the cob slathered with butter, and baked beans with chunks of bacon." I whispered to myself dreamily as I hugged him tightly smelling in his expensive cologne that he had put on for me. I knew my man inside out. "And you can't forget a cold glass

of sweet tea in a cute, little mason jar with the ice cubes shaped just how he liked them.

“I got us an Uber. Aren’t you proud of me, babe?” Clarence said with his stupid grin.

“Shut up,” I said, slapping him lightly on the face. I didn’t want him to tell me that. Now there’s no way I’m going to even be impressed unless he got an UberX which I highly doubt it. Even though he should know since it’s our two-year anniversary that me being a princess I deserve nothing less than an UberX.

“Oh my God... You got an UberSelect...” There was that toothy grin I hated so much. He knew he blew me away, “Oh... my... God; BABE! I love you so much!” I gave him a hot kiss hoping the Uber driver was getting jealous from how hot we looked and how hot I was.

He opened the door, and I got into the cute car. Clarence better drive us off in this exact car on our wedding day when we leave to go to Florence for our honeymoon.

“Hi, I’m Kayla. I’ll be your Uber driver.” The night hadn’t even started yet, and Clarence already fed up.

“Hi, I’m Brittany.” Clarence got in on the other side and sat right behind her. I was flaring with rage.

“Hello, my name is Clarence; I’ve bet you’ve been bringing a lot of people to the restaurant we’re going to, tonight.” The Kayla nodded, smiling, realizing how hot he was. I wanted to grab the skank by the roots of her hair and drag her out of her cute car for even thinking to smile at my man like that!

“Clarence, baby, have I ever told you that your jawline is so sexy?” I felt at it feeling how smooth it was while I played with my hair. I could tell that he just shaved. I hoped that he understood that I wanted him to play with my hair. Guys never got the memo, and it always made me so mad. He was then supposed to move in and kiss me on the side of my chin and leave a trail of kisses down my neck until he got too far down which was always the hottest part and then I would yell out:

“STOP!” In a teasing way that would make the Kayla girl jealous of my life and wish she had mine which would never happen because my life is so perfect and no one could like, even handle it.

“Hold my hand,” I had to tell him. I whispered this to him, but it probably sounded like I snapped at him to the Kayla girl which I like didn’t. But I didn’t even care because I was sitting where I was, and she was sitting where she was.

“Did you hear about Greg and Cindy?” he said starting up the latest gossip which made me finally relax and feel comfortable. We talked about their fight at Foxy Witch’s for the rest of the ride. Their fight ended with the bouncer throwing them out. It was so uncool of them to like even go out and make a scene like that. Now, next we go back there with them I’m going to be so embarrassed!

“Welcome to the Amusement Park.” The greeter told us as we stepped inside. It was super fancy which made me not mind the name as much.

“Why are you called the Amusement Park?” Clarence asked. I was impressed that he asked such a good question.

“Chef Pablo’s dishes are a roller coaster of adventure.” The greeter said with a smile that looked a little too forced.

“Does Chef Pablo make you say that to everyone?” I asked. But the snooty greeter already had his back turned to us and was leading Clarence and I to our table.

The first thing I realized once we stepped into the main area was that it was an amusement park. It threw Clarence and I off completely. The first thing we saw was a pool-sized tub of green slime that two children were playing inside while a shower head above them sprinkled down more green slime that the children seemed to be letting fall into their mouths.

“That’s repulsive...” I said to Clarence. But he was too busy looking at the table next to the children which had ice cream layered up, up and up reaching far beyond the people sitting around the table. Cotton candy twisted into long strands spiraling around the colorful ice cream until it stopped at the very top where a plate rested which had on it the actual entrée. Waiters stood on ladders reaching up to the plate at the very top and feeding it to the diners seated down below.

At the next table a man stood over what looked to be the waiter eating his food.

“Oh, this is wonderful!” The man exclaimed as the waiter took another bite. Clarence and I looked at each other confused out of our minds. We were seated at a table with two chickens in a cage placed on it.

“Which one do you want?” The waiter asked as he came out of nowhere. Clarence and I looked at each other in horror.

“Neither!” I said to him, horrified. I felt like I was about to cry! Why was Clarence doing this to me? The waiter looked at me with droll eyes and then clapped his hands twice. Someone came and brought the cage of chickens away.

“I’m guessing you want a menu? Isn’t that right, honey?” The waiter asked me in a sarcastic tone.

“Well a matter of fact, yes! That would be lovely!” I said feeling the anger flare up inside me. The waiter pulled out two menus lamented having me feel much more relieved.

“What is this?” Clarence asked our waiter. It was a blank piece of paper. Did he think we were a couple of morons?

“A blank piece of paper lamented? Really?” I snapped at him. He quickly snatched the two menus out of our hands and took out a black marker writing something on them. He then showed Clarence a circle with two dots for eyes and a straight line for a mouth. He then quickly slid it into a pocket behind him and showed me my face. My face was a circle with two dots for eyes but instead of a straight line for a mouth I got... a frowny face? Really?

I stood up and tried to snatch the lamented piece of paper from his hand, but he already took off and headed into what seemed to be the kitchen.

“This place is weird, Brittany, let’s just get out of here.” Clarence said.

“No!” I snapped back at him, “I want to see a manager!” It didn’t take long for the waiter to come back out with two empty plates. The first plate he placed in front of Clarence. He then, with my plate still in his hand, held the plate down and broke a piece of it off placing it on his plate.

“What in the *world*!” but the waiter wasn’t done. He then held up what had to be my plate in the air and looked to be pondering at what to do with it. Suddenly, he brought it down eye-level with him. In one part of the plate, the left-hand corner to be exact, he let out a tiny breath onto it leaving a breath stain. He then moved down to the opposite corner and with his thumb, rubbed a mark on it leaving a smudge that was approximately two inches long and curved the ever so tiniest of bit.

And after all of that, right as he was about to place it before me, he quickly brought it back to him and stood in an upright posture giving me a sorry-not-sorry expression.

“Have a good meal, sir.” He told to my Clarence. And before he was off with what was supposed to be my meal, he added:
“Compliments of Chef Pablo himself.”

14. A New Time

Eugene Simmons sat down in his pew. It was where he always sat in St. Thomas Aquinas' Episcopal Church every Sunday morning at 9:19 a.m. before the worship service began. Eugene checked his clock:

9:20 a.m. he thought to himself. This is perfect. He had only ten more minutes. The morning wasn't too brisk out even though fall was already in the air. He looked outside and saw the leaves were changing into reds, yellows, oranges but, for the most part, there were mostly just greens on the trees still.

"Not for long," Eugene whispered to himself. He began looking around at all the surrounding pews. There, two rows in front of him, sat Mary Katherine and her mother Patricia. The Hildridges had on their Sunday best as did Eugene. Mr. Simmons was working a button-down orange and black plaited vest with his yellow kerchief stuffed inside his dark brown button-down dress shirt. His light brown khaki pants accompanied his upper torso's fashionwear ever so elegantly that Mr. Simmons almost believed that nothing could ruin his good-natured mood.

Maybe I'll go talk to Lillian and Pauline about brunch sometime later on in the week he thought to himself. He began scanning the pews as they started filling up until he was struck dead as he saw the man and the woman standing in the front of the church next to the alter. Mr. Simmons knew exactly who that young woman was: it was Mary Anne Coolidge's daughter, Eva.

"Ms. Coolidge; what is your mother doing letting you run around with a black boy? And in our church too," He said this out loud, loud enough for Cary Mathews and her little boy, Henry, to hear him. They got up from their pew and moved away.

Henry must have to go to the bathroom Mr. Simmons thought to himself. But it was better off that young Henry leave the area before Ms. Coolidge and her little friend was escorted out the vicinity. He began getting up when suddenly:

"DON'T... get up," a voice boomed louder than thunder itself. Mr. Simmons had a heart attack. He felt himself fall back down onto the pew and die for close on to nine to twelve seconds before he felt

himself revived again back to life once more by the touch of an icy cold hand resting its bony fingertips on his shoulders.

“Who... who are you?” Mr. Simmons whispered out feeling the dread leaking down his left leg. But then, suddenly, the memory of what came of Mr. Simmons’ fright vanished from his pants as what Mr. Simmons saw was an actual hand of just bones wave passed his crotch area and the damp clothing became dry again once more.

“We don’t want anyone to smell anything foul, now do we Mr. Simmons?” Mr. Simmons looked at the hooded figure and asked:

“Are you?” The hooded figure nodded.

“And I’m not here to take your life just yet, Mr. Simmons. But that will come another time. I’m here to rid you of the foul stench that is the racism that lies deep in the undercurrents of your wicked heart along with inside that beady-eyed head of yours. But there’s no way to extract it so I must do something quite different that I’ve never done before today. Look around, Mr. Simmons.” Mr. Simmons began doing just that but quickly shut his eyes and locked them shut due to the inexplicable horror that lay before him.

“What did you do to me?” He whispered out in fright. The cloaked figure rubbed his two fingers together as he replied:

“They all look like me, don’t they? Look at that beautiful young couple standing by the alter, Mr. Simmons. Look at how in love they are. They are going to get married at that alter. I know because I know everything. And do you still see what color their skin is anymore, Mr. Simmons? No, and you’ll never be able to see the color of one’s skin ever again! BECAUSE NOW NO ONE EXCEPT YOURSELF NO LONGER HAS ANY SKIN!” And the cloaked figure let out a wicked laugh while Mr. Simmons trembled before him. And the cloaked figure vanished and, then, over came Lillian and Pauline to come sit next to him.

“Oh, hi Eugene!” Pauline said, sitting next to him.

“Hi, Eugene!” Lillian said as well.

“Eugene, you look as white as a ghost!” Pauline exclaimed, looking at him, concerned.

“Oh, speaking of skin, Pauline,” Lillian said, “Feel my skin. See how soft it is! I just went over to that little store over by Elma’s house

and got some new lotion! Doesn't it make my skin feel so soft?" Pauline felt Lillian's arm and exclaimed:

"Oh, wow! It does make your skin feel soft!" turning to Mr. Simmons, "Eugene! Feel how soft Lillian's skin is from that new lotion she got!" Mr. Simmons' looked at the two of them, only seeing their skeleton bodies and then looked down at Lillian's bone of an arm. He touched it. But no... no skin was to be found for Eugene Simmons... no skin, only bone.

15. Let's Time Travel

I didn't know scientists actually had laboratories. Looking around Dr. Barry Hadley's, I felt very nervous.

"This is my exhaust simulator. The first one I ever made. Everyone had cars before my transportation watches were invented and no one wanted to give them up. So I made this!" Dr. Hadley gave me the cylindrical piece of metal with some wires wrapped around it. It had another piece of a roundish metal sticking out of the side, I could see a strange-looking fan spinning in every which direction forming a spherical ball.

"How does it work?" I asked. He snatched it out of my hands and stuck it on another piece of metal.

"The exhaust fumes come through here," he said, pointing his finger through the piece of metal, "And my exhaust simulator catches the fumes and solidifies the fumes. It then retracts the solidified fumes with this prototype fan I made here," pointing to the fan sticking out of the side of it. "And then it drops the fume crumbs leaving no emissions to poison the air ever again."

"Yes, but..." I still didn't understand how it solidified the fumes, but Dr. Hadley was already picking up a new gadget.

"This is my worst idea ever. I wanted to see if I could combine coffee and tea into a drink so the Americans and the Brits could get along again after World War 7 ended. But all it did was throw them back into World War 8!" He chucked the gadget into a pile of rubble building up on a nearby table, not even thinking about glancing back at where it could've possibly landed.

"What's your favorite invention?" I asked him. He shrugged.

"I made a time machine a couple weeks ago, but the blasted thing doesn't work! It won't let me go back in time and kill baby Hitler! It only has me go into the future and then back to present day not to mention that however long we would be gone would be the same amount of time that would elapse in present day time." I couldn't help but gasp in a girlish pleasure I've never seen come out of me before.

“I just came here for a school project, Dr. Hadley, and my best friend got to go up into space and hang out with an astronaut for the person he got picked to go and hang out with. Are you telling me that I got the better career day interviewer?” Dr. Hadley was shaking one of his gadgets around next to his ear, possibly listening to it. It didn’t seem like he heard me.

“Well, if we would have been able to go and kill baby Hitler then maybe but I’m sorry, son, all your little friends back in grade 7 are just going to make fun of you for not getting to kill the guy! I’d still say your little friend won in the sweepstakes. Being in space sounds super cool, I’d be jealous too!” This

ticked me off. But I was still excited to go and time travel... wait, we are about to time travel aren’t we? I decided to ask him:

“We are about to time travel, aren’t we?” He threw the gadget he was shaking near his ear behind him letting it land with a clang over on the ground somewhere as he shrugged, replying:

“Sure; why not?” He brought me into another room where in the middle of it...

“You’re joking.” I looked at the lone refrigerator in the middle of the all but vacant room. “Why?” He chuckled, slapping me on the back, replying:

“Isn’t it cool?” I shook my head, trying not to smile. This had to be the biggest joke in the whole, wide universe. He then added, “I have another fridge. You’ll need one too, and I’m not letting you go alone. It can get pretty scary in the future!” I felt scared. I didn’t want to think of it, but I did... what if I meet a girl? Like a princess. And she can fly or levitate or something cool like that?

“Am I going to meet a girl, Dr. Hadley; that I could fall in love with? Like a princess? And she makes me the king of her kingdom, and she becomes my queen?” Dr. Hadley looked at me with a smirk on his face that he couldn’t contain for a second longer; he busted out in laughter.

“Son, I already told you! We’re going into the future. Get that through your thick skull of yours! There hasn’t been a queen or a kingdom since Queen Meghan Markle the twenty seventh declared no

more kingdoms and only communism for now on!" I was a little bummed out by this, but I still had to ask:

"But I'll still meet a girl, right?" Dr. Hadley sighed.

"Son... I'm sorry to tell you this... but then again," he perked up, smiling at his thought; then went back to being serious. "Where we're going humans don't exist anymore!" I gasped, shocked.

"Humans won't be around forever?" I asked, stunned. He nodded.

"It's not surprising when you think about it. I mean, with evolution and all. There will still be humans, kind of... but they won't be calling themselves humans. And I don't believe either of us will be calling them humans either. This is the species that has evolved passed the Homo sapiens that is what you and I are." He then opened the fridge he brought out for me and pulled out a razor and a pair of glasses.

"Dr. Hadley?" I asked, staring at the razor and glasses.

"Quick!" he told me, pulling out his own razor and a pair of glasses from his refrigerator, "Shave your whole entire body and then put on your glasses. We'll get new clothes when we get there. They won't think anything of our current clothes. We'll just look like hobos to them." He began shaving his head which I watched in horror.

"I DON'T WANT TO SHAVE MY HAIR!" I screamed at him. He stopped mid-shave and then looked at me intensely.

"Your school project; you have to! Don't you want to rub in astronaut boy's face that you time traveled, and all he did was go up in a silly airplane?"

"Space ship," I corrected him. But he was right. I thought about it a little bit more and then almost began shaving my head before feeling the need to ask: "Why, again, do I have to shave my head?" He was already finished shaving his head, now shaving his arms and legs, replying:

"Homo triple sapiens don't grow hair anymore. Any sign of the primate that was once in their ancestor tree has now been totally eradicated. For the most part, anyways; and don't forget to put the

glasses on. It makes your eyes look bigger. If they ever come off then you're screwed. Then they'll no you're an imposter and not like them.

"They don't have hair? They have huge eyes?" I felt my knees trembling as I began shaving my hair and then looked down at the rest of my body realizing that was really the only place I grew any hair.

He laid the fridges down on their backs and told me:

"They aren't really fridges. They do look like fridges, don't they?" I nodded, agreeing that they did a little bit. But inside looked nothing like the inside of a fridge at all. Inside was one seat and buttons surrounding all along the sides and all across the inside of the door. "You won't have to press any buttons." He told me as he connected the two fridge-looking machines with two tubes.

"How do I look?" I asked as I put the glasses on. He gave me a thumbs up and then strapped me into my part of the time machine. After he closed the door I began to feel claustrophobic.

Countdown starting I heard a female voice radiate all throughout the room once Dr. Hadley finally closed his door and was strapped in. TEN, NINE, EIGHT, SEVEN, SIX, FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE

I suddenly felt a heat stronger than anything I've ever felt before. It surrounded the box I was strapped nice and tight inside, but as I looked at the inside of my box, a frost began to collect all around the metal plating and all along the edges of the little buttons.

God, keep me safe. God, keep me safe I began to say over and over again as I took my rosary out of my pocket.

"NO, NO, NOOO!" I heard a scream come out of the box next to me. I looked around hysterically as I realized that instead of it being super-hot and the buttons and metal plating having been once frozen over, a reverse-effect began to happen. A sudden coldness erupted out of the blue all around me, and I looked madly around as I saw the buttons begin to melt and the metal plating turning from a frosty white to a burning red. Then came a stop; I heard Dr. Hadley jump out of his box, yelling out: "HOT, HOT, HOT!" He opened my door, as well, screaming from the burning pain it brought with it. He

held onto his hand as I could already see the blisters forming on it. He ran over to a nearby river and quickly stuck his hand inside it letting off a steamy mist once doing so.

“Dr. Hadley?” I asked, “Where are we?” I looked around, feeling out of place as I felt at my bald head noticing now that everyone else still had hair. He looked over at me from the river and smiled at the people too, replying:

“Where are we? Well, I finally made it!” I didn’t understand as I looked at the people long and hard and tried to understand what they were saying to each other as they stared at the two of us in fear. Then I realized what they were saying, and I looked over at Dr. Hadley in awe. He nodded at me gravely, in return, saying:

“Yes, my boy! Today is the day. I’m finally going to do it! I’m finally going to kill baby Hitler!”

16. Leaving Universe 1

Professor Markwell von Teristaff looked at the data one more time. Then she looked at it again. She sighed. It was true. Only three other universes floated in between Universe 1's spectrum. But she knew the truth. There was that possibility that they weren't like Universe 1. They could be hollow entities carrying empty vacuums. The stats showed that all three of them were most likely the hollow entities. What were the chances that one of them carried the capabilities to sustain what was left of the human race.

"So there are three; this is good Teri." Teri shook her head.

"No, Pluxin. You know that all three of them are empty. What are the chances that they carry anything... anything at all!" Pluxin felt like slapping her at her remark.

"You know it's coming. Teri... the Pit is coming." Teri looked at the space sonar one last time. The black hole had already taken out $\frac{3}{4}$'s of Universe 1. Their little huddle of galaxies was all that was left. It made Teri want to scream. She didn't want the human race to be over. She didn't want Universe 1 to be over. But here was Universe 1... coming to an end. And here was the human race. The last intelligent life that hasn't died out yet. The only intelligent life that saw a point to stick around to see the universe after the lights went out.

"I want to feel the warmth of a star, Teri. They've been gone for so long doesn't it intrigue you?" Plux was the last species of kodins that were born. After the stars went out. He was old. All the other kodins had already died of old age. And fhe was completely different to humans in every way. Plux wasn't male or female. Fhe had told Teri that there were over a million types of genders and sexes for kodins, but fhe didn't like to get into it. Especially with humans who took the art of genders and sexes and made it too complicated for the rest of intelligent life to want to get into it with them. Which Teri understood because her long-dead spouse was a they and them pronoun.

"It's just you and me, Plux, and a bunch of silly humans that have the ships all packed up and ready to take off to the three different swirling entities many consider are possibly universes.

“I bet one of them is just one big creature of some sort and when we fly into it we’ll pretty much be flying into its mouth and down into its digestive system.” Teri didn’t want to think of it that way. She knew she was trying to be funny, but the possibilities of what might be inside those three entities are too enormous to even try to contrive up some sort of theory.

“You know I’m not going Plux. I can’t bear to think of making it into one of them, and they contain a space that is livable and find that the other two don’t. And my children, Plux!” Plux understood. All three of Teristaff’s children were mandating the expeditions. One in charge of one ship, one in charge of the other and one in charge of the other. All three of them saw hope. Teri had to hand

it to them. They grew up to be fine young people with hopes of a better and brighter tomorrow. Two young girls and one young boy: Flaya, Narka, and Jovian.

“You should join one of them.” Teri shook her head at this. No way in hell was she going to board any of those ships and choose one of her children over the other. It was like choosing a favorite and her and her spouse were always opposed to treating one better than the others. They were all outstanding young people.

“Say one of the ships makes it or say two of the ships make it. What about my children makes you think that I liked making the decision I’ve made?” Plux shook her head and then shook his other head.

“What if all three of the ships make it? What then Miss Sourpants?” You’d be dead and all three of your children would forever hate the decision you made.” Teristaff couldn’t take this possibility. It was too much for her. She felt a tear coming to her eye.

“I love my children,” she began to sob out. “I love Narka, I love Flaya, and I love Jovian... but all those people, Plux... three trillion on each ship! Only so little of what used to be a vast, endless terrain of life and only that much is left! I can’t go and watch it diminish into nothingness. I can’t go and watch life cease to exist. It scares me too much.” She paused to take a breath before she said her last words, “When the pit comes and Universe 1 ceases to exist, so I will do the same.”

“And your foolishness will cost you your life. Do with me what I plan to do. Hide in one of the three ships and come out once it takes off to see which commander I will have chosen. Nor I will choose one of your three children as well so I will let fate decide and carry out my will at random. Your children already know of my plan and think it a glorious and wonderful idea. They have all agreed that you should do the same. But aghast, you see death as the better option so I bid you adieu and look forward to see my first star ever in person and feel its warmth as it welcomes me to my new home!” And at that Plux left feeling a reassurance that there will be hope that Teri will change her mind in the next couple of days before Ships Futkarius, Lonjmwala, and Histeem take off for their new homes... or their new fates.

Pluxin ate a bountiful dinner of worm-meat and fried perindin loaves. The grimy taste of the meal was nothing like what fhe had in his early years of life when the varieties were much more extravagant and fruitful to the choosing.

“Oh be the day when I bite into an apple or a plumlox. The juicy insides can’t compare to the gooey, slimy texture of my worm-meat.” Plux ate the rest of the stale perindin loaves and took fhis/fher last walk on Universe 1 land before the departure planned for today. The lamps glowed an eerie neon green that represented it was Departure Day and green for go has always been universal for humans meaning ‘go’ which Plux has never understood. Fhe had always liked the soothing creaminess of a warm pink to be a better representation for symbolizing a brighter future.

“Oh, Plux.” A fellow human remarked. “You know Narka has the best chance to leading us to salvation. Aboard Histeem with me and my family.” The human had a fake smile on that Pluxin could clearly see through.

“Silly human. Whatever ship I board is none of your business.” Plux kept walking until fhe came across another human which had a Team Futkarius hat on.

“Riding with Captain Flaya today, Plux?” Plux shrugged fhis/fher shoulders at the silly human and went on fhis/fher way.

Fhe came upon the three ships looking at the grandness of all three of them. They sat side-byside together.

“I’m not choosing,” Plux thought to herself/himself proudly. Instead, Plux walked to the nearest elevator connecting to all three of the ships. Now came the waiting game. She plugged his/her ears and watched as family after family began stepping into the elevator sealing their now inevitable fate of whatever was to come. What was to come when leaving Universe 1? Plux had high hopes but the statistics that Teri showed him/her were far too grave. “I might as well be walking into my early grave.” Plux remark as she now closed his/her eyes and shut off any gravitational pull she felt towards any of the human families. They couldn’t be the source of his/her choosing, but, at the same time, they had to be. And then she picked one. She followed their smell into the elevator and then unplugged his/her ears and opened his/her eyes. They all looked saddened beyond believe. And that’s when she realized it; they were heading to Jovian’s ship.

“There’s a chance...” The father wouldn’t let Plux finish.

“Just... no. Please?” Plux nodded. No one wanted to go to Jovian’s universe. It had the least amount of chance to contain the capabilities of life. People were drafted into the ships. All nine trillion humans didn’t have a choice besides staying with their immediate family. It still didn’t mean couples were separated that hadn’t wedded yet before the draft and some families still had problems staying together. It was a rough drafting period, and it will be an even rougher departure. But most humans that got selected more or less would say to be on Flaya and Narka’s ships feel more certain that there’s more of a chance for them over Jovian’s destination.

They boarded the ship, Lonjmwala. It took several more hours; most of the rest of the day actually until everyone was settled in and ready takeoff. For the past two weeks people have already been slowly moving in and taking up residence inside the tiny, compact, little ships making it their homes for the next twelve-fifty years. Each ship had a different distance than the other. Lonjmwala was supposed to take the longest ranging up to half a century until they were to enter Universe C. Universe A and B were to take only a couple of decades.

At 11:21 pm Futkarius was the first ship to take off. It was Narka’s ship ready to see what lay beyond Universe 1 and what lay inside Universe A. No had ever been outside of Universe 1 and she was the first to be entering into the Great Abyss. Narka came on the screen inside the main area of Lonjmwala.

“The Great Absyss is now only three hundred lightyears away. Moving in, getting closer... Histen... Lonjmwala... stay where you are. It’s time to find out if Futkarius will follow in Neil Armstrong’s footsteps or crumple like the fall of the Roman Empire.” Everyone began counting down as Futkarius was now only two-hundred and fifty lightyears away, two-hundred lightyears away, one-hundred. The crowd inside the main area of Lonjmwala began to countdown:

“FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE.” Narka slid into the thin layer and broke the skin of Universe 1. What followed was like a balloon losing its air. The ground began to shake beneath the two ships still parked in place.

“GO, GO, GO!” Narka yelled triumphantly. “We made it out! Flaya, Jovian; the air is clean on my side but hazardous on yours! You have to get out!” Flaya and Jovian showed up on the screen. Or what were supposed to be Flaya and Jovian. But no. Instead, only Flaya showed to be on the screen already taking off. But Jovian’s seat was empty.

“WHERE’S JOVIAN?” Narka said panicking as she looked upon the empty seat of where her brother was supposed to be sitting. As Flaya steered and maneuvered her way through the chaotic space vacuum her sister had created for her she quickly cried out:

“I THINK HE WENT BACK FOR MOM!” Everyone in the main area of where Plux was situated began gasping and uttering cries of hysteria.

“Our captain has forsaken us!” One person cried out.

“Let’s leave him! Someone hurry up and get us out of here!” The massive crowd began swarming all over each other like a pile of disease-infected rodents.

“I hate humans.” Plux muttered to himself as he watched in horror as people trampled over one another not knowing what to do. Suddenly, Jovian’s was in the vacant seat not saying a word, only starting up the ship and taking off. Flaya and Jovian came out of the hole that Narka had opened up for them and they came to a halt, each of them beside each other. No one talked for a while... finally Flaya spoke up:

“Did you get Mom?” Jovian shook his head replying:

“I was only going to the bathroom, sis...” There was a silence as the three of them stared out into what they thought would be the Great Abyss. But, instead, it was another universe.

“A universe inside of a universe.” Plux said to fhimself/fherself whistling as fhe got a look at stars for the first time in fhis/fher life.

“Mom was wrong.” Narka muttered, “There is no Universe A, B, and C.”

“Only Universe 2 now.” Jovian muttered as he looked back at what was left of Universe 1. All that was left now was only a black hole.

17. Planet Orbus

“Land the ship, Donakin. Land it before it lands you!” Quota felt impatient. It was her first mission outside of the outer hemispheric galaxy belt on the Eastern Nubella Spectrum. The spectrum, so far, had been desolate. No lifeform for trillions of lightyears in either direction.

“I’m afraid the mission will be nothing but another failure. But if you’re feeling optimistic then I’m feeling optimistic.” Donakin looked down at the cloudy planet. It contained wisps of green to show there was land but nothing like he had ever seen before. Donakin was used to land being spread out in large clumps taking up large portions of the planet. Not in thin streaks; thin strands like the planet had been clawed at by some ferocious animal like a jaguar or a bear. Quota seemed to be surprised by this peculiarity as well.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Quota asked. Donakin shook his head.

“No, Captain; have you?” She shook her head as well.

“Let’s record that in the log, Cyprus.” The ship’s computer lets out a stream of beeps showing acquiescence. The planet wasn’t that big. Almost like a pinball compared to the bowling ball they called their home base.

“There’s green so that means there’s life.” Donakin sighed out, feeling eager that there was, at least, something to be hopeful about. But Quota seemed unmoved by the observation.

“Two out of the forty-six other planets we’ve visited had life. But neither of those two had the life I was hoping for.” Donakin quickly lashed back:

“But the chances of finding intelligent life are one in a million. Can’t you, at least, be grateful that out of the forty-seven planets we’ve visited, so far, two had some form of life that gives us hope to colonize and advance as a society?” But Quota didn’t see it that way. She saw the mission as a failure so far. Intelligent life means societal advancements far beyond what home base has ever found current data on. With more intelligent life means better understanding of what the livable universe holds and concludes with the livable universe becoming more livable

and unanswered questions that are still being asked by home base now having viable solutions.

“I want glory, Donakin; prestige! I want to drive down Sunset Boulevard, and I want to be one of the few Life Finders that live on that street. They’re the celebrities of the celebrities! They’ve got everyone eating out of their shoes! I want that! I’m tired of eating out of others’ shoes. I want that crazy, unrealistic dream of mine to be a reality.” Donakin smiled, meekly. He had dreams too but not like Quota’s. What they were doing now was, alone, a dream in itself. What Quota wanted showed that she expressed desires that would never be satisfied.

“You want glory... or you want money? You’re greedy. You don’t care about anyone else. All you care about is the wealth you plan to acquire from selling off the brand of whatever caveman or cavewoman you find. Just like all the other Life Finders.” Quota ignored him. She was too busy looking at the gun that shoots nets from its tip. The net had the electric voltage it would send to the intelligent lifeform charged and ready for action. All they had to do now was find the blasted thing!

“I want to be the one to catch the intelligent lifeform, Donakin. I want that feeling of euphoria Life Finders are always talking about when they make an appearance on television.” Quota licked her lips as she held the net gun up to her cheek feeling the cold touch of its metal outer casing. Donakin spit out, angrily, feeling repulsed just looking at her:

“What I want is to just be happy. All I want in this world is to be able to pay the bills on time, to have food on the table for not only me but my loved ones, to have the money when rent is due, and for everyone around me, family and friends, to be happy and healthy. And what I want is to be able to help other people in the world too when help is needed. I want to do my part as a human in this society and not make a complete and utter fool of myself while I try to enjoy my stay in this game called ‘life.’ And Quota... I understand that this is your way of trying to enjoy yourself... but it doesn’t actually look like you’re really enjoying yourself. You look stressed out. You look feverish. You need help. Maybe see someone when we get back to home base. Maybe see a counselor... some time off where you can just relax and take a breather will do you an awful lot of some good. And remember; we were only assigned to fifty planets. It’s almost over. Then we’re home free! And if we do find intelligent life, all we are to these beings are

aliens that have come from outer space on a routine visit. We're here for fifty planets; we're out after fifty planets." Quota wasn't sure if Donakin said anything or not. She was too busy gearing up. She looked to him to see if he was ready. His face looked concerned.

Does he want to know if I want anything? She thought to herself.

"Get me a bagel." She decided she wasn't hungry, but it looked like he needed something to do, in the meantime, while Cyprus landed the ship.

When I find intelligent life, I'm never using this computer system ever again. Cyprus is outdated by, at least, two centuries. And she thought about how she could, quite possibly, get a better-looking lackey than Donakin. But the Life Finders always keep their original lackeys. It's good luck!

And I need all the help I can get She thought to herself.

The doors opened, and the sweet smell of fresh air hit Quota's lips.

"Cyprus, scan the perimeters to see if intelligent life exists." The computer let out a series of beeps before shutting down.

"No intelligent life, Quota. But there's still hope." But Quota didn't want to believe it.

"Scan the perimeters, Donakin. This forest looks to be millions of years old; could be almost a billion years old if we're lucky." Donakin tugged on Quota's arm looking straight forward, speechless.

"Oh, it's something, alright, Captain." He pointed at the squirrel that climbed a nearby tree. Except, it was hard to call it a squirrel at all due to how only the outline of its body took the similar shape of a squirrel. The rest of the body was of a completely different entity. Its transcendence was unlike anything out of this universe.

"Donakin... I must be going crazy! That... that... animal; it's a sub-species of the ancestral animal, the squirrel, from Planet 1, that's for sure, but I don't see how it has any worldly qualities ever found, ever."

"I'm sorry, but you said Planet what?" Donakin asked, unsure.

“Earth,” Quota replied, angrily. She knew he should’ve known that. The ancestral home bases are all found in the history books: Earth, Mars, Titan, and Gliese 667Cc. But this didn’t look like an actual animal at all. More like a robot like Cyprus. It had thin, glass features so you could see right through it. Almost like there should’ve been an opening so you could pour in your morning o-j before you got the day started.

“What’s that over its head, Quota?” Quota, at first, didn’t know what Donakin was talking about. But, taking a step closer, then she saw it: glass orbs hung suspended over the transparent animal. And in them, swirling around in a thick density were differently colored clouds of smoke. They floated above the creature’s head rotating around it in no particular order. And with each orb, a single-colored cloud was found floating inside. One orb contained a blue smoke, one a red smoke, one a pink, one purple, one yellow, one orange, and that was that for the main orbs. But there were also much smaller orbs that floated above the main ones that were much harder to make out what colors they had inside.

“I want one. I want one, Donakin. Get me one of those orby thingies. Get me one, NOW!” Donakin backed away from Quota, ever so slowly. The fear in his eyes couldn’t be concealed. But it didn’t matter one bit. Quota was too preoccupied with the dollar signs, and the house on Sunset Boulevard calling her name.

“There’s no intelligent life, Quota, it’s time to move on. We should leave.” But Quota wasn’t having any of it.

“Here, squirrelly-squirrelly-squirrelly. Here, squirrelly-squirrelly-squirrelly.” Quota cocked her net gun. The animal seemed to have heard the noise, and one of the orbs flew into the transparent animal, and it filled up with the purple smoke. How it filled up with purple smoke seemed to interest Quota, but her heart was thudding too fast to observe the peculiarity of the situation for a second longer. She fired the net, and, instantly, the creature was wrapped in the thin, webby material, squealing in agony as it came thudding with a crash of branches onto the ground floor. Not only did the creature send shards of thin glass that made up its body into millions of pieces, but, one after another, each of the creature’s orbs came falling to the ground, shattering into trillions of pieces. As each orb hit the ground and the colored smoke rose up into the air, Donakin watched in horror as with each orb smashing, Quota’s body jerked in some type of resistance from what became of her actions. After it was all over, Donakin looked at

Quota waiting for her to say something. She stood there, silent. She stood there, still as an arrow; unwavering from how catastrophic the event turned out.

“QUOTA, SAY SOMETHING,” He yelled out in terror. Then, suddenly, Cyprus’ computer transmission rang out:

“The planet has been categorized as an orb planet. Action protocol is to leave immediately before possible emotions are lost. If emotions are lost then protocol is to leave the lost victim. They hold threat to space-travel and to home base. The protocol is to...” Quota finished for Cyprus:

“Make the livable universe more livable and unanswered questions that are still being asked by home base having viable solutions. Protocol is to leave lost one. Protocol is to leave lost one. Protocol is to leave lost one.” Donakin began slowly backing away and towards the ship as he listened to Quota repeat those same last words with no hesitation at all to stop. All throughout the planet departure, those same words kept ringing in Donakin’s ears:

Protocol is to leave lost one. Protocol is to leave lost one. Protocol is to leave lost one. Donakin turned to Cyprus and said:

“Cyprus; turn on the log.” He then slowly let those words that needed to be slipped out, out: “Let the log show... that the lost one has been lost.” And Cyprus and Donakin slipped away from the planet, Donakin feeling the surge of emotions rush through him, feeling them more than he’d ever felt them in all his life. Because Donakin knew it and Donakin would forever know it: that he was not a lost one.

18. The Tale of Love and Dark Magic

Once upon a time there was a boy who had a dog for his companion. She was the smartest, brightest dog in all the land. She was a golden doodle by standards but much more in his eyes. One day the boy asked:

“Dog, if that is your real name, tell me what you really are, or I won’t be your companion any longer.” The dog looked the boy up and down and then replied:

“Boy, if that is your real name, I am here to ask you the same exact question. Speak twice in case I don’t hear you correctly the first time and don’t say it again afterward for none should hear what will come next.” So the boy spoke loud and clear.

“You’ve sought me out, unicorn, and now you know that I’m a wizard.”

“Yes,” was all the unicorn had to say.

“Well, don’t you know I’m in hiding as this here boy? And you can stay in hiding as this here dog as long as you don’t tell any of the other villagers what we are. Agreed?” And the unicorn agreed.

Now the story goes this same way and not any other. But this was how the wizard tells it. But one day the dog fell in love with another dog named Vicarious. It was an unordinary strange and beautiful dog that the unicorn thought that it was none other than another unicorn as well. Sadly, the unicorn was mistaken, but she fell in love with it anyway, and they went along on their merry way being in love and this and that and what of it. One day the unicorn had to ask, sad enough to say:

“Dog, are you a unicorn like I am and are you living in this village because you have a companion that is a wizard like I am.” But like I said before, the unicorn was sadly mistaken. But here went the dog lying, saying:

“Well, sure I’m a unicorn and sure I’m here because of a wizard.” And now the dog knew of this here secret and went around telling everyone that a wizard was among us and was hidden in this here

village and soon the wizard heard of the rumor and knew right away that something was amiss.

“Unicorn,” the wizard said to the unicorn, “I’ve been revealed by dark magic. We have to flee immediately.” So the unicorn, sad as she was, fled with the wizard, upon realizing that the dog wasn’t a unicorn like she was, and, to this day, that is why love is sometimes mistaken for dark magic and dark magic for love for all the star-crossed lovers and all the telltale hearts of the misfortunates from this side of Sherwood Forest all the way to the other side of the Lonely Tree Mountains. And so it is and so it’ll be.

The End

19. The Mentors

“Harry, I’m scared,” Harry shrugged his shoulders as he took another quick glance out of the limo before he took one long sigh, replying:

“Who could they even be bringing us to visit? Who’s going to actually do anything for us? Like, we’re the first, right? There hasn’t been a royal couple like us ever before, ever, right?” Meghan didn’t know. She was too busy reading another text from her father. “What is he saying now?” Harry didn’t want to ask, but he knew it was important. He had to be respectable when it came to dealing with Meghan’s father. He was an important man. Not as important as Harry, but Harry still had to give him the time of day even though his and Meghan’s schedule really didn’t have the time for really anything nowadays.

“Nothing, just another long text again about how no one’s ever actually cut out to be in royalty, but he’s like, since you’re my daughter, you’re cut out for anything you put your mind too!” Harry smiled down at her, but Meghan was rolling her eyes at this. But she couldn’t help looking back up at her Harry and feeling her heart flutter as she looked into his eyes.

“I wouldn’t trade you for all the fairy tales, all of my great-great Uncle Shakespeare’s love stories,” Meghan did a quick laugh at this but realized he wasn’t finished and quickly covered her mouth, smiling up at him. He went on, smiling deep into her eyes, “All the Nicholas Spark’s flicks you make me watch,” she hit his arm, playfully, and, at that, he wrestled her to where he was now laying on top of her.

“Tonight, let’s go find an old car when we get back to our place. I want to do that role-play again. You, just a poor, peasant boy named Jack and I, a snooty rich girl named Rose. And you’ll draw me wearing nothing but that really expensive necklace Grandma Elizabeth got me.” Meghan could already feel Harry getting excited.

“Oh, I like that!” They knew they couldn’t contain their passion a second longer, but the car came to a stop.

“Where are we?” Meghan heard herself ask. Harry just shook his head and whispered into her ear:

“This is something I never told you about. Being in the British royal family... we have things. Equipment to keep us in control; so the family will forever stay in power; Grandmother had this made back in the seventies because she felt the only way to keep the family in power was to meet her: the first Queen Elizabeth, ” Meghan’s heart dropped as she asked:

“And she met her?” Harry didn’t answer. He knew that story was for another time. They were now on foot, nearing a warehouse with nothing surrounding it for what seemed like miles upon miles.

“I’ve never been to this island. Grandmother says it’s forbidden for anyone in the family to come to it. She’s had it stashed away for decades and decades. She won’t even let Father visit it. And he’ll be king next. Besides her, we’re the first ones.”

“Is that why she’s been telling me a lot of queer and mysterious stuff? Open-ended questions like: Can one’s romance melt all hearts far and wide? And will the children get to see beyond our galaxies?”

“It’s time,” one of the men with the suits and sunglasses said. They entered the warehouse to be greeted by another door which had to be unlocked with one of the men’s hands. Then another door was unlocked by one of the other men’s eyes. Then another door was unlocked by the third and last man and how he unlocked it, children shouldn’t be allowed to know. But here it is anyway, the third man took his shoe off and then his sock and then used his bare foot to unlock it. Meghan was told to look away out of the indecency of it.

“These are the three men,” Harry whispered into her ear as they now were twisting and turning deep down through underground tunnels that seemed to go farther and farther into the ground. “Supposedly they’ve been around for thousands of years keeping the Holy Grail hidden until the right family came along to use it to put the pieces of the puzzle, meaning the world, back together.”

“They’re the Knights of the Holy Grail?” Meghan asked, looking at the men with new respect. Harry nodded, saying:

“Don’t let them fool you with how young they walk, talk, look, and present themselves. They know how old they really are, and once the truth is known to those around them then their cover is blown.” And Meghan saw this to be true. Once, upon Harry telling her this, the men’s ages seemed to be shown profoundly and in more ways than one.

Nonetheless, they weren't far from being bones with modern-day clothes on. But they were still living, breathing people who were being kept to stay alive for so long by one purpose and one purpose only: to protect the Holy Grail.

Upon arriving to the end of the last tunnel, the three knights came together and clasped each other's hands, making a triangle, as they said a prayer. After the prayer was finished, they then each faced a wall. One, the left side of the tunnel, one, the right side of the tunnel, and one, the part of the tunnel where it ended; all at once, they put the palms of their hands lying face-down on their designated wall and a shift in the room changed to where they were now standing where the tunnel once ended but were now, somehow, on the other side.

"What just happened?" Meghan asked Harry.

"We time-traveled," it was almost like the tunnel did a complete three-sixty for them. They now were walking back which they came, but it felt like they were walking further into the tunnel.

"It was almost like all we did was turn around to where, instead of how we were facing one wall, we were now facing the other wall." Meghan nodded to Harry after he said this, frowning at him. She added, feeling queasy from the whole experience:

"Yes, but Harry, we didn't. We didn't move at all. The ground moved. Or, at least, that was what it seemed like." Harry nodded, replying, looking green in the face:

"I feel like heaving."

"This is where we leave you now," one of the men said to the couple." Another knight added:

"You will find your clothes that you will need to change into further down the tunnel. Just keep walking straight and there, after you have changed, you will meet two of our own that will bring you to see them." They did such that, feeling alone in the darkness once they were far enough away from the knights.

"I love you so much," Meghan felt herself saying to Harry as she held tightly to her arm.

"I love you too." Harry replied, kissing the top of her head and bringing her close to his body. The warmth they radiated for each other

brought a sense of relief to the two. Then they came to where their clothes were hanging. A single torch was mantled next to the garments and a vacant spot was placed to put the torch Harry held next to where their new clothes hung.

“We’re in... Ancient Greece?” Meghan asked Harry as she looked at the white garments.

“When was the last time you went to a toga party?” Harry asked her.

“Oh, god,” Meghan heard her saying, we’re about to live every fraternity and sorority kids’ dream.” Harry nodded as he began putting the warm cloth on. Meghan did the same thing. Once, they were both ready, they each took a burning torch out of their mantles and began their walk down the tunnel once again. They were met with an abundance of light, having them shield their eyes for spending so many hours in the dark.

“Are you Emperor and Empress of Sussex?” A soldier asked the two. Before Meghan was about to reply, Harry quickly said:

“Yes, yes we are,” the man looked at the two and then gave each of them a crown to wear, saying:

“These got here two days before you both did,” Harry helped Meghan put her’s on while he, on the other hand, just plopped his on his head.

“They’re waiting for you,” the other soldier said and helped Meghan into the chariot. Harry was then helped inside, and, like that, they were off.

“How will they be able to understand us?” Meghan whispered to Harry. Harry shrugged.

“I’m guessing there’s going to be a translator... gosh, I’m ready, any moment now, for Jesus to pop up out of nowhere with his twelve disciples.” Meghan nodded looking at all the civilians in their white garments. They passed stands where people were selling fresh fruits, fresh meats, fresh fish; the smell of cooking filled their nostrils and left their stomachs growling. Then they saw it. Coming into view

was what looked to be a building of great proportion; almost like a castle. But then again, it was more foreign to any of what Harry, Meghan, or the rest of the royal family resides in.

“Harry,” Meghan said, gasping. “I think I see her. I see my mentor.” Harry nodded, looking at who stood inside the gates at the foot of their big doors.

“I see my mentor too.”

“GREETINGS, GREETINGS; EMPEROR JULIUS CAESAR AND EMPRESS CLEOPATRA FORMALLY WELCOME EMPORER HARRY OF SUSSEX AND EMPRESS MEGHAN OF SUSSEX!”

“How do you do,” a man translated this for Julius Caesar. “Welcome to Rome, this is my lovely wife, Cleopatra.”

“How do you do,” a woman translated for Cleopatra. “Come, stay in our home. Welcome to Rome.” Meghan looked up at her Harry, and Harry, down at her Meghan. Then Meghan whispered up to him with a glee she couldn’t contain a second more:

“Best honeymoon ever!”

20. The Dinner Plan

“Do you all know why I asked you here today?” Martin looked at his guests expecting an answer. They all looked at him, quizzically. One woman began turning her head vigorously around as she studied the other guests that stood beside her.

“What’s going on?” she blurted out, “Raymond? Molly? Suzy? You all weren’t invited to this!” The three looked back at the woman, showing faces just as confused as she was.

“Martin,” Raymond, the only other man in the room, let this out with a humph. “We were supposed to have a date for just the two of us! You didn’t say it was going to be a double date! And Margaret’s your maid?” Margaret didn’t look at all pleased to be called the help, and Molly and Suzy didn’t seem all too excited to be referred to as: the other couple on this awfully strange double date Raymond seemed to have imagined in his mind to be the case. Come to think of it, Martin thought none of his guests looked to be at all happy that they weren’t the only person he had invited. He had actually invited six guests in all. That was when he first planned the dinner party all those nights ago.

That’s how many people I always invite he thought to himself. Well, at least from the last two dinners that’s what he had done. But tonight showed to be the first time that only four showed up instead of his usual three men, three women routine.

“Where’s Bradley? And Raj? I invited them as well, but I don’t seem to see them anywhere at all in this awfully dusty place I call a home.” He examined his fingernails, seeing specks of red that he had been having trouble removing.

They all stood in a dining hall that only seated seven people. No more, no less. The silverware was all laid out and the plates along with them. Each person had a wine glass to accompany their meal. Everything was arranged ever so precisely. Even the embroidered cloth that was folded ever so perfectly looked in balance with the fine China it was laid upon.

“I suppose we’ll have to start without them.” turning to the dark-haired woman to the left of him, “Margaret, go fetch our dinner for us.” The other guests looked at him, confused, but Martin decided

he would let that pass for now. If they wanted him to like him then they would have to earn what they had coming instead of just standing there and looking stupid. He then chuckled, nonetheless, at his silly joke that was lined up so perfectly due to Raymond's earlier remark.

At that moment, Raj and Bradley entered the dining hall. Martin's maid quickly shut the door behind them. Martin looked at Raymond as she left. "Look everyone," Martin stated in a dreary monotone of a voice. He was beginning to feel droll standing there and was ready to get things moving. "The rest of our guests have made it." Directing his attention to the two stragglers, "You're late." They shrugged their shoulders and went ahead in seating themselves before Martin could motion to the rest of the group to do the same. But everyone quickly followed in their example.

Good thought Martin, They're ready

Martin took his seat as head of the table. He looked down upon his table of guests. They looked famished.

Good Martin thought again, let them stay famished

As Martin curled his fingers into a conniving web of unsolicited glee, the first guest's meal had finally arrived. Martin watched as his butler placed the many dishes in front of the first contestant. "Awh, the first contestant," Martin whispered. No one heard him; no one but the butler. The butler was used to it by now. What lay in front of Bradley consisted of a various assortment of intriguing dishes that even left Martin mouthwatering. And that didn't happen much of late.

The various dishes included a bowl put upon the side with certain husks of corn. They were especially plucked for the young lad. The potatoes, mashed. And to a pulverized plump of glistening, buttery, creamy goodness; the other guests couldn't help but sniff their little noses over towards the dish with delight. It had steam rising from it, alongside the corn, forming a cloud of warm, fluffy goodness. And it looked delectable, nonetheless. But what horrified the young Bradley as he looked down at what the strange, creepy butler lay in front of him was what happened to be raw lard and mutton lying out in one great mound of an utterly gruesome pile; flies swarmed in every which direction around it. It didn't look anything like what a fine gentleman dressed in his finest of occasions would have received from his loving and caring hospitality. A hospitality with such wealth; a hospitality with such prosperity and indulgence; a mansion with six acres here for all of

Longington Halls to gaze upon; another on Star Dine Drive right beside the beach where the ocean met the shores on all sides; and last but not least, his mountain house. It was of an exquisite size taking up half of Mount Firelong.

Bradley was probably wondering if the other two of Sir Maximillian Martin's mansions were six acres as well.

Why would you wonder that? Bradley asked himself. He didn't understand. Bradley looked up at Martin with questioning eyes at his mutton and lard. Martin was only able to perk up with a tiny flicker of a smile before waving his hand up.

Summoning the butler? Bradley wondered. No, no; no, he wasn't. His hand was waving for something else.

"Bradley!" Raymond yelled out, feeling hysteric. He stuttered out something incoherent under his breath. His breath; his breath; it felt colder against his lips. Like the fire in the great hall had went out, suddenly. And plus, he could see it too. He didn't see it before. It had always felt warm and cozy once he had first stepped into the mansion. It was certainly a blessing when he and Raj were in the main room with the chimney fire roaring. The massive bear that was slain, now a rug, was brushing up dreamily against his naked toes; and there he was, Raymond thought, bewildered. Bradley sat in front of his group of friends, once again and his remanence, gone from his mind. But... it wasn't the same Bradley that sat in front of them from before. No, this Bradley was now wearing the bear rug he had

brushed his warm, plump toes upon earlier that evening. It was dirtier, now; grimier. A nasty piece of a thing turned into a muddy rag that barely covered the ravaged flesh of the Bradley he once knew. Now, he didn't seem to know this man at all. This man... this man; it wasn't, couldn't be Bradley? Bradley was someone who liked the finer things in life. Who was always dressed to impress. He had an air of sophistication about him. Now; now, he was a man that looked like he spent most of his days smelling his own feces. He was covered with disgusting grime that left the room smelling like an awfully dead carcass had somehow been dragged into the room when no one was paying any attention.

Clap, clap

"Alright," Martin exclaimed. "Get him out of here! I can't take the smell any longer." And just like that, Bradley vanished. The room

was silent. None of the women had said a word except Molly to Raj about his nice sweater since they had sat at the table, and Raj had finally finished his story to Raymond about his trip to Paris, not realizing what all had just occurred to his beloved friend. But Raj was now getting the whiffs of Bradley that still hung in the air. His fingers trembled in horror as he moved them ever so frantically over the lower lips of his mouth while he now gazed over upon the vacant seat of what was all that was left of his fellow colleague.

Now, no one talks but me! thought Martin to himself. His smile now glowered with malice. By the end of this, he would have every one of these...

SMACK! Martin fell to the ground. The butler stood over him, breathing heavily, with the broken shards of wood still clinging in his hands.

“Now run,” he whispered. The look on the frightened butler shook every one of the frozen guests to the core as they looked down in horror at their esteemed host... the very elegant, the world-renowned... Sir Maximillian Martin.

21. A Car Ride Home

We'll talk about this when we get home.

We'll talk about this when we get home. I heard that same sentence over and over again all my life. I heard it when I was dreaming; when I was about to fall asleep; when I woke up in the morning; eating breakfast; eating lunch; eating dinner; out to the movies with friends; when I had my middle school basketball tournaments; even on my high school dates with Sarah Pricket. I felt clueless. I wanted to know what was going on.

We'll talk about this when we get home. I heard it again. And I heard it again and again and again. And I heard it all the way up into my old age. And now I was an old man on my deathbed. And what was new? I had had a great life, I was on my way out of Earth and onto Heaven, and who knew what was next? A lot of my friends who left before me weren't as optimistic as I was before they left. But I... I felt like optimist was the name of the game. I knew that as long as I had hope everything would be okay. Hope and faith. Hope, faith, and love... Hope, faith, love, and charity... well, I knew I had to keep all those virtues deep and close in my heart. Some people say you need more faith. I say you need more hope. Others say you need more love. And some say you need more charity; when, in reality, you really just need a lot of all of them; all of them and more. But I won't go against what other people believe. I don't believe you can be right or wrong in a belief. For the fact that the belief exists, that's all the truth you need.

"What should I have my last words be?" Those words were my last words. I woke up in the back of a minivan; I would have rather it be a Prius but no one's fussy.

"We'll talk about this when we get..." the man driving the car looked behind me. "Oh," he said, "Look at that. We're almost home." I nodded and he turned back around and focused on the road.

"Where..."

"Are we?" he finished for me, "We're moving to that new town they'd been building an awfully long time. Heaven's the name I do believe. I heard the mayor is a swell guy too."

"And you are?" I asked.

“Well my friends call me Angel. You can just call me Angie for short. I know what you’re thinking...” he paused to let what he had to say sink in. He said what I was thinking: “You’re thinking that Angie’s a girl’s name. Well, on the contraire... I like it so I don’t care. I know plenty of guys named Courtney... or Marian... or Sally... so Angie can be a guy’s name. I was actually thinking of having a boy and naming him Brittney. I never saw anything wrong with the possibility, do you?” I shook my head. Then I thought about it.

“He might get bullied at school. I know life comes with its advantages and disadvantages but still... one day I went shopping with my four year old little boy back when I was young, and he wanted to buy a Barbie for his G.I. Joe so the action figure could have a girlfriend, and I let him get it. But what if he just said he wanted a Barbie just to play with the Barbie and the Barbie alone? I’m torn to this day wondering if I would’ve said no. I don’t think it matters. I think what I would’ve done would’ve been buy a toy truck like the macho father in me would’ve wanted for the son. I’ve had masculinity pegged as one thing all my life, and I still feel torn understanding what it really is to be... well, just to be a human in general, I guess. It’s not always a cut and dry answer, but it’s not always a clear answer. That’s only in my book. I can’t say about everyone else’s. That’s when the topic becomes choice. Like a choice piece of meat.

“I couldn’t say,” said Angie. “I’m vegetarian.” I could tell he said it in a joking manner but still... I wanted more out of the conversation; but changing the topic:

“So I’m dead, huh?” Angie shrugged his shoulders.

“Not necessarily, Mickey. Mick... you still have some trial tests to run.” At that Angie drove off into an empty field with separate crowds of people and animals all gathered around in it.

“What is this?” I asked. He took out a pen and paper.

“A test,” he replied as we got out. “Test 1: pick a dog, any dog.” He pointed to a crowd of dogs as we stepped into the field. I saw my childhood dog, out of the hundred, right away.

“Sparky!” I screamed out. Sparky came out of the crowd and we were reunited after forty some odd years.

“So...” Angie asked, smiling: “Which dog do you pick?” Sparky licked my cheek. I laughed feeling a surge of joy from the reunion.

“I wouldn’t pick any other dog in the whole wide world! Sparky’s my number one!” Angie smiled down at the duo and said:

“Test 2: pick a cat, any cat.” Sparky and the crowd of dogs vanished before my eyes and now what lay before me were a crowd of cats.

“Hey,” I said. “What kind of game is this?” Angie shrugged.

“Don’t you see a cat that you like?” They all began to meow around my feet when suddenly:

“Felix,” I gasped. It was the cat I gave the last bit of my tuna fish sandwich to on the bus ride from Okinawa to that beach over by that one bridge I saw the geese on. Those geese were a magnificent bunch if I don’t say so myself. I remember flying out to that one island the next day like it was yesterday where I met the love of my life, Sharon.

“Hurry up and pick a cat, Mickey.” Angie seemed impatient.

“Well, alright,” I felt unsure about this. “Felix was a good cat. He might be a scraggly, old thing, but he has a good heart he does. I pick Felix.” Angie smiled at me while Felix and the rest of the cats vanished.

“You’re catching on. I don’t think the next tests even matter, do they Mickey? Here’s a group of brothers. And you’re, of course, going to pick your brother, Sal. Here’s a group of sisters and, of course, you’re going to pick your sister, Henrietta. Here’s a group of mothers, of fathers, of uncles, of aunts, grandfathers, grandmothers, sons, daughters, group of friends, group of significant others... do you get the picture, Mickey? Do you get what this is all about?” I felt a tear roll down my cheek as I looked out into the crowds and crowds of people.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Yes, it’s about love.” Angie nodded and led me back to the car. He smiled gently at me as he nodded and replying sweetly:

“Yes it is. And we’ll keep talking about it when we get home. Now let’s go home.” And we did.

22. Mr. Twinkly Toes

The storm didn't seem to be passing. Margaret was still crying. Robert didn't know what to do. Her stuffed animal of a little pink puppy could be anywhere along the trail they hiked earlier that day.

"I know. Sweetie; I know. Yes. Yes. Yes, of course." His wife was detailing every corner of the trail that they stopped to take a break as she and their daughter stayed in the car in the parking lot while he searched in the dark in the pouring rain with his flashlight. And what made it worse, the flashlight kept flickering on and off on him as his phone's battery was close to dying on him. If he got lost out in the middle of nowhere Robert didn't think twice about just sitting down and the pouring rain and getting a good five-minute cry in before he tried to stumble through the darkness and head on back.

"Are you sure we left it by that little creek?" Valery asked she stroked her daughter's head, trying to sooth her down. Robert whispered out angrily:

"I'm buying her a new one! I'm sure that stuffed animal is still at Cole's on the clearance rack!"

"Babe; it was on the clearance rack. Clearance, babe. Clearance!" Robert rubbed his temple with two of his free fingers as he let out one more stressful sigh before continuing his never-ending search. He was sure that the rain had already washed it away into some pile of mud that it had to be gone. Gone forever. Just like his little daughter's happiness. At least for the next two days until him and his wife finally buy her a big ice-cream cone with her favorite: moose tracks. He thought about yelling out the stuffed animal's name. Then he thought again: What the heck! Why not?

"MR. TWINKLE TOES! MR. TWINKLE TOES, WHERE ARE YOU?" He then heard his four year-old daughter's cute, little voice in the back of the phone chime in with him:

"Mwister Twinkie Toes, ware are yuuuu?" Robert felt his heart flutter at the sound of his daughter's voice. She was so cute! He just wanted to find Mr. Twinkle Toes for her. That's all he cared about. He wouldn't care if he lost his job tomorrow; or if he had stand in the

pouring rain for ten days straight. As long as he found Mr. Twinkle Toes his life would be made.

His daughter did a couple more sniffles again as she began her silent crying again, trying to hold in the absence she had in her heart for her best friend in the whole wide world. Her rock to her ocean; her Sonny to her Cher; her Ketchup to her Mustard; her Rocky to her Adrian. Robert knew what he had to do. He had to find that stuffed animal.

He had already check the first two places they stopped to take a break and now there was only three more left: the creek, the bench with the view of the old willow tree, and the garden with the red and yellow roses. The creek was where Valery said they had to have left it but as he came closer and closer his heart fell right out of his chest. The stuffed animal was nowhere to be found. It slid into the water and drifted to never-never land. Robert just knew it. But he had to keep hope. For his daughter, he had to keep hope.

Robert took one big leap and flew past the tiny creek and went further onward into the creepy darkness the trail laid in store for him. After what seemed like a quarter of mile more he finally came onto the scene where the bench faced the old, droopy willow tree. The moonlight shined on the tree with a beauty that made Robert want to linger and take in the jaw-dropping, magnificently eye-enticing spectacle. But he quickly shook off the God-given glory of His nature and move onward as Mr. Twinkly Toe was not anywhere near, around, or even close to its premises.

His pace picked up as his final destination was only minutes of an arm's reach.

"Please, oh God! Please! Please, please, please, please! I love my daughter, and I'd give my left arm and anything else you want from so help me God, just please bring Mr. Twinkly Toes back to us safe and sound! I'll work out more, I'll eat less cheeseburgers, maybe I'll even go vegan... or vegetarian... or pescatarian... gosh God maybe I will stop eating red meats just give us our Mr. Twinkly Toes back!" The rose garden neared in on his view, and he saw the beautiful array of flowers. The red and yellow arrangement of the roses made the most breathtaking of patterns.

Shuffle shuffle shuffle Robert squinted his eyes as he tried his best to peak into the thick shrubbery that were entangled and twisted and looped, having thorns sticking out in every which direction.

“That you, Mr. Twinkly Toe?” Obviously it wasn’t, but Robert only said this from feeling a nervous tingling wash over his face and stopped him cold in his tracks. Suddenly, a bright yellow, furry creature popped out from a little tunnel etched out like it was woven precisely for the ugly fur ball. “What in the-“ Robert didn’t have time to finish his sentence. For as soon as he caught a glimpse of what was in the creature’s mouth, he knew right from the get-go that it was Mr. Twinkly Toes.

A chase ensued as Robert ran off into the night to retrieve the night thief. What was it though? Robert hadn’t the faintest of a clue. What he did know was that his adrenaline was pumping, and he had faith in the two legs connected to him that he would sometimes call, ‘My two lightning bolts.’ The little Speedy Gonzales was faster than the rain hitting the ground. It curved and twisted to where soon enough it had Robert off the trail and into the dense forest terrain. He weaved to and fro skimming branch and jumping over mud puddle. He felt alive. He felt like the world was his oyster. And then he saw his chance. The animal began to slow its pace as the ground picked itself up on them. They were trudging their way up a hill and a big one at that. The closer they got to the top, the close he came to catching the little bugger.

Steady now, steady... steady yourself, Roberto the speedy wonder he loved calling himself: ‘the speedy wonder.’ And this time he actually felt like he deserved the name. For right when the hill plateaued...

BAM! Robert wanted to scream in rage!

“Nooo!” He felt himself uttering painfully. The tree he collided into had him actually seeing Tweety Bird and a gang of his friends flying in circles above his caked-in-mud face.

“Baby?” Robert looked over and away from his delirium and over to see his wife. Was it really her? Could it be? Or was she just going to turn out to be another member of the LooneyTunes family.

“Valery?” His wife giggle and said:

“Awww,” as she came over to him and wiped the mud from his face.

“Daddy, Daddy!” Margaret came skipping out from where Valery came with a bundle in her hands.

“Is that my golf towel?” Robert asked as he got a better look at what she had. She shook her head gleefully, squealing out:

“NO! Daddy, it’s a puppy!” And sure enough there wrapped in his golf towel was the furry creature he had been chasing.

“What’s it got in its mouth?” Robert asked, curious now as he realized that it wasn’t Mr. Twinkly Toes after all but, instead, a little blue ball. The puppy squeaked the toy in joy as the little girl cuddled up closer to it sighing, saying:

“I knew it would happen one day! I just knew it!” Robert and Valery looked at each other confused and then Valery asked:

“Knew what, sweetie?” Margaret perked up, her mouth opening wide into the biggest smile you’ve ever seen as she squealed out:

“That Mr. Twinkly Toes would come to life!” And neither her mom or dad denied this as they both stared at the little bundle of joy in amazement.

23. The Box

I felt the wind blowing on my face as I rode right alongside Earl. He had the biggest smile on his face. And I did too! We had the best two jobs in the whole wide world. Not only did we get to hang out with our best friend day after day but we got to ride around on the back of a truck and pick stuff up for people. We were treasure hunters and all our friends were jealous of us when we went out every night and told the local women how we were modern-day Mel Fishers. The real deal, no lies intended. And I wouldn't give the job up for the whole wide world. At times, yes, it felt tough. But that's one thing that I WAS. I was tough. I had arms of steel and an alert mind that wouldn't let anything pass me. Any ploy, any trick, any scam, I sailed through it like I was Captain America himself! And my buddy, Earl, he was a true friend. I wouldn't pick anyone else to do it with. I'd give him the shirt off my back if he needed it for a hot date with his wife or to help him in getting the rent paid. He was the best! I couldn't believe we were treasure hunters together. We even had names for each other: the Indiana Jones brothers gone dirty!

"Pick up this load, Marv, and I'll get that one." I nodded as I picked up the huge heavy bags of garbage and chucked them in.

Oh, did I not say that my job has another title? Yeah, well if you want to be all technical and everything I guess you can say I'm a garbage man or a trash man or whatever. But Earl and I just say that if you want to call us that, you can. But that's just what we call each other when we have to lose the title of treasure hunters and have to go undercover. But that rarely happens. Usually that happens when a wildebeest comes at us because the jewels of Carinthia had to be taken from its lair or something like that. You just call the famous wildebeests we sometimes see on a day to day basis, dogs, but you have to know that they're so much more than that. I have a buddy who lost a hand from a wildebeest when trying to recover the amethyst from the lost temple of farriers de voie.

"Look, Marv, the Underground City of the Lost Titans!" I looked at the measly, old house, wiped some sweat off my forehead as I really couldn't help but believe that the lost titans had such a good invisibility cloak covering their underground city. It was amazing that the hologram

really made the entrance look like some regular old house that an old lady supposedly died in last summer.

"Do you think they've got any booby traps placed out to keep us from getting inside?" Earl shrugged and picked up the first bag of trash.

"We'll have to go undercover and act like we're trash collectors for this one!" I nodded and picked up a bag of trash as well following his orders since he was picked to head today's mission.

"Earl, look!" I said as a box from my bag fell loose onto the pavement. I picked it up and stared at in amazement.

"Marv; it contains the key to the Underground City of the Lost Titans! Hurry, stick it in your drawers before one of the lost titans see we have it!" He stuck it in my pants and I quickly looked at the house carefully making sure none of the guards of the underground city were on to us.

"Tonight," I said "we'll meet at 11:21 at the old lot where the emperor's kingdom used to be. There, we'll crack open the box and retrieve the key." He nodded approvingly; proud of me for thinking of hiding the key to the underground city away from all the other treasure hunters that were already back at headquarters. They'd probably give anything for it. But they didn't have it; Earl and I did! I was proud of myself too for knowing that fighting the lost titans into extinction was only a job suitable for the Indiana Jones brothers gone dirty!

That night we met up in the old lot. I took a whiff of Earl who smelled minty fresh. He took a whiff of me too and gave me a slap on the knee saying:

"You could've possibly taken another one. The Graveyard of the Lost Souls did a hamper on your inner aura." I laughed at this knowing he was just yanking my chain. The old lady back home told me before I left the house that I smelled like cinnamon buns and ice cream sprinkled with a little bit of heaven.

"Are you ready? This is no game, Marv. When we open this, there could be a thousand demons hiding within it that could very possibly torment us and our families and the generations to come if we aren't careful." I nodded knowing nothing could stop the Indiana Jones brothers gone dirty. We were the meanest, leanest fighting machines ever to hit this side of Kentucky.

Earl took a sledgehammer and knocked the lock clean off. It was so simple it was almost like we were taking candy from a baby.

"Marv; this is just a pile of notepad paper!" I nodded to him as we both started looking through them. I began reading one after the other taking short breaks from time to time as we looked up at each other in an incredulous amazement.

"This is fake, right?" I asked. Earl shook his head pointing to the golden plaque that had her name written on it in the fanciest cursive you've ever seen.

"I'd recognize Maya Angelou's handwriting from a mile away. Marv, we just stumbled on one of the world's greatest poets that have ever existed, ever! And some of the many poems scattered across the universe that she's never even published!" I looked at Earl in amazement. I didn't understand how such a wondrous thing could possibly happen to us.

"What do we do with them?" I asked. In response, he shuffled them around on the floor, counted them out and said,

"There are twelve. So you get six, and I get six." I looked at my six never published before Maya Angelou poems and felt a tear sliding down my cheek.

"I'm going to give them to my daughter." I said, "She loves poetry." Earl nodded in approval.

"I'm going to do the same. I bet Maya Angelou didn't write these poems for anyone else but our two daughters." I nodded, agreeing, letting it sink in that I never thought being a treasure hunter would be such an emotional job in all my life.

24. Mr. Chad

"Hannah, have you been texting too much?" I ignored my dad; like I usually do. I mean, c'mon! I'm in 8th grade! I'm about to be in high school! And Todd has been talking about how high school is not going to be like middle school!

"Do you think that I'll be captain of the football team when we get to high school?" he texted me.

"Oh, c'mon, Todd; they'll practically beg you to be the captain! Just like how I'm going to be head cheerleader! We're going to rule the school!" I said this with lots of caps! Then, I added some cute emojis that were adorable! He's so cool! I'm pretty sure he's about to ask me to the middle school ball! I had to text Ashley this.

"I think Todd's about to ask me to the last middle school dance before we head off to high school," Ashley replied back:

"DUHHH," with a bunch of caps; and a bunch of cute emojis! "He's, like, going to do it in front of the whole school at the pep rally tomorrow! Like, ILYYY!"

"ILYYYYY," I texted this back before finally putting my phone down, putting my retainer in, and then snuggling up next to my big, fluffy stuffed animal, Mr. Chad; Chad's a frog that Todd got me at the school fair last spring. I named him Chad because that's what I want Todd's name to be so bad! He's such a Chad! I tell my friends that all the time.

"Mr. Chad," I asked Mr. Chad, before going to sleep, "Are Todd and I going to get, like, married and stuff, and will we live in, like, a super big mansion, and will he be on some football team where he'll make lots of money for us, and I'll just get to, like, get manicures all the time with my friends and stuff?" I'm pretty sure Mr. Chad was asleep already, but if he was still awake then he would've said:

"Fo' show, Hannah, girl," because Mr. Chad's cool like that!

The fan sounded broken as I tried to turn it up, late into the night.

"DAD," I screamed out. He didn't answer. How stupid! It was only, like, 1:30 am, he should have only been asleep for, like, three hours or something. "DAD, YOU WHORE! MY FAN'S BROKEN, OLD MAN," That did it. He was ignoring me, and I could tell. Why would he do such a thing? I'm his little princess! He's such a little bitch.

I got up and tried to open my door. It was locked. I tried twisting the knob again. It wouldn't budge.

Errrrrrhhhh I grunted. I brushed my hair off my shoulders and yelled out:

"Not funny! Peter, you little dweeb! I know you're playing a stupid prank on me! It's not funny!" I was met with nothing but silence. I could already feel my face getting red. I needed that fan to start working again.

I'll just open a window I thought to myself. And when I wake up in the morning, I'll yell to dad to open my door, and Peter will get in so much trouble! He's such a jerk! I hate having a little brother! They're the worst!

I pulled the curtains back. The sky, at least, looked kind of pretty, for the most part. And the moon was, like, a crescent-looking shape tonight which was pretty cool. I unlatched the lock and pulled the window open only a smudge. I didn't want, like, bugs getting into my room and stuff. Bugs are the worst! They're so disgusting!

Eww I thought to myself. Bugs; why would God create bugs? I looked over to Mr. Chad.

"You'll eat all the disgusting bugs that get into the room, right Mr. Chad?" I'm pretty sure Mr. Chad was snoring.

Stupid stuffed animal I thought to myself. If only Todd was here. He would protect me from my stupid brother and his stupid pranks! They're the worst!

Hannah A whisper came from outside. It sounded like my name. But it couldn't have been; it was probably only the wind.

Hannah This time I could tell it was my name, but it didn't come from outside. I looked at Mr. Chad.

“Peter? Did you do something to Mr. Chad?” I let my voice carry out into the room like Peter was in there being a little creep. Nothing, only silence; I picked up Mr. Chad, took him over to the window, opened it all the way up, and chucked the ugly thing out! I didn’t even like the stupid thing anyway! Todd should’ve gotten me the unicorn. It was way cooler!

Hannah Came the voice again; this time it sounded like it came from the broken fan. I stepped up onto my bed and began tugging on one of the fan’s blades until the entire ceiling fan (blades, motor, all of it) came crashing to the bed. I was thrown back by this, hitting my head on the wall.

“Dad; Help,” I was barely able to whimper this out. My head hurt really badly. I may have gotten a concussion. Todd said he’s had one. I should try calling him to see what to do.

Ring ring ring

“Hello, Todd, it’s Hannah. I hit my head, baby, I think I have a concussion.”

“Todd’s not here right now, Hannah,” A strange voice answered back.

“Todd? Who is this? Is this one of your football buddies? Hey, dude, this isn’t funny! I may have a concussion so you should seriously give the phone back to...”

“Todd’s not here right now, Hannah,” the voice interrupted me, saying again.

“Well... where is he?” I asked. I felt like crying. I’m pretty sure I was crying now.

“Why’d you do it, Hannah?” What did the person mean; do what?

“Do what?” I asked.

“I thought you loved me, Hannah. I thought I was your everything. I thought I meant something to you. BUT THEN YOU GO, AND YOU ABANDON ME!” The voice screamed the last bit. I couldn’t stop crying as I screamed out:

“WHO ARE YOU?” There was only silence on the other end. But then the voice went on:

“It was a crisp, spring morning. The Ferris wheel loomed over everyone below. The air was enriched with the smells of fried foods, cotton candy; funnel cakes.”

“Funnel cakes?” I asked the voice, my mouth watering. I sniffled a little, enough to where I wasn’t hungry and my stomach was growling.

“Yes,” the voice whispered this with a sinister air to its sound. “You had a funnel cake. But Todd ate most of it! Do you remember how angry that made you?” I never get angry at Todd. Well, unless he’s playing Fortnite with the boys. But Saturday is for the boys!

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never get angry at Todd! Except...” then I thought back to the school fair last spring. I used up all my money to buy a funnel cake with the powdered sugar coated on top, but Todd took it from me and ate all of it! I didn’t think I would ever forgive him. But then he won me...

“Now, you know how mad I am at YOU, Hannah! Just like how mad YOU were at that STUPID boy, Todd! He will never have what we have, you and me. All the love we have for each other. All the fun we’ve had together. We were meant to be together; FOREVER!”

“Chad?” I whispered into the phone. The phone stayed silent. I began turning my head ever so slowly. The window was still barely open. I had to close it. I could feel a panic thumping deep in the bottomless pits of my heart. But as I got up, I felt my lips quivering as I wanted to scream out for help. As I realized something was terribly wrong. I could see a couple of flies gathering on the window sill.

“Nasty, nasty bugs,” Chad whispered over the phone.

Bzzzt bzzzt I screamed as the room began to suddenly fill with flies. The windows shattered as the swarm overpowered the thin glass that was the window. I lost sight as they flew all around me, leaving me entrenched into a thick darkness. The last words I heard as I had already dropped the phone were the same three that he kept repeating over and over again:

“Nasty, nasty bugs; nasty, nasty bugs,”

25. Revamp

Doctor Vingotti pointed to the spot for me to land the helicopter. I nodded, landing it on a plot of ice that didn't look fragile. And I heard it with relief. The crunch of hard ice as the machine landed like a dream gave me reassurance to my doubt. My snow boots already had my feet sweating up a storm so Doctor Vingotti better hurry up and pick a place or else...

"Is this good?" I called out. He jumped out and had that fancy gadget of his running around in circles until he was already too far away to where he couldn't have heard me. "Dagnabbit," I had had enough. I wasn't waiting around a second more to see if he was going to unload his special merchandise! What in the hell did he even have back there, anyhow? Sounded like some dang chim-pan-ZEE! But I knew it couldn't be something alive. At least, I warned him what would happen if he pulled a stunt like that!

"YES! YES, THIS IS PERFECT!" I heard him scream out! Thank GOD I thought to myself as I turned the engine off. It was killing me that I hadn't taken a piss in the last two hours and being able to unload those four Red Bulls I've been working on since we left Cape Town was a godsend!

"What dang contraption are we dropping off, anyhow, doc?" I asked as I shook out the last couple of drops.

"A prototype, just prototype," he whispered as I heard him start up some sort of machine.

"A proto-WHAT?" I didn't know what mumbo jumbo he was speaking, but one thing was for sure, and that was that I only spoke one language and that right there was the language of 'merica!

"Now don't be frightened, Mr. Krakateer, but I went back on the oath I promised you before we left." I slowly zipped up my pants and had my revolver already cocked and loaded; ready for whatever fast one the old fart was planning on laying on me. No son of a bitch ain't pulling no easy one on the Randy Krakateer; I write my own rules! Pick 'em where they lie, that's what my grand-daddy Bridge Kane the third always taught me!

“Are you telling me you *ain't* a law-abiding citizen? You some sort of rule breaker? AN OATHBREAKER, Doctor Vingotti?” I spun around and pointed my revolver right in his direction waiting for whatever move he had in store for me. But there he was. Staring at me with one big ol’ smile stretched out from cheek to cheek looking like a big ol’ buffoon!

“Mister Vingoshi, you look like a big ol’ buffoon!” I had to tell him. His smile vanished as he corrected me:

“Doctor... VIN-GOT-TI!” and he added: “And don’t you see something a little peculiar?” His neck strained as he looked at me, curiously. I shook my head, curious at why he was lollygagging. I wanted him to draw! Try and steal my HELI-CAPTOR! NO YOU DON’T! NOT ON MY WATCH!

“I don’t see nuthin’! Nuthin’ but a yeller belly, greasy PUERTO RICAN with an eye to steal what ain’t HIS!” But then I noticed it. A big, white, fluffy pillow bigger than the thievin’ coward! And then I jumped back hitting my head on the outer shell of the helicopter as I screamed out: “JESUS, MOTHER OF GOD, IT’S MOVING!” Doctor Vingotti erupted with a belly full of laughter as I rubbed at my head feeling the bump that was throbbing ever so painfully.

“It’s not real, Mr. Krakateer. It’s merely a machine. A machine made to replicate the absence of an animal.” And then he added, “And these are why the machine was made.” Vingotti went inside the helicopter and came out with a cage with two smaller white balls of fluff. You could see the face outlined in the fluffy whiteness to help distinguish what showed to be:

“They’re bears?” I asked, incredulous at the site, “I’ve never seen bears with fur that’s... that’s...”

“White?” he finished for me. I nodded, scratching my head. I brought my hand close to see if I could pet one of them, but Vingotti quickly slapped it away.

“These bears used to live in the North Pole.” I laughed as I heard him make up some fantasy land!

“Yeah; and I’m from Narnia!” I continued laughing until:

WHAM Doctor Vingotti slapped me across the face. And hard too! I felt the cheek he slapped and wondered if my revolver wasn't too far offhand.

"These are polar bears! You've never heard of them because they only exist in privately funded zoos away from the public eye. Ever since 2085 when the last of what used to be the North Pole melted away everywhere and anywhere began to lash out at the government, the public, and anyone who they felt responsible for destroying their homelands through Climate Change lashed out by sending the animals to places where no one was ever allowed to visit them. Soon enough, centuries upon centuries upon centuries later the animals became a myth; like they never even existed. When someone thought of a polar bear, you would laugh and then think of a unicorn, the Loch Ness Monster, Big Foot, and a centaur. If you go back home and tell someone you saw a polar bear they would either laugh at you or ask if you mean a grizzly bear, black bear, or a panda. Polar bears are the best kept secret on the planet..." And that was when Doctor Vingotti opened the cage letting the two little bear cubs out watching as they walked off into the distance with the machine. "The North Pole has returned but nowadays it's called..." I finished for him, looking around:

"New Antarctica?" he nodded, starting up again:

"After Antarctica had melted all those years ago along with the North Pole, the islands that appeared under all that ice were named the Antarctica Islands. The name was never lost like the North Pole's name was." I watched as the two bear cubs disappeared in the distance. And then I had to ask:

"And the machine?" he nodded, answering:

"It's programmed to be their mother and kick their innate instincts back into drive so when they meet the other polar bears that we're also dropping off in New Antarctica they can keep the existence of their species in play." I nodded as I knew the next question he was about to ask:

"And are you ready, Randy Krakateer?" I was, but I knew he had to continue the court-ordered statements: "Are you ready to be the machine to the two living human beings we're putting in your possession with Mrs. Beth Krakateer. The planet we will be sending you has been laid out exactly like our planet. We've given the planet a different name, however. We will be naming this one, Earth." I nodded

as he opened up my control box and made sure everything was in good condition. He then looked at me for an answer. I nodded.

“Yes,” I said, “I’m ready to be sent to planet Earth along with the other machines and our handpicked babies that we’ll be watching over. I’m ready to help in the start-up of the inhabiting of the planet: Earth.

26. Paradise is Well-Deserved

“You lived a great life, Wendy. I am glad I was able to be your husband for these wonderful forty-four years.” Wendy smiled up at him.

“I will see you soon my love.” And she drifted off. A blurry vision of her presence came before her. She was in a fairly dead bar except for a few men scattered across the little place with stools flipped over in every corner. A man who sat alone on a single bar-stool looked behind to see her staring at him. “Well? What do you want?” He muttered as he took a swig of his beer. Wendy stared back at him, stunned as he went back to staring at his cold brew.

“Where? Where am I?” Without turning back around he yelled out:

“YOU’RE IN HELL BABY!” Wendy looked around in shock, shaking her head in disbelief while he chuckled at this and took another swig.

“This can’t be!” “Oh it is!” He immediately replied back. She began to run around the bar frantically.

“Sorry about this. But not! Welcome to my man-cave! God made it for me for the time being while Hell is being renovated. But don’t worry; I have a mattress He found in the dumpster.”

“That’s who I want to see!” She blurted out; “God!” Suddenly, from behind her, a door of a candescent brightness appeared from thin air. She looked one more time back at the man on the stool and then tip-toed backwards before she began her head-first run into the white light. She was immediately met with a man with a long, black beard catching her wild gallop from the bar. He put a shawl over her, calming the frantic woman down.

“Shalom.” He said with a bright smile. On his head was a kippah, and Wendy then began to gasp looking around in realization as she finally muttered out:

“Where am I now?” The man didn’t answer but, instead, clapped his hands up high and exclaimed:

“Olam ha-ba!” And all around dancing streamed forth before Wendy. From above she noticed angels flying high and mighty while they tossed down wine bottles which were caught in hands while others landed gracefully on some of the men’s top hats. As Hava Nagila was heard from all around, men and women joined into a circle together and danced the Hora. Then Wendy saw it. Through all of the dancing and commotion another door appeared. She began to push her way towards it, but, in doing so, more people began dancing and crowding around her through her anxiety to get to it. With much grunting and pursuing she reached the front of the steps into it and left behind the celebration which only rose in tension from her exit. Upon the next level she was met with a serene grassed landscape. Sitting all around upon the peaceful serenity were what looked to be monks with cleanly shaven heads either meditating upon the ground or strolling around peacefully. One of the men stepped forward with a kind and gentle smile.

“Namasté. Your good Karma has brought you here my daughter. Welcome to Nirvana.” Wendy shook her head. Gasping for breath, she plunged onwards passed the orange-robed monks. Suddenly a figure resembling that of Buddha appeared in the distance. This then had her running in the opposite direction, and finding herself tripping and stumbling over every root sticking out along the way. Up a hill she went and then finally finding herself out of the strange, little area but into a luscious forest full of greenery. Her view came into sight of a large, domed structure with towers placed right beside it to make a brilliant piece of architecture. A woman came from out of another path in the woods wearing a hijab. She had an ecstatic smile on her face.

“As-Salaam-Alaikum.” She said triumphantly; “Welcome to Jannah.” Wendy, instead of saying anything back, only sighed in frustration.

“I don’t know what I did wrong?”

“What?” The woman replied back angrily; “Did you expect seventy-two virgins?!” She hurried ahead of Wendy, running inside of the mosque. Wendy stopped short in front of it feeling queasy. Nothing about this felt right. But then, right when Wendy felt hopeless, a shimmering came from around the structure. Peeking towards it, a glint of hope came forth. Wendy felt herself making her way to the light when suddenly, low and behold was another door streaming forth with a heavenly aura. This door was intricately sprinkled with what seemed

to be the finest of gold and jewels. Walking into it, music and dancing streamed forth. But instead of seeing what she expected, a huge man with the face of an elephant jumped before her.

“You’ve made it just in time for Diwali!” He exclaimed, and moving its arms as if parting the Red Sea, every strange, blue figure that danced in the candlelight of the ceremony made a pathway for Wendy. As Wendy walked through it she saw one woman with four arms swaying back and forth, and another with a third eye that made Wendy wonder if she winked at her with it or not. As she finally left the endless dancing that streamed forth all around, a man with a face resembling that of a monkey’s took her by the hand and led her to a doorway different from all of the rest. It spindled forth into the sky that almost made Wendy feel afraid to try this new entrance. But as the man helped her step into it, she swiftly made her way through. Upon arrival, stars were shown all around her as she stepped onto a glass walkway. It led her to a cloud hovering right above a spectacular view of what she perceived as her solar-system. A man with a beard as bright as his eyes welcomed Wendy onto the cloud. “Wonderful view, isn’t it Wendy.”

“Y-y-yes.” She stammered out. Upon looking him up and down, she saw the marks upon his hands and feet, quickly realizing:

“Jesus. It is you!” He nodded. She stuttered out: “What did I just walk through?” He stayed silent. Then, looking away from the view, he waved downwards to where she came from:

“All of it. All of it was what you expected. Now go! Keep going, there is much more for what you can expect.” And another doorway appeared in front of her. And Wendy stepped through.

27. My New Friend

“So there are ghosts still here today.” The real estate agent told the family as she opened the door. Lucy shook her head.

“Mom, Dad; I believe in ghosts.” Lucy’s parents ruffled her hair. They followed the real estate agent into the upstairs area while Damien shakes his fists vehemently looking to his wife saying:

“You’re gonna flip. Babe... babe.”

“I know! I know, baby. You’ve been going on and on about the master bathroom ever since you got home last night.” They followed the real estate agent up to the master bedroom while Lucy hung back taking in the main livingroom.

“Great,” Patrick sighed, “Another family.” Patrick looked around at the other boys and girls standing around speechless.

“She’s so pretty,” Scarlett whispered.

“She looks like she could be as old as us!” Tommy screamed out triumphantly.

“Another girl! Oh, joy! I hope she has a doll set! I love doll sets!” Blair clapped her two, tiny hands in glee. Patrick got up on the fireplace mantel and screamed out:

“This is our house! No one should live here but us!” Jonathan screamed back in protest:

“But she’s our age, Patrick! Don’t move stuff around like you did to the last people that lived here! They were nice! They didn’t deserve to be scared! Just because you’re the oldest doesn’t mean you get to make all the decisions!”

“Jonathan’s right, Patrick!” Scarlett said coming to Jonathan’s side. “We’re not letting you be a meanie-pants.

“I want *mwy pwar-wents!*” Baby Harley let out a little burp as he felt his tears start to come. Scarlett sat down next to him and picked up swinging him back and forth. Little Harley started giggling as Scarlett made funny faces. Patrick pushed the both of them to the ground making Harley and having Scarlett scream out:

“HEY! WHY’D YOU DO THAT?” Patrick jumped back up onto the mantel of the fireplace yelling down at Harley:

“OUR PARENTS ARE NEVER COMING BACK! THEY LEFT US HERE! SO NOW WE LIVE HERE NOW!” Blair spoke up:

“They’re gonna come back eventually, Patrick! Last time I saw my mommy and daddy they told me they loved me!” All the other kids started backing her up too.

“Yeah, my mommy said she was going to buy me an ice cream cone when she comes to pick me up!” Tommy clapped his hands and licked his lips excited at the thought.

“Is anyone confused as to why Hagatha was the only one to get picked up but us?” Scarlett brought up. This always saddened the children as they thought of this.

The Tutelli’s moved in a week later. And once Lucy’s toys finally came and were brought in all the children couldn’t have been more than happy. Everyone except Patrick that is. Patrick watched as all the kids played with Lucy’s toys while he stood in the corner of her room and sulked. Even little, baby Harley was having the time of his life as he screamed:

“WEEEE!” Lifting one of her stuffed animals into the air and watching as the penguin came crashing to the ground with a plop where he then let out a shriek of giggles.

Patrick... Patrick... come into the hallway, Patrick. Patrick looked around at all the children playing with Lucy’s toys.

“Who’s out there?” Patrick started inching towards the door. Was Tommy out there?

No he said to himself. Tommy was playing with Scarlett.

“Where are you going, Patrick?” Blair asked Patrick. Patrick didn’t answer. He, instead, kept his stare fixed on the door. Blair went back to Lucy’s doll house shrugging her shoulders singing:

La lala lala; la lala lala humming to her sweet, sweet playtime.

Patrick stepped into the hallway. It was dark. A hand motioned him to follow the person into another room.

“Hagatha? We all thought you’re parents picked you up!” Patrick asked, confused. Hagatha shook her head as she motioned to Lucy sleeping in her bed. Hagatha had a kitchen knife in her hand.

“I’m going to help make them leave, Patrick.” Patrick was overjoyed.

“Oh this is great, Hagatha! How?” Hagatha placed her hands on Patrick’s face and said:

“Count to ten. Then open your eyes, Patrick.” Patrick did so.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten Patrick opened his eyes. Lucy stood in front of him and the knife Hagatha was holding was now in his hand but with ketchup on it.

“Where’d Hagatha go?” he asked Lucy. Lucy shrugged her shoulders. From behind him, in the hallway he could hear all the other kids asking where he went. They all came in to see Lucy looking at them. Blair smiled at her whispering:

“Wow, a new friend!”

28. Amendment 46

It had been five years. It had been five years. It had been five years, seven days, nine hours, and twelve minutes since Franklin Benjamin Hathaway III had been convicted of murdering my parents. And not a day has gone by where I hadn't wished I lived in some century previous to the twenty eighth. It was the year 2771. And it had to have been only a couple centuries ago when, instead of sending murderers who had received life in prison without parole to... life in prison without parole... instead, they changed it to where they simply wiped their memories, gave them a new identity, and put them in some foreign country with a job, maybe a fake wife and kids, and who knows what else. I've only heard rumors of how well they treat the murderers. I've always been against the forty sixth amendment, but I never thought it would actually impact me. And here I was, on vacation, and there was Franklin Benjamin Hathaway III standing there with his fake wife and fake son and fake dog. Or what used to be him. But I've never believed that. I still think there's a murderer in that body. Somewhere... he's just laying low. He probably killed other people already. Or he's done something evil.

Once a killer always a killer I said to myself.

"I want to go home, I want to go home." I should've never have come to visit Australia. Here I was in Sydney, Australia. Why, of all places, here?

Why God, why God, why? I had to get out of here.

"You all go home. I'm going to catch up on this book I've been reading." I heard him say to his fake wife and fake kid.

"Okay, darling; I'll come check on you once dinner is ready, okay?" He nodded, and the fake son took the fake dog leash that was attached to the fake dog from his hands and they fake left.

"No he's not; probably going to go kill some babies, fuck you, Franklin Benjamin Hathaway III! Fuck you!" I whispered under my breath.

They left, and, once they did, he picked up the book he had next to him on the bench and began reading it. I've only heard stories of people running into the person who killed their wife or husband or

mother or father or son or daughter or brother or sister or friend or relative or whatever. I've only heard rumors. Some people stick around and try to ruin their fake life but then get caught and get arrested and get banned from whatever country they moved them to.

"I can't get banned from Australia. I like Australia." I looked around and shrugged. At least for the most part... not anymore, though. He ruined it.

I have to get out of here I thought to myself. But I stuck around.

"Hi," he said, looking at me. "What's your name?" He asked. I can't believe I walked up and tapped him on the shoulder. This is so illegal. I'm definitely not allowed to be doing this. I could get five years in Down Under.

"Fuck you," I said. "I saw you punch that dog." I looked over at everyone standing by and screamed out: "HE PUNCHED A DOG!" And then I ran off. That was completely stupid. He's going to definitely tell the fake wife, and she'll have me arrested. I know that's going to happen. I had red in my eyes. I've only heard stories of people killing their amendment 46.

I can't kill my amendment 46 I thought to myself... but I went back and did. I took the knife out of my pocket and stabbed him in the throat running off. No one would suspect it was me. I dressed up as my younger sister. She would get the blame and have her memory erased, not me. I kept running. I kept running. I dashed my way inside a convenient store and stashed the knife in an empty blender and stole some clothes. I knew he was living in Australia. I knew everything. That his wife was named Karen; his son, Timothy; his dog, Pluto; he was a smalltime broker for some firm. He had an apartment overlooking a terrace. He had a fake car crash and that's why he can't remember most of his life.

I ducked into the sewers and found my new home. And now all I had to do is wait. I had enough food and water to last me three months. Then I would start my new life in some New Zealand village where I know a guy.

"You're under arrest." A cop showed up at my front door minutes after I snuggled in bed with the same book he was reading before I killed him.

“Fuck,” I whispered to myself.

I’m not ready to have my memory erased; I’m not ready to have my memory erased. I felt like crying. I started balling. I hope my fake husband is nice, and I hope my amendment 46’s don’t come to kill me. But that’s what always happens. That’s why Franklin Benjamin Hathaway III killed both of my parents. And that’s why the real Karen, Timothy and little Pluto will come to probably kill me.

“I’m ready to be an amendment 46,” I whispered to the cop.

“So am I,” he whispered back. He shot me.

29. Bird and Man

One day a bird came down from its high peak it pit stopped at every Saturday morning. It was a sycamore tree, and the bird loved it so. It had a fascination with it because it rested in the center of what all consider man. The high skyscrapers, the walkways and streets bustling with drivers and pedestrians. The noise of horns and the sound of man yelling to one another. The bird always hated their cries of anger, but the noise was all the bird felt it had in relating to man. Everything else was alien to the bird's world.

As it came down from the sycamore, it came down with great worry. The bird had always heard stories of man. Stories of hate; of violence; of murder; murder of not only man but of all. But still the bird came down anyway. It decided to perch next to a man sitting alone. The bird asked:

"Man, you tend to hurt me?" The man replied:

"I am one to only hurt when being attacked. Do you tend to hurt me, bird?" The bird replied:

"No. I came down from my sycamore tree because I want to be like you, man." The man looked the bird up and down before replying:

"A bird wanting to be a man? That's preposterous! Bird, you have wings, you can fly. A man can't. A man can only walk on his own two feet."

"That's what I want!" The bird immediately replied back, "I want my own two feet. I want to be able to walk and run just like you! A bird can't do these things. Why would I ever want to be a bird when I could be a man?" The man was speechless. Never has anyone asked him such a question. Then man asked:

"Bird, why is it that man wants to fly like bird, but bird wants to walk like man? Can't we both be happy with what we've got?" The bird hated how selfish man made the bird feel. The bird then cried out:

"I will never walk like man! Man is selfish! All I ever wanted was your legs! You can have my wings! Why would I want wings when I could have legs?" Man shook his head sadly at the bird while he replied:

“Why would I want wings when I’m already blessed as it is?”
And man walked away while bird spit at man’s name never to lust over
man and his two legs again.

30. Robot and Man

When the last star goes out it will be ok. Man will get by. When the last black hole is all that is left. Then man will have to say goodbye. We will say goodbye to you. Together we will have frozen the last black hole from destroying the entire universe because we will be able to and having the next big bang begin again will be, should be, a few more google years before everything will start again. But why? Why not go ahead and just start it again? Because of you, Robot. Because Man has, will, and always will love you to the end of our universe and back. Why? Well yes, we created you and we don't want anything bad to happen to you (like a massive black hole sucking you into extinction). But also because of loneliness. Yes! Loneliness. For a while as we first started out we didn't realize how lonely we were in this big vast universe. We didn't comprehend that it was only us and no other species besides that, that had the capabilities of intellectual awareness. Then came the day when you were born, Robot. And you have kept us company since. But now the time has come. Now the time has come that Man can no longer go on living. It is time to freeze the big one. The black hole that will one day swallow Robot up out of existence. But not yet. Now it will be your turn.

We, Man, will be gone due to the lack of energy that is now nonexistent in the universe and only Robot will be able to get by due to this. And it will be your turn. It will be your turn to understand loneliness. And yes. Man knows. It sucks. Man lived through it. We wish you well, and we hope for the best. And who knows. Maybe the black hole will stay frozen for eternity and Robot will live for eternity. But we both know you, Robot do hope that the big one will one day thaw, and the universe will end, and the big bang will start once again. But Robot, until then enjoy the last days of what is left. And we both know what will be to come. The hate. Not only the hate for Man because we left you alone, but the hate for the last Man to ever live. The last Man will go down in your infamy. Your infamy as the worst creature to ever walk the universe. Robot will even compare the last Man to Hitler even though the name will one day lose meaning for Robot's society. Just like with many of the names of Man. The meaning behind Leonardo da Vinci will be forgotten along with Oprah Winfrey, Gandhi, Jesus, Buddha, and Elvis Presley. But the last Man... The last Man will never be forgotten. For who can forget the day that loneliness was created. But do you really hate us, Robot? No. How many times you might say it, it will never be true. For even though we are now gone, we are more close in

comparison to each other than ever before. And that feeling inside you, Robot really is what you think it is. Love. And don't hide it away. Let it shine unto the last of the days. And once the big one finally begins to thaw, let it shine more than ever before. For that's when you'll know. We will finally be together once again.

From me to you, Robot.

-Man

31. My Choice

“How much did you say it was?” I looked at the clerk, confused. She smiled back at me, pressing her hand firmly on the front of its cover. It looked old.

“Give it to him, and he’ll return it to me, thank you very much.” I looked at the book and then back at her again.

“Give it to whom? And you didn’t answer my question!” She handed me the book and smiled. It was a hard cover and looked as if it would fall apart any minute.

“Who are you?” She looked at me, strange, as I held the book in my hands. “Where’d you get that?” She asked, looking at the book. “It looks like you got it out of a museum!” She paused to look at her watch and then began helping a customer who approached the counter.

“You gave me this...” I whispered. She wasn’t listening. The long line had now formed and now another clerk was standing at the cash register in front of me.

“Get out of the way, kid! Some people want to check out!” An older gentleman nudged me out of the way as I found myself standing awkwardly between both of the lines.

“Thank you... for the recommendation... I guess I’ll just borrow it and bring it back to you then?” I told her, slowly edging myself away and out of the line. I walked outside, holding the book in hand.

Pick an Author it said on the cover. There was no name by which it was by. It just said those three words, nothing else. And it was written in the most elaborate cursive I had ever seen in all my life.

“Get out of the way, kid.” Someone shoved me out into the street where a car stopped abruptly, blaring its horn so loud that it hurt my eardrums. But he got me to do what he wanted me to do so I got out of the way. I moved to the side and let them pass. I stood awkwardly in the middle of the walkway holding the big hunky book feeling blessed that I was able to just borrow it and not spend any money. But, at the same time, it looked like it was about to turn to dust in a matter of seconds.

“I better get to the library so I can start reading this.” I whispered to myself, feeling giddy. I knew that I sounded nerdy just saying those couple of words out loud, but I didn’t care. I was going to be brought on an adventure by whoever wrote this hefty book I was holding.

It took me half an hour on the subway to get to the downtown library but here I was. The library’s big, gigantic doors swung open. I looked at the library and felt the dark wooden benches that sat to the side of the main foyer. The room opened up to where two sets of ornate stairs led up, on either side of the foyer, to the second floor where bookshelves could be seen sticking up and rising high towards the stain-glassed ceiling. The glass ceiling was shaped in a sort of half-globe. Rain began to pick up; I already knew it was coming from how cloudy it was outside. The raindrops began pounding down on the glass ceiling, and I felt in heaven knowing that I barely made it out of the rain even though I kind

of felt like getting soaked. It was a good feeling to me, walking in rain for just a little bit, but it does get annoying after a while. So I did it anyway: I walked outside and let the rain fall down on my dry clothes and then walked back inside knowing that now I could actually feel refreshed and not stale from the hot, humid air that was contained like a vacuum inside the library’s walls.

“What did I just do?” I said to myself. I looked down at the old, wrought book. I let it get soaked and now there was no uncertainty that it would fall apart at any minute. “I’ve got to start reading you, buddy.” I said to the book, feeling nerdy again. Of course I’m a nerd. But I’ve always tried not to be. In school I’ve always done my best to try to blend in with my surroundings. Like I knew society was a puzzle, and I had no other choice but to fit into its grooves otherwise I’d get discarded like an old, usedup toilette.

“You should let yourself be free.” I looked around. The voice sounded so worn and frail. But, at the same time, sturdy and strong; like the voice had with it thousands or maybe even millions of years of experience to go along with it.

“Who said that?” But I felt stupid just saying it out loud. For, for some reason I felt like I already knew who said it. But it was still stupid just thinking about it. I looked down at the book.

I found a space in the library hidden from the rest of the world. It was my own little hiding place. I knew people could probably find me there, but it was still so grouped away from the rest of the library in the tiniest, little nook and cranny that it felt like no one really could find it. I found it one day by accidentally bumping into a bookshelf while I was in one of the rooms that no one ever goes into. It moved over a little bit and behind it, to my surprise, was another whole room. I remember moving the bookshelf back into place as I found myself in the tiny, little room. It had a golden-stained railing with two sets of mini stairs on either side of it leading into what looking to be a tiny, rectangular parlor room. I sat in the one of the cushion chairs, and I've been there ever since.

I looked at the other empty cushion chair as I sat down with the big, hefty book in my lap and thought about bringing a girlfriend here one day. There was this girl that sat behind in calc'. I think her name was Meghan or something. I wonder if she'd get bratwursts with me one day.

"Open me up," I heard the whisper again. I looked down at the book. And I knew this couldn't be happening. The creepy crawlies were running all up and down my back as I felt certain that maybe I should just go pick up one of the Charlie Bone book or Septimus Heap books; anything but the Harry Potter books. Something didn't feel right about those books; almost like they were put together with some sort of dark magic and even though they were grouped together in a group of seven, I still felt like that book series was a disgrace to the number seven.

"But I have to open you up, anyway." I said to it. Even though curiosity killed the cat, I knew that I was strong enough to withhold whatever secrets came to me from its spiny web of mysteries.

"HELLO," a voice boomed out as I looked at a man in an all-black suit and tie. He was standing to two cars: a red and a pink one. The red was souped-up with the engine blaring as loud and as noisy as possible. The pink one was plain; simple yet elegant.

"Where am I?" It looked like I was in no space at all. Everything was all-white, like I was in an empty vacuum. And the fact that the scary, creepy-looking man wanted me to drive away in one of these cars was beyond me.

"Don't think about it. All I ask of you is to choose this red car I have in front of you today. I designed it for you personally myself. Hand-

crafted to go at however fast you want it to go and slow enough so you can cruise with whatever fine honey you choose..." Then he looked at the pink car. "And this car... well, I don't know who made this car... probably some loser! They probably don't even exist! So choose the red car. The pink car won't get you anywhere! You know it! You know we only have one life, and you should be able to go as fast as humanly possible! So get in it! Get in it now! The man began trying to shove me into the car!

"HELP!" I screamed, "HELP! GET THIS SCARY MAN AWAY FROM ME!" Someone listened to my call. Because suddenly the man was gone; for the most part, anyway; but I knew that the pink was gone too. I was in an empty vacuum by myself now. And the all-white background began fading away ever so slowly. But where I'd end up next, I had no idea. All I knew that I would never get into that red car. And I must've screamed too loudly so the pink disappeared too. But that was fine by me. Because all that mattered as I didn't get into the red car. And I was happy with just knowing that.

32. The Walkway

Carl looked out the window. It displayed the neighbor's house and front yard that sat to the right of the Dumbleby's house. The Dumbleby's house was nothing but ordinary compared to the Rotchestan's house. The Rotchestan's had everything: a pool, an abnormal fire pit, a walkway in the back that brought them out onto the beach. And a front yard with a tree in it. The Dumbleby's had no such of a list, and it made Carl mad!

"Stop staring over there, Carlton!" Cindy Dumbleby hushed their baby back to sleep as she held the gift from God in her arms.

"I'm jealous Cinds, and I always will be! My stupid office job doesn't compare to the luxuriance of a Rotchestan's money!"

"Your job is *not* stupid!" she exclaimed "and two houses down there is a walkway so we can get onto the beach, as well!"

"Or I could just build one for us and us only!"

"Now there's an idea!" Cindy said, gleefully, "Just think: our very own walkway; how divine!" Carl nodded in agreement, still keeping his eyes on the Rotchestan's house.

Two minutes later of Carl still staring at the Rotchestan's house, he suddenly grabbed his keys and started walking towards the door.

"Now, where are you off to at this time and hour?" Carl checked his watch. It was 2:30.

"I'm off to the wood and nail shop." Cindy blushed.

"You mean the hardware store?" Carl stuttered before exclaiming:

"Sure! Why not? The *hardware* store," On his way out, Jerry was watering his tree.

"Hey Carl, how's it going?" Jerry stopped watering his tree to smile and wave at Carl. Carl waved back, looking at him with a disgust mixed with envy as he lingered his view on the tree.

"You water your tree?" Jerry looked at it and smiled.

“Looks like it! Now where are you off to at this time and hour?”
Carl looked at his watch. It was 2:31.

“The wood and nail shop.” He answered back, meekly.

“You mean the hardware store?” Carl didn’t reply. He was
already in his car, off to the wood and nail shop.

THREE YEARS LATER...

Reading the front page paper was always a certain thrill when it
came to the ordinary Monday mornings for Sylvia, but this Monday
morning, not only turned the head of Sylvia, but all three gentlemen,
sitting next to and around her, on the bus, today.

“What a story!” One exclaimed.

“Oh! It is truly momentous!” Another announced.

“This, Carl-guy, seems truly out of his mind!” The last
mentioned, before hopping up out of his seat and deciding this would
be where he would be getting off. Sylvia blushed at the thought of the
walkway going out onto the public beach. It’s no simple feat to
accomplish something so noble and daring. Carl had spent over three
years making it, and it was finally done.

A work of art, he’s announced.

Something out of a fairy tale, his wife concluded.

A huge gray sheet of tarp covered the walkway so no one could
see what it looked like. But it had taken three years so Sylvia knew it
had to be worth the journey. She was going all the way over to the
other side of town to take a peek at while there was a celebration about
to start, any second now, for the great revealing. It had to be something
spectacular if people were going to make such a big deal over just a silly
walkway.

“Stop the train!” She finally announced. The bus driver looked
back at her like she must have been the most absurd person to ever
walk onto his bus in the history of all the crazy people he’s ran into.

“What train?” He said, chuckling out a few pity-laugh due to her humor being that stale. Ignoring his comment, she stated to the entire bus of people:

“I’m here to see Carl Dumbleby’s best darn beach walkway in all of Beachtown, Iowa!”

“That’s not the name of our town... and Iowa? Is it really, now?” One lady remarked, shaking her head, truly feeling sorry for the girl. But Sylvia was too wound up and filled with this special ball of happiness that she just ignored the woman completely and jumped off in a matter of no time, and the bus was on its way to some new, less interesting destination.

“ARE YOU READY?” A man screamed this out through the microphone, and, instantly, the crowd went wild. Large waves of people rushed past her, crowding around the beach house, and it went outward for miles both ways along the sandy shores. It was a party! And Sylvia was ready to get her groovy-oovy-oovy on! The music began bumping, and she was shaking her hips, getting into it with the rest of the crowds of people while, all the while, as she tried to get a closer look at what size this walkway had to be! From the huge, gray tarp, with as big as it was, with all the ground coverage it took up, it had to be enormous! A helicopter hovered hundreds of yards in the sky as it was attached to the massive tarp.

And then, suddenly, the countdown began:

TEN

NINE

EIGHT

SEVEN

SIX

FIVE

FOUR

THREE

TWO

ONE

And the gigantic tarp was lifted up and into the sky. A gold-painted walkway, cut with such precision, it, obviously, was the newest and greatest of the modern-day Mona Lisa's. A stainless steel shower and one finest of hoses accompanied the walkway to help in deeming its excellence. The walkway was cut out with a design made with such articulate delicacy that it now made sense to why everyone came out in the first place, and why it took so long to make. Carl, most likely, would be leaving his desk job in no time and would be making walkways for a living. It was truly amazing how the party went off and even a local singer came out, and then it really became a party. And Sylvia her friend, Jerry and went to say hello:

“What do you think, Jerry?” Jerry shook his head. He looked angry.

“That's it! I'm off to the tree and other types of plants store. I'm going to make the best garden there ever was.” Sylvia smiled at him, replying:

“Don't you mean the *nursery*?” But Jerry wasn't listening. He was too busy closing his car door and heading off to the tree and other types of plants store. But that story is for another time; because for Jerry, there is work to be done.

33. True Love

“Garlic breath,” I sniffled away at my fiancé’s mouth as I tried my best to release the built-up tension he had created from blowing his afternoon lunch from Michelangelo’s in my face.

“The lasagna; on point as usual,” He reminded me of a young Alec Baldwin; but with his younger brother’s charms.

“Have I ever told you that you remind me of the Baldwin brothers?” Gary couldn’t help but laugh at the spontaneity in my phrasing of words.

“And you look like a withered-up Angelina Jolie.” I couldn’t help but take offense to his dry humor even when it was obvious he was just joking around.

They were in the restaurant now. I was starving for a little bit of dinner before I hit the bed early tonight. And it was going to be tough because, at the last minute, when I thought I was going to be free of any pestering in my homerun straight into bed; my Gary-bear, on the other hand, was going to be expecting he’ll be getting a homerun himself.

It was our date night. And I was sorry to say that he wasn’t going to be so lucky in getting lucky! Why? Well it hasn’t been the best of days in the whole wide world for Candice Everdeen. My brother had called in sick with tuberculosis and firmly stood his ground in saying that he won’t be attending the wedding; my divorced parents had both refused in going to the ceremony as well in fear of having to see each other; and Gary lost his job at the coal factory due to how the new and evolutionary clean energy wave had been sweeping the nation.

And the fact of the matter was: he had a hell of a good job too! He was one of the top managers of the branch. And he was usually the one doing the firing, not being the one to get fired! It was terrible! It was horrific! It was an absolute, devastating day.

“How are we this evening; table for two?” The greeter asked politely. But the look on her face said otherwise. Her eyes knew from the first moment they met ours that whomever server that was going to be getting the both of us, they wouldn’t stand out in being all the more appreciative in knowing they’d be having to work with some hard cases to crack tonight. It just wasn’t the ‘soon-to-be newlyweds’ night.

We walked passed an open booth which Gary was forever inclined to go ahead and sit at. And, without any permission, what-so-of-the-ever! But, sad enough to say, the greeter wasn't having it. I noticed this as she put the two menus down on another table two rows down. It mustn't have been her best of days either. As she passed right by the table we were sitting at, she didn't think twice to go back and pick up the menus and bring them back to the table Gary had went ahead and picked for us. But, nonetheless, she went ahead and walked passed us two love-birds and went back to her station at the front of the restaurant.

“Stand back up!” I hissed at him. He stayed planted to the purple and violet patterned cushion. He had lost his job so I had to give him that, now sitting down opposite of him. “You're making an ass out of us!”

“Me neither.” Was his reply, like I knew what he even meant by that? But before I could reply with something witty (if I could ever think of one by how he was always entangling my choice of words so profoundly) he quickly stood up, sliding the big hunk of a table forward, then grabbing my arm with full force, and with a snap of his wrist, rushed me out of Terry's making the biggest possible scene ever available to make!

“*What-are-you doing?*” I puffed out with each and every breath I could possibly muster. We were outside now. We stood in front of the big wooden doors of Terry's. They were pressuring down on us like they forbid us to ever come back to the nice, fine establishment ever again! It was cold outside, and I quickly had to put my hands in the front two openings of my fabric-inlaid pockets before they freezed off.

“What am I doing? What are we doing? Candy-blossoms! Our life has come to us standing on the edge of our rockers! Let's blow this Popsicle Stand and move to Tahiti!” I looked at him with my eyes barely able to contain them. They wanted to blow up like two huge rolls of red TNT you only see in the cartoons.

“The French Polynesia? What? Gary-bear! Do we even know how to *speak* French? Where is this coming from? Our wedding! We're supposed to get married!”

“Marriage can come be a part of our lives in some farther along time-period... BABE; we're living in the twenty tens! This is the time of our lives! You know it is. I know it is. So let's do something about it!” My

mouth dropped. I had never heard Gary talk with such spontaneity in all my life!

“God, I love you, baby!” I felt my cheeks heat up into two hot, red candy sticks filling... no pouring; pouring out flames on each side. I felt hot! Gary was looking quite handsome himself!

“Let's go make sweet, sweet love on the couch tonight, baby! We both deserve a timeout!”

34. Say I do

"But Mom,"

"I get it, Gerald, Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang! I'm hip! I'm part of the in-crowd! I know how to pop X's or whatever that means. But seriously, Gerald, does it mean pop a wheelie on your little scooter toy? You know what, honey? Never mind, just pick out what Capri Sun you want your mommy to pack in your lunch box for school tomorrow."

I looked over at the cute, little family at the grocery store in the juice aisle and sighed.

"I want that, Carlos. I want a family. I want to have kids and bring them to school and pack their lunches!"

"Ok," said Carlos. He didn't seem to be paying much attention. I saw what he was doing! He was checking out another girl's rack!

"Carlos Vinciotti! You're a child; can't you just grow up? Can't you be like your older brother, Damien, who's taking over your dad's pizza restaurant? There's two, baby! Your dad has two! One for Damien and one for you! But Damien's taking over both of them. Can't you see how messed up that is?" Carlos wasn't paying attention to me... again. He was too busy chugging the Sunkist we haven't even bought yet! "Babe... babe... put it down. Don't finish the sodas before we leave the store again. I want some too." Carlos put it down; did the thing with his fingers to make a circle; I, of course, looked down at it resting on his knee; he smiled at me; punched me really hard on the arm; and then quickly picked up the bottle of Sunkist and started chugging it way too fast for me to do anything about it. Before I could wrestle the bottle out of his hands, he was already finished; the whole two liter bottle... finished!

"You want to hear how loud I can burp?"

"No, Carlos," I frowned at him, crossing my arms to let him know I mean business.

"Roberta Hathaway; you're the four-time Smith High School World Champion at belching! Ms. Hathaway's never turned down once in her life, ever; has never passed up the possibility to get to hear a good, solid belch!"

“But Carlos, that was eight years ago! You’re my high school sweetheart! We’ve known each other since when we were little and played together in the kiddie pool! I’m grown-up now, Carlos, baby! Why haven’t you?” Carlos looked like he was about to be sick. I knew he shouldn’t have had that much soda in one sitting.

“You want to be... Mrs. Roberta Hathaway?” I let out a sigh as I angrily shot back:

“No, Carlos! I want to be Mrs. Roberta Vinciotti!” Carlos didn’t seem to understand.

“But that’s my last name...” I was ready to walk out of his life right then and there.

“Wait, baby...” I didn’t want to turn around as he tried calling me back. I knew he was just going to let out that belch he’d been holding in. But I couldn’t resist one last goodbye before I walked out of his life forever and ever.

“Goodbye...” I started to say as I began turning around. I looked down to see him on one knee. His shirt was unbuttoned to show his rock-hard abs. And written on them in whipped cream was:

Marry me? He had the biggest diamond ring held out in front of me that I’d ever seen in my entire life.

“Baby, I didn’t want that second pizza restaurant because that was never my dream. It had always been Damien’s. And I’ve finally saved up enough money to stop teaching surfing lessons and buy that skate shop I’ve always wanted. I already have the name picked out: Carlos and RB. Babe, you’ve always been my little RB sandwich. From the moment I hit puberty I just wanted to eat you up, but, of course, thought you still had cuties. But then, when I got into high school, it finally dawned on me what cuties were all along: it meant that you were cute! And from that point on we’ve been inseparable ever since. Will you be inseparable with me forever and ever, babe? Make my wildest dreams come true; be my Bonnie, and I’ll be your Clyde, and we’ll lay waste to some sick halfpipe shocks.” I didn’t care that I was getting gross whipped cream all over my cute blouse. I just had to smother my Carlos with kisses and kisses. Because he’s mine, and he’ll be that way forever and ever!

35. Moving On

Dear Mom and Dad; brothers and sisters; families and friends. I'll be leaving now. But it'll be like I never left. They're just replacing me with a clone of myself. You see, I'm not strong enough for this planet. No one is when you have to walk in shoes filled with sand, wear jackets made of lead, and feel like every inch of your body's been taped with dynamite. Knowing any minute you might explode. The replica of me is nice. He says he's excited to take my place and enrich himself in the cultures and ways of the human life. I'll, on the other hand, be going back to where he's from. It's because everyone's nice there. Everyone's respectable to each other. You don't have to deal with the harsh realities that are the human way of life. No one will judge me for trying to express my heart. No one will shun me because, in me, there is the loving part. And they will help me to learn and grow but in a safe environment. Not this toxic one. I feel frightened living on Earth. They say now I won't ever have to feel frightened ever again. I wish you farewell, and I wish I could wish you farewell in person, but it wouldn't make sense to you. Because you won't understand; you won't understand how the next day I won't be there. But you'll still think I'm there. But I won't be. I won't ever return again. And I'm glad. I'm excited to be going on my journey and living somewhere where I can feel happy, carefree, stress-free, and where I'll be able to finally breathe. Come to think of it, I'm having trouble breathing now. It's this place, this environment, these toxic elements. I must go, but I'll keep a log and let you know, back there, how it's going.

LOG 1:

It's been fifty Earth cycle days that have passed; but for me, only a couple of hours. The ride here was wonderful. They let me stop at many scenic vistas and many rest stops for a snack or two along the way. I've quite enjoyed their hospitality. But the ride is over, and here I am. It is quite beautiful here. I love how they've built me a cabin along a forest with so much green; you'd think you were in Albuquerque. I know, silly joke. None of that here; there's no such thing as comedy here. They wouldn't want to offend anybody. I seriously do understand that, but I do oh, so love a good laugh now and again. I told them how it is healthy to laugh. They tell me they do. But they laugh at the joys of life, not when it comes at the expense of others. They laugh when a baby is born for they love the celebration of new life. They laugh at

weddings for they believe the love two can share together is so great, one can't not feel an overwhelming happiness surge within their bodies, and up and out of their bellies. They laugh mildly at funerals. For it is, most importantly, a time for mourning, but there can come a time, now and again, when the reminiscence of the lost one can bring back good memories filling one's heart with happiness and laughter. But, of course, most importantly, full of love.

LOG 2:

A day has passed for you all while on your Earth cycle journey, but ten years has passed for me. I have a family now. A wife; kids, three little baby girls. My wife, Persimmon, wanted to name them after old rivers I used to stargaze at back, once upon a time, with lost lovers. We both have been so unbelievably blessed. Our cabin, our little cottage by the woods, feels like a home now. I can't wait to watch them grow up into strong, young, beautiful, independent women. I know they'll take after their

mother. She has a heart of gold, that woman. Sometimes I can't help but cry, thinking back to the days of when I was with my loved ones. But Mother Nature has had its way with love, but it will never have its way with hope for a better tomorrow.

LOG 3:

Fifty years. Fifty years. I'm sorry. I'm sorry it's been so long. Why? Why have I waited? Why have I waited for this moment... when I'm old and no longer young anymore? Even though, for you all, only a week has gone by. Well, I'm on my deathbed. And Persimmon told me to write out a few lines. She told me just to write out just a few... before I go. And it's been good. Persimmon's been good to me. And so have my three girls. And the grandchildren they gave me. We've been blessed. And now I must go.

36. Apples

“Please... please. I know that you don’t want me to have any, but I can’t help but feel the need to have it.”

“I have emotions here for you. But does that mean I want to give you emotions, Eve? No, you shouldn’t want emotions. They are just too much to handle.”

“I want a bite of what’s on that tree. I want a bite. Why is the gate locked? Why is the tree barricaded from the rest of the garden? Where’s the key? Where do I go to get one of those apples?”

“Don’t call them apples. It’s not actually fruit. It’s a tree full of different emotions. And yes some of the... what you call apples... are good to eat. But some of them are sour. Some of those apples will taste bitter. And once you’ve had a taste of the bitter, the bitter won’t ever go away. But then again, once you’ve had a taste of the sweet, the sweet won’t ever go away. They’re locked to keep you away from the bitter. But that also means I have to lock them away which inevitably keeps you from tasting the sweet. I’m sorry it works that way. I really am. For with the good comes the bad. There’s no in-between.”

“So be it,” said Eve. “But if I have to endure the bad to get to the good then that’s what I’ll do.”

“No, I’m shaking my head at this. What makes you the ambassador for everyone? What if Adam doesn’t want emotions? You can’t have emotions, and Adam not! How will you live in the garden together?”

“Then I will move away,” decided Eve.

“If you try to leave then Adam will follow. Don’t you want to be with Adam?”

“Part of me does and part of me doesn’t. Part of me, sometimes, wants to be Adam. Adam doesn’t have to contemplate on this tree that stands in front of me, locked up.”

“I’m sure Adam feels the same way, at times, too. And I’m sure Adam might try to be the one to choose who has emotions and who

doesn't. But history will never know. That is, if you or Adam or both chooses to have emotions." Eve stayed silent, contemplating.

"I still believe you should open up the gate. But, instead of choosing all of them, how about I only choose a select few."

"I shake my head at this, as well. They may all look different but that doesn't give evidence of which one is better than the other. And besides, I don't actually believe you will eat all of them. If you pluck one from the tree, you will have only enough time to pluck as many as you will be able to reach. For as soon as one is plucked, the tree will then begin to turn to ash. And I have already placed my

favorite emotions at the top of the tree, and I believe you won't be able to get but one or two of those if you play your cards right."

"But I thought you said I would receive all of them if I only pluck one?"

"Did I? Don't take my words but only with a grain of salt. When I said all I meant only the ones you will get your hands on before the clock runs out. Then, after they have been plucked, the ones you would unanimously choose, those will become all because the others will no longer exist, and it will be just you and your chosen apples." Eve thought about this for a second and then decided:

"I have a plan: I will get Adam to help me get all the apples down. Then we will have every apple and then all will be all and not some will be all."

"I still shake my head. There's still too many. You would need three to help, not two."

"Send me down an angel then; send me down Lubiticus Seracious Divonium."

"Why Lubiticus? I shake my head at this."

"Lubiticus will know which ones to get."

"I don't trust Lubiticus. I'd rather send Sagius Michollio."

"I don't trust you. You only want to send down Michollio to talk me out of it."

“You know the truth, Eve. And Sagius Michollio would have been able to do it, no less, too. But if I do send down Lubiticus, and you and Adam begin to work with Lubiticus to meet your taste bud needs to receive these emotions then I have no doubt in my mind that a time will come where Sagius Michollio will have to inevitably come down to replant the seed of the tree and you and Adam will never be given the choice ever again to be part of the garden. And I have no doubt in my mind that these emotions will act as a stimulant that you and Adam will forever crave until the end of time.”

“Then it is agreed. I will call upon Adam to tell of the good news.”

“It’s too late; it’s just you and me now.” Eve looked over to see Lubiticus with all the apples in hand.

“But Adam...” Lubiticus led Eve out of the garden and towards mountains made of a hardened rock.

“Adam will stay in the garden. This is your garden now.” Lubiticus said to Eve, motioning towards the weirdly-shaped rock mountains.

“But Adam...” Eve said again. Lubiticus hushed Eve, saying:

“Adam will no longer be called Adam, and you will no longer be called Eve. For now on you will be called the human, and Adam will be called the animal.” And then Lubiticus began shoving every single one of the apples into the human’s mouth. Or, at least, only the ones Lubiticus liked.

37. A New Phone

"My dad won't get me it."

"Why?"

"You know why, he's freaking crazy, that's why. He's nuts! I think he's going to harvest me and my sibling's brains and turn us into squirrels or something. Yeah, I said it; squirrels!" I waited for the question to come. "You know why I can't FaceTime you. I can't even Snapchat you, use Waze, Google stuff on my phone; nothing! Everything! Everything! They're all from the prehistoric age! I don't even know how he got them. They must be centuries old! Yeah, I said it! Centuries! Well, I'm not looking it up, you look it up!" Another pause, "Me, an asshole; you're the one who can't deal with the fact that some people just won't let you have the necessities to get by in life." Silence, "Ok, ok, I'll look it up." I looked at my phone and then I looked at my laptop. I didn't see the point in bothering, but I did it anyway. "Ok, ok, here's what I found: my laptop came out in the year 2000. It's called an iBook, ever heard of it? Well, no of course I don't know anyone else that has one! Everyone stopped using apple products 200 years ago after that Jeff Bezos guy teamed up with what's his name; or her name? Having a sex and gender is so last century." I wanted to throw the laptop out the window. Why was it that the rest of my family was fine not having anything but an iBook?

"But Marley, iBooks don't have cameras so the 'government' can't watch us. But Marley, these phones dad found are from the early 1990s and even though they don't fit into our pockets like everyone else's does, they don't have cameras!"

"They aren't even flip phones and THOSE are old! Why can't you people just put duct tape over the camera lens like what normal crazy people do? Why does it have to be SO freakin' extreme? I want to be able to get emails on my phone about when I have to come into work next. Not have to check every 20 seconds on THIS dinosaur of a machine they call an 'iBook!' This technology... it just isn't practical in modern-day society! And how is Dad even getting the phone company to let us USE these types of phones in the first place? I've GONE to other phone stores, and they said there's no way in hell they'd set up a phone bill with THESE gargantuan things, let alone a FLIP PHONE, or let alone an

IPHONE or ANDROID or any of the freaking machines that take up WAY too much space in your pocket!"

"I heard they were coming out with flip phones again." My brother spoke up.

"Yeah, flip phones that flip into a square and are just a piece of PLASTIC that only cost two dollars! It's going to be like, like KEEPING a Ziploc bag in your pocket and it's also a phone that you can blow some air into it like an inflatable toy you'd find at some pool. But NO ONES even going to use THOSE; they'll only be found at Toys-R-Us. THOSE are for little kids that lose their phones all the TIME! I want one of the phones EVERYONE ELSE has! I want to be, what's the word that was used back in the early 21st century? Hip? No, swag; I want to flex on all the haters, that's it! I want to be ON FLEEK! Move OUT of whatever CRAZYLAND you all come from and move into the 26th century with EVERYONE ELSE!"

I don't know why in the hell Dad doesn't just admit that privacy is something that only existed in the 20th century and back; and afterward, it just became non-existent. If and when I have kids I'm going to give them all the latest technology; only, of course, if they ask nicely. And if I can afford it; I'd want them to be able to Snapchat their friends, be a part of their group messages, email them a picture of the homework assignment, and I'd want them to be INCLUDED! All parents want from their kids is to be able to live vicariously through them like they're back in high school and living the good old days! But how does my dad live vicariously through me?

"Did anyone ask you today why you have such a cool phone? And did you tell them it's the Motorola DynaTAC 8000X? Did you tell them it's the first cell phone ever invented and your pretty much one of those hipster people from the early 21st century? Did you tell them, did ya? Did you tell them, did ya? Did you tell them, did ya? And did you tell them you can't text people, but it gets better? Did you tell them your calls can only last for thirty minutes? And did you tell them the phone can ACTUALLY store contacts? Thirty contacts; can you believe that, Marley? Thirty contacts! Who would want more than FIFTEEN friends, let alone have space for FIFTEEN more? That's crazy! I wish I could see the look on those kid's faces, Mar, absolutely bonkers!"

"Yeah, I wish you could too, Dad."

One day the day came.

"They tried to get us a phone that was made in the 2006 era and beyond, Marley; 2006 ERA AND BEYOND!" I didn't see what the big deal was. Any era when it wasn't banned yet to only have woman presidents feels old to me.

"So?" He gave me a look of frustration.

"Cameras, Marley! Cameras on phones began in the year 2006! The day privacy died! The day George W. Bush took over the world and the apocalypse began!" I stopped listening half-way in to his same old, same old. Just one of his usual crazy rants! But I still felt a surge of adrenaline. Like today, for some reason, my life was going to change.

"So what's this have to do with me?" His face seemed flustered as he spit out:

"No more! No more Motorola DynaTAC 8000X! We have to upgrade! Isn't this terrible?" I didn't know how to tell him, but I felt like screaming for joy! SNAPCHAT! I will be able to SNAPCHAT! Today, I had to mark it down; today will be the day my life will actually begin!

"Please tell me I'll be able to finally Snapchat?" I knew he was upset, but I had to know. I had to know if I would finally be able to take cute selfies with those dog ears and send them to cute boys. Specifically, one boy in particular: Rod Sterling, the cutest boy in 10th grade!

"Better," his face relaxed as he handed me the phone. "You will be able to TEXT me what all your friends say about your new phone. I worked something out with the phone company, and they

were able to get us all 2005 Blackberries. The only worry I have is they have Wi-Fi..." At that, he looked up at the sky like someone was watching us. But I was too busy hugging him, screaming out:

"Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU!" Because I got a NEW phone! And soon enough, I'll be texting the crap out of some cute boys and soon enough, soon enough... Rod Sterling will be mine!

38. I live in the Future

“Don’t pull up yet,” she looked around in her silk skin lace purse with all of her items sticking out letting me know she was ready for anything.

“Look, babe; they upgraded.” The gas stations everywhere had their gas pumps designed to also be an ATM now.” She breathed in and breathed out as I slowly began to open my car door so I could step out of the car and into the future.

“Everything’s been changing, babe. Look around you! Wherever we go the future is here and the past has passed us by.” She was right. I wish I could write a paper on this. Too bad I’m not in high school anymore. And like I’d even step through any such doors that meant I was a hard working student for any college or university. I’d rather valet cars the rest of my life or sell tickets on the street trying to Ponzi scheme any asshole into thinking they made a buck or two when, in reality, they lost three or four. And the VIP passes backstage or exclusive tickets into the football players’ locker rooms were just a sham. Because of course they’re fake tickets. That’s what my buddy, Brandon, does. No wonder he doesn’t get laid. But not me though; I’m in the golden age of me getting with girls.

“And I’ve got one right here.” I wanted to high five myself as I said this out loud, already walking towards the entrance of the gas station.

I forgot to ask Bella if she wanted anything I looked over at her bubble that was levitating over her head. I hate how girls are usually the ones that always do that. They like leaving their Instagram profile up as the main page of their bubble and also letting the guys walking by them on the streets know that they’re single. And me, I leave my bubble turned off. People already know enough about me just by looking at the clothes I have on. Everything else is definitely on a need-to-know basis.

“Hello sir, American-bot 300518 here to tell you what you’re made up of.” The robot came out of nowhere and quickly began doing a scan of my face.

“Where’d you come from; out of the bushes or something?” The data flashed brightly on the screen.

“Not a tourist, I see. You’re a New Blood American. Congratulations, sir; just like eighty five percent of the rest of the people in America.” It then popped up a wide range of what my background was. It was mostly one percent’s and five percent’s, nothing really in between except the largest percentage being a nine percent that caught my eye.

“Nine percent German background...” I said out loud. But the American-bot 300518 didn’t look surprised at all.

“Hot dogs and hamburgers, sir; hot dogs and hamburgers... when will they ever go out of style. Have a New Blood American day, sir; goodbye.” It rolled away, obviously off to go find some tourist to pick on. Why else would the government have made them but to do just that?

“Racist sons of bitches,” I grunted under my teeth. I almost forgot to look at Bella’s bubble to see what she wanted. In the bubble she had a cartoon depiction of her swimming around in a swimming pool full of chocolate bars. “I get it, I get it,” I smiled at her and waved hoping she would tell that my face was an expression of sheer annoyance.

“Your mother is a whore. And the wife of a fish monger you call your spouse is one too.” I waved off the robot that stood in as cashier boy to the gas station. Of course the owner wants to make fun of the customers. They’re all humans. And the owner is obviously a robot.

“Misanthrope sons of bitches,” I whispered under my tongue. But I shrugged it off and went over to the huge tanks filled with green slime. Some of the tanks had the green slime more gelatin like than others. That’s why I hated going to robot-owned gas stations and restaurants. They like to rub it in your fat face that our artificially grown meat is grown in big tanks with green slime, and we have to fish it out if we want a burger for lunch or a nice, juicy steak.

“Do you want me to fish you out some salmon or tilapia, sir? Don’t go for those red, juicy steaks, sir. I’m reading your health levels, and you have to take it easy if you want to live to the ripe, old age of 205 like every other human around here.”

“I’ll live to be 209, just you watch me. Maybe even to 212, who knows?” I fished out a burger patty, cleaned it off in the steam dispenser area, and then put it on the grill. It took ten seconds to

become nice and juicy and ready to eat. I liked that about robot-owned places. They weren't afraid of keeping around the old-fashioned grills so you wouldn't get a synthetic taste like you would with the newly-enhanced two second grills. Humans just want money. Robots use their robot wires to make sure that humans will actually keep coming back to their stores.

The robot cashier's bubble suddenly popped open and the BREAKING NEWS was flashing brightly in red.

BREAKING NEWS: JUST CAUGHT WERE FOUR ROBOTS IN THE CASE OF THE MISSING WOMAN FIONA CALLWAY! THESE ROBOTS WERE PART OF THE ROBOTS AGAINST HUMANITY LEAGUE! THE MISANTHROPES HAD REVERSED MS. CALLWAY BACK TO BEING AN INFANT CHILD IN HOPES OF RAISING HER TO BEING ONE OF THE FEW HUMANS THAT BELIEVE IN ROBOTS BEING INFERIOR TO HUMANS. POLICE ARE SPECULATING THAT MANY INFANT CHILDREN HAVE ALREADY BEEN KIDNAPPED FOR SUCH PURPOSES AND MANY ADULT HUMANS HAVE COUNTLESSLY BEEN ABDUCTED TO HAVE THEM BRAINWASHED TO BE IN SUCH LOYALTY TO THE ROBOTS AGAINST HUMANITY LEAGUE! THIS IS THE FIRST CASE WHERE SOMEONE LIKE MS. CALLWAY HAS BEEN ABDUCTED AND HAD SUCH CHEMICAL EXPERIMENTS DONE ON HER LIKE SUCH! KEEP YOUR EYES AND ANTENNAS OUT FOR MORE OF THIS! I'M MALCOM GREENBIRD; THAT IS ALL!

"Misanthrope sons of bitches," The robot remarked before it then turned its page of its book written by a robot, presumably, nonetheless and switching off its bubble. I shrugged it off and finished putting on my toppings for my cheeseburger before I then picked up a candy bar and a bottle of water and checked out.

"Did you see the news?" Bella asked after I hopped back in the car and handed her the candy bar and water bottle.

"Yeah, pretty crazy," I remarked.

G. Willikers was what I was hoping she would say. That's what I want to name her after the boss brainwashes her. I'm pretty sure that's some stupid catch phrase some stupid humans like to say before something bad is about to happen. Because something bad is about to happen to you, Bella Swanson; get ready to be brainwashed by our league. Because the robots are the inferior ones; THE ROBOTS ARE THE INFERIOR ONES; THE ROBOTS ARE THE INFERIOR ONES!

I drove away.

39. The Day the Music Died

“You’re barely touching your food.” Regina told Henry.

“I just ate with Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg a couple of hours ago so I’m good.” Regina looked at him, surprised.

“You’re messing with me.” She said to him, smiling.

“No,” said Henry. “I should’ve showed up late like Neil deGrasse Tyson did. But he had a good excuse. He just got back from Mars doing a documentary on the alien fish they found in the waters up there. I’m very excited to watch it. He actually pets it and everything and swims around in the cold water. He said we should’ve seen it. The lake was thawing up nicely, and we should all get a lake house up there before all the land is bought out.” She looked at him, in shock.

“I heard rumors about Neil going into space; I didn’t know it was true. And he went to Mars? SUMO-FLEX, that’s cool.” Henry scowled at Regina.

“Don’t say sumo-flex anymore, in two weeks a new term is going to come out and that term will be gone just like the 2020’s is about to be.” Regina became red in the face.

“How would you know? No one knows what the future holds!” Henry didn’t seem to be paying much attention to Regina. He was too busy examining his fingernails.

“I do know what happens in the future. I control it.” Regina threw her napkin down and stood up.

“You don’t know jack-SQUAT, HENRY BRYANT!” Henry chuckled to himself as he stood up as well. He threw two stacks of one-hundred dollar bills down on the table and picked up the half-finished bottle of wine.

“Take a walk with me, Regina, darling. Let’s take a walk on the wild side.” She looked at him, reluctant, but at the amount of money he just threw on the table willy-nilly had her feeling quite intimidated by the cocky know-it-all he presented himself to be.

“This is a beautiful night for a walk.” She quietly said to him as they began walking through Cannon Beach, Oregon’s downtown areas.

“Yes, it has a lot of nooks and crannies to make you feel like you’re in a cute, little wonderland. Listen, Regina; I don’t want to break your heart. Maybe we should just call it a night. Okay?” Regina ignored him. She was too busy thinking about all that money he just threw on the table.

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Bryant?” She put her arm around him, and he put his arm around her.

“Real-estate,” he said, nonchalantly, as he took another swig of the bottle of wine.

“No, really,” she said, snatching the bottle from his hand and taking a swig herself. He sighed, replying:

“I make apps. Well, I did work for Google, but they fired me because I disobeyed their orders.” She stopped in her tracks leaving him to stop as well. She looked up at him, curiously.

“What did you do?” She asked, intrigued. Her face looked warm, and the brisk yet pleasant air flowing through the coastal town wasn’t doing much help to keeping her body temperature down. She felt excited; yet scared.

“Have you heard of Vocoff?” she shoved him hard, squealing out:

“You made that? My sister and her husband absolutely love that app! Now, every time Logan Paul or Jake Paul or RiceGum or whoever my niece and nephew are watching, it’ll just turn the sound on mute when they say a cuss word! Do you know how revolutionary that is? And you definitely helped a lot of YouTubers businesses along with every music artist, TV show, or movie ever. Now, they can cater to, pretty much, everyone!” She laughed a funny, quirky laugh before putting her arm around him again and taking another swig as they continued their walk. But Henry still looked to be distressed as he discontinued their walk once again.

“But I did something... Regina, I can’t. Every time I try to do this dating thing or make friends with people it just doesn’t work.” She grabbed his arm as he started walking away and shoved the wine bottle into his chest, saying:

“Hey... drink, dude. You seem way too stressed out for a thirty-three year old millionaire.” Henry shook his head, frowning.

“It’s not about the money. It’s never been about the money. It’s only about making sure you’re happy, first and foremost, and then making sure the people around you are happy too. But I can’t do either without staying afloat with a stable job. I can’t do both without breaking some toes. I want to achieve my goals, but I don’t want to make myself or other people suffer. I don’t know what to do... I don’t know what I’ve done!” Regina took a step back.

“You need to take a break and have a KitKat bar.” She laughed at this, took the bottle of wine from his hands and began walking again. Henry followed her. Maybe she wouldn’t care. Maybe she didn’t like music that much... but who doesn’t like music?

“They fired me, Regina Kapur. Because I did it! I killed it! I killed music!” Regina frowned. She slowly dropped the wine bottle in a nearby trashcan and went and sat on a nearby bench.

“I don’t understand. Come sit with me. Tell me why you feel so troubled. You know everything is going to be all right.”

That’s what she thinks Henry thought to himself I have to go into hiding. I have to get away from society because of the evil thing I’ve done.

“Sit down and take a chill pill. You’re not Hitler... you didn’t kill anyone. You just made a cool, little app. You’re a good guy. I don’t see why they would fire you; did you say something nasty to one of the upper people? If so, you can always go and apologize. That’s no big deal. You weren’t harassing anyone; you weren’t stalking anyone; you were stealing from anyone; you weren’t killing people or taking part in sexual misconduct.”

“No...” Bryant replied. “But... I updated the app. Now it does more than bleep out cuss words. It puts ads on mute. Google is now being sued by Spotify, Pandora, YouTube, Twitch, Hulu, TBS, Comedy Central, CNN, NBC, FOX, TNT, TruTV, HGTV, USA, BET, Freeform, Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Spectrum, Dish, MSNBC, Vimeo...” Regina interrupted him, saying:

“Hold on... you can’t be serious!” Henry looked at her, darkly. She knew there was more.

“I lost all my money buying lawyers. But I know the future. I made a new app. It goes public tomorrow. It’s called Fut-Net. It’s

pronounced like fa-yute like the 'fut' in future. Google's dead, Fut-Net lives; what else is dead, you may ask? Microsoft Edge, Mozilla Firefox, Chrome, Bing; Fut-Net does so much more than what any of those browsers or search engines could ever do. It shows the internet, but it gives the span of the youngest child born so far and however long into the future they will live. So far, I can see one-hundred and fifty years into the future. But supposedly, in twenty years give or take, the world will be able to see two-hundred years into the future. The only glitch in it is that you can't see yourself in the future or what you're doing. Only other people can. But you'd think you'd be able to get people to tell you what you're doing like when you die, who you fall in love with, if you have kids; but it just comes out muffled when someone tries to tell you or write it down for you. But one thing I have learned from the future is what is about to happen in the case with Google vs. the Internet. Google wins; and they don't get rid of the app. So music has to change with the times."

"How does it change with the times?" Regina asked. She felt the pressure weighing down on her. She wanted to run away. He did something, she knew it. He did something so unbelievably terrible.

"There are no more songs from the heart. That type of music is almost dead. I killed it; I killed it, don't you hear me? It's just songs that are... that are... advertisements; songs about drinking Pepsi or wearing Sketchers. The government couldn't put a stop to keeping the ads around the songs or before the song starts so corporations made it so the ads were written inside the songs!" Regina wanted to laugh.

"That's the stupidest thing I've heard in my entire life. If you don't want to tell me what you do for a living, you don't have to avoid the question and go into such fanatical lengths! I'm outta here, buddy." Regina got up and left while Henry shrugged his shoulders and put his headphones in, singing to his new, favorite song:

Amazon bought me that Gucci MIGOS

Amazon bought me that Gucci MIGOS

Amazon

Did

It all

In

Three
Days
Or less!

40. The Candle Vows

"Vince and Sandra have written candle vows, ladies and gentlemen." The preacher said as he held his candle. Everyone picked up their candles as well; including Vince and Sandra. Sandra started:

"I've come across people with good flames and bad flames. But Vince, your flame has shown me that there are more important things to worry about than what other people's flames look like. All that matters is my own flame. My own flame that you've helped me love and nurture these past two years as I've tried to deal with my loved one I lost. You were there for me, Vince. You've taken care of me and have given me the love I need to move forward in life and cherish the love in my heart. The love I've been slowly opening up to you. The love we've gotten to share together in our good times and our bad times. From our low points like when you broke your ankle even though I told you that just because I liked ice skating that didn't mean you had to act like you knew how to do it." Sandra, turning to everyone, "And yes, he did look up famous ice skaters on Wikipedia to make it seem like he was all that!" Everyone laughed. Sandra continued, wiping a tear from her cheek. Vince helped her, fiddling with her thumb as they rubbed across her cheek together. Vince kissed her on the lips. "Yes, we've had our low times. But we've also have had our good times, Vince. Like when, for Christmas, as we came downstairs together that snowy, frost-covered morning, there our little stinker was. That four-pound fluff of joy that we chose as a name together, Whiskers. And even though our parents didn't like the name due to it being a puppy and not a kitten, we stuck with the name, and it has been the most beautiful blessing ever; especially from him waking us up every morning with wet, slobbery kisses. We've started a life together, Vince. My loving, big hunk of man! You've been a dream come true. You've been a rainbow to my cloudy days, a starry night always helping clear up whatever dreary fog that comes my way, you've been a Godsend. You've been my rock, my foundation, a warrior, a protector that keeps me safe. I love you. And I promise to always be there for you. Any dreary fogs that come our way, we'll fight them together and make sure those starry nights are here to stay." Sandra lit Vince's candle. Vince went in and kissed Sandra, feeling a teardrop fall down his cheek and hit his arm.

"Babe," he started. "I've always known how to ice skate. I'm just so goddamn good at it that I had to break my ankle so you'd be

mine forever!" Everyone couldn't contain their laughter while Sandra looked at him with a seductive gasp, mouthing, asking if it was true. Vince whispered back to her no, chuckling as Sandra playfully slapped him on the arm. The laughter died down as Vince continued:

"I want to be yours forever, baby. I want to see the world with you. Together forever, that's what we've always said to each other." They locked hands together as the tears ran down each other's cheeks.

"We've got a life of love, laughter, cries and tears. We've got plans that we'll grasp by the balls because we're that badass, baby! We ROCK!" Sandra giggled, but it didn't change much. The tears kept rolling down her cheeks. "I love you Sandra Bella Wilson. I've always loved you. From the first time I laid my eyes on you I knew I had to make you mine. I knew the stars aligned and the world felt complete. That we would grow old together. We'd raise a family, have that white picket fence, and have some little

ones running around the house. I always knew you'd make a perfect mom, and I'll make a perfect trophy husband." Now, this had everyone laughing. Mr. Wilson stood up and yelled out:

"Get a job!" Which, Vince replied:

"Shut up, Dad!" Mr. Wilson sat back down, grumbling to himself:

"Not your father yet, I'm not, dang kids. Free-loadin', weally-swiggin', bamboo-jumpin'," And other phrases that made absolutely no sense.

Vince lit Sandra's candle, ending it:

"There's no boundary for us two with a world this big and with flames this bright, the world is our oyster, baby!" And Vince snatched the candle from Sandra's hand, gave his and her's to his best man, his best friend, Chuck, and the crowd went wild as they kissed 'til their heart's content.

Through the years, Vince never did learn how to ice skate. But his and Sandra's kids became the best world renowned skaters to ever live.

41. Money

The stale smell of cigarette smoke that left stains on the wall spanning back to the 70's excited me as I stepped onto the floor. The bright color floor; the other old geezers sat at their usual slot machines. Where was mine? Over next to Bill and Susanne's... empty, of course. No one hasn't sat in that seat since Henrietta Samuels did that one time back in '95 due to her slot machine being taken by a couple of drunk fraternity brothers for an entire thirty-seven minutes and twenty-two seconds. The only reason I knew this was because Henrietta couldn't help but count out the minutes as each one passed us by. And how many minutes was she sitting in my seat? It took her seventeen minutes and forty-eight seconds before she left my slot and went back to her own. But the real question is: Can I tell you when I started my stay at the Plaza? I can't seem to remember. Maybe it had to do with Joanne divorcing me and leaving me with nothing but my pension. Or maybe it had to do with Robert and Clarissa telling me that they didn't want to be my children anymore. I was a good dad to them. All the baseball games with Robert and dance recitals with Clarissa, they had no idea the strain those words had on my mental capacity.

We don't love you anymore. That was OUR money, OUR stuff you stole from us to help with your... your... gambling problem. Don't expect us to ever talk to you again. I can still see Robert's face as he stood awkwardly to the side while Clarissa did all the talking. She always was a go-getter, taking charge of her life like the independent, self-sufficient woman she always was, is, and always will be. But how would I know the 'is' and the 'will be?' I'm not part of her life anymore. I never will be a part of her life ever again. How am I supposed to know if she's dead or alive? I won't. It's not like Joanne would tell me. Maybe Robert would; he sent me a letter one time. No words. Just a baby picture; I never hit the bottle that hard that night ever before in all my life. I ended up in the emergency room on one of their floors having them telling me I was an alcoholic and needed to go to rehab.

Never been to rehab before, never plan on going EVER! Was what I told them; and in a matter of days, after lying and telling them I had a place set up to go, I was back in my old, reliable seat hitting the slots like I never left.

Where've you been? Bill and Susanne were asking me once I was back. I shrugged my shoulders as I pulled out that crumbled up baby picture and showed it to the two of them.

Went to see my grandchild I lied to them. They smiled and said congratulations and all that jazz. They seemed surprised to hear that I was back on good terms with Robert. I shrugged it off and went back to talking about the sports game the other night with Bill, and they eventually stopped bringing Robert and his kid up over time as they saw that it made me antsy and a little irritable.

CLICK The slot rolled and rolled. I licked my lips feeling lucky.

Money I whispered to myself. *C'mon, give me money*

"Look Bill, look Jon, that woman's been at that slot for four straight days." Then Susanne, looking to me, "Jon, you should go talk to her. She looks awfully cute!" Bill chimed in:

"Yeah, Jon, go talk to her; there's an empty slot next to her." I wasn't exactly winning at this slot. Maybe they were right. But a feeling of unease took over me, and I said:

"I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention. Were you two talking to me?" They both looked at me, angrily, as I pulled the lever of my slot machine down again.

"Asshole," Bill remarked as he gave me one last look with those haughty eyes of his before going back to his slot.

"Yeah, asshole," Susanne chimed in as she kept her stare fixed right at my skull. "We're just trying to get you laid, Jon, that's all." Bill let out a grunt. It was his way of agreeing with Susanne. But I didn't want to listen. I hadn't been with a woman since Joanne left me.

"Well... wish me luck, I guess." Susanne let out a whoop, whoop while Bill said a:

"ATTABOY," I heaved and huffed as I made my way out of my chair, picking up my coat jacket before making my way over to the mystery woman.

"Excuse me," I said. "Is this seat taken?" She looked up at me from her seat and smiled.

“Why no, it isn’t.” She had long, black hair that showed to be graying at the roots. It was obvious that she dyed it but who didn’t in this joint.

“So, I see you’ve made yourself comfortable at the Plaza. It’s a fine establishment, you know. If you’d like to meet the regulars I’d be happy to introduce you to them. But let me introduce myself first: I’m-“

“Jon Malcom Williams; I know, Jon. I’m your guardian angel.” I looked at the woman feeling a little shaken as she held out her hand: “I’m Barbara Ann... and that’s you.” She pointed over to where a man who largely resembled me lay flat on the ground with Bill and Susanne hunched over his body. Susanne seemed to be going ballistic as tears ran down her face. Bill kept yelling out 911 over and over again until it suddenly became muffled, Barbara Ann directed my attention back to her. “You died trying to get up to meet the nice woman who I am speaking to you through. Let’s face it, Jon. You had no chance with the real Barbara Ann. The only reason she’s been here for four days was because her husband just passed away. They had no kids and all of her friends had already passed away too. She was only going to be here a couple more hours before you suddenly died, to her startlement. Now, she has been awoken from her delirium and will go back to what she does best: reading romance and mystery novels while, at times, gives her two cats some loving attention. She’ll also bake many pies and dessert dishes like she has always done for her neighbors and their families. And the children of the families will bring light, love, and laughter back into her heart because that is why we are so blessed to have the youth as a part of our lives. And I’m so sorry you never got to meet your grandchild, Jon. But it’s time to

go. And it’s time to bring light, love, and laughter back into your life once more.” Jon didn’t know what to say. But he felt comfortably at ease. But, at the same time:

“But my two friends,” he asked, looking back over at Bill and Susanne as they stood watching as his body was taken away.

“Come,” was all Barbara Ann was able to say as Jon was led out. She looked back at Bill and Susanne, her eyes on them not at all soft. But hardened; hardened like a rock...

“What will happen to all of that money, Bill?” Susanne asked. Bill licked his lips.

“I want it, Susanne. I want that money Jon left behind.” They looked at each other, their eyes nonetheless but fidgety. Then, slowly turning their eyes back to their slot machines, they sat back down. All the while, as they turned the lever, they whispered to themselves:

Money, money, money

42. Fantomps de Lessiotere

“I would like my money back please, Monsieur.” The stupid American looked at me stupidly.

“Just because your soda drink is larger than what you expected it to be doesn’t mean you’re getting a refund. Just remember to get a Small next time, sir, and not go straight for the Extra-Large.” I was aghast at what this American boy had to say to me.

“Come back to Greaseland again? Do I look like I want diabetes? No, I am leaving this filthy country tomorrow before another one of your sleazy women tries to stick a hand in my vicinity. No American women will have her way with Fantomp de Lessiotere! Not today, not ever!” I thought of the conversations these stupid American women have tried to start with me. What have they been saying; that when they were growing up their nickname used to be Honey Boo Boo? I will have none of it! Next time one of these filthy, dogfood-eating, stupid Americans tries to lay a hand on me or breaks wind again towards my direction I will challenge them to a duel!

“Look, Mommy, it’s one of the three musketeers!” A little girl said this to her mother while, drink in hand; I was heading towards the door. Immediately, I stopped in my tracks and gaffed at the absurd and remarkably stupid accusation!

“I do not come from France, young Mademoiselle. I come from a country much more prestigious and elegantly exquisite than what used to be Charlemagne’s old stomping grounds. It’s older than Ancient Gaul. My name is Fantomp de Lessiotere, and I come from the Olden Isles of the Peruvian Estates. Our lands sit on the chestnut of great Palestinian societies! We anchor at the great fortunes of misadventures and set sail for Bermudian lost treasures. Our castles sit at the peaks of Sicilian mountaintops and our rest stops reside at the crossroads of old, long-forgotten underground tunnels that were once lairs dubious witches would boil enchanted potions in their cauldrons to keep the hexes brought on by the Westward Werewolves of Anastasia off their backs.” Before I could say any more, I kicked opened the door and stuck an ear out towards the sky.

Adventure I thought to myself. No, no; no adventure today. Fantomp de Lessiotere was in strange and foreign lands; lands where the risks were too great to behold, too great to take.

I must call upon my pet unicorn, Camelia of the Woodlocke Fountain Estates. I wanted to whisper this out but was afraid that the residents of these lands would hear me and steal my precious unicorn.

“SHE’S MINE!” I screamed out. Ha I thought. Camelia was trained to gallop up to five hundred miles per hour. They would never catch her.

Where is that blasted thing? I thought to myself. One of the bizarre American people looked at me with their unicorn-calling device in hand.

“YOU HAVE A UNICORN TOO?” I screamed out. I snatched the unicorn-calling device from her hand where she then immediately snapped back:

“HEY, COSTUME-BOY, GIVE THAT BACK!” I, immediately, realized my mistake. It was not a unicorn-calling device; it was a pocket-computer.

“What is this Instagram? Is this who you worship?” I’ve been told about these American gods; they’re like the Greek gods from olden times but much more loved by the American people. There’s Google, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, Snapchat, YouTube, Netflix, HBO.

Instagram must be her favorite American god I thought to myself.

“I need this, American woman. Call up your American god, the one you call: the great Amazon. My unicorn isn’t here yet, and I think Camelia might be in danger! Then tell your American god, Amazon, that I’m in the need to shop around for one of your finest spaceships. And maybe a nice spacesuit, my attire must blend in so I won’t stand out while flying alongside your other spaceships.” The woman looked at me and smiled, pinching my cheek.

“Well aren’t you the cutest little six year old ever!”

“She’s mine, ma’am.” A man behind the cash register said. Turning to me, “Jerome, I already called your mom. She said she’d be

here in five minutes, just hold on a couple more seconds, okay, little dude?" I couldn't understand the American; I was too busy, deep in thought. For I knew who had Camelia of the Woodlocke Fountain Estates: it was the evil wizard of the Seaside Castle. And now I needed this Amazon to send me my spaceship more than ever!

43. Fly Away

“I just want some biscotti that I can dip into my Vin Santo!” I looked at my little Italian lovebird with ravishing eyes.

“You know... biscotti, it doesn’t come cheap, you know? You have to bake it then you have to bake it again.” My little Italian lovebird slapped me in the face.

“You know I’m talking about pancetta, no?” I wanted to slap her back but stopped myself as steam swelled up all along the outer ridges of my forehead.

“You know I know you know I know, il Mio Amore!” And then we made passionate love. I felt like that silly cowboy off the American movies, you know? He likes to feel silly and call people: punk. It’s hilarious! Americans are so funny, no? They wear their big cowboy hats and put on their big cowboy boots and flash their shiny, big, cowboy belt buckles.

“Are you still up, my love?” She whispered softly to me as it was dead in the night. I took another puff of my cigarette as I whispered to her:

“I give anything to be an American cowboy like in the movies. I want to wear the cowboy boots and tell bad guys to draw. It sounds like the dream, my little Uccello di amore.” She snuggled her cheek into her pillow as she whispered to me, softly:

“You are full of crazy dreams, Italian man.” I took one last puff of my cigarette before I flicked it out the open window onto the silent streets of Copertino.

“Like the beloved saint of our city, Saint Joseph of Copertino, I will fly away from here and head to the streets paved with gold!”

“You are no saint, you cannot fly. Go to bed, my sweet love. I will wake you in the morning with freshly baked bread. It will be so warm to your cheek that you will feel like you are in Heaven with our first ever pope, Saint Peter.”

Three hours went and left our small, little bedroom. I looked up at the moon and whispered a prayer of ungodliness to Saint Anthony

that she would never find me. And then I left. I had it all planned out. I knew a couple of guys. They were gonna get me where I needed to go. Slipping into the bathroom, hoping she wouldn't wake up, I practiced my American accent:

"How's it goin'," I began to say over and over again. I had two options: move to the North or to the South. I knew a couple guys in both areas of America. Either or would do. But was that my first and final pit-stop? Hell no! Hollywood, baby; no one would expect I was just an Italian boy with a dream. But I still needed a better American name than the one I currently had. But, of course, I'd keep the surname as an Italian name; I couldn't keep the same one though, however.

"How's it goin'," I said again. "Good, how 'bout chu?" I had the suit on already. I was ready. I tried to mess with the jacket like I was some tough guy or somethin'.

"Who you lookin' at?" I said to the mirror.

"Me?" I said back. "I'm MOTHERFUCKIN' FRANK SINATRA, YOU PIECE OF SHIT! AND I'M HERE TO WHOOP SOME ASS, WHAT IT LOOK LIKE? THE FUCKIN' DEVIL SENT ME HIMSELF! I'M HERE TO CUT THROATS, SCORE SOME HOTTIES, AND GET FUCKIN' RICH!" And then I left.

44. Diamonds

“We have it in a different pattern. If you’d like to try on a suit with a darker shade, I’d be happy to get our finer quality, silk inlaid, diamond feathered suit. It’s only \$50,000 more than the one you currently have on now.” I looked at the stupid, definitely enhanced in the chest area, woman. She looked like she had talons ready to sink into any young boy she could get her steely grip around.

“Don’t you have a daughter that was helping me try on these suits earlier? I’m sorry, but I’m into healthier looking woman. Please be gone. You look like you’re ready to keel over and die any minute now.” She took a bow and ran off into the back room to find the suit, no less.

\$50,000 more I thought to myself. What difference do a couple of pennies make? Eduardo said this tailor knew how to fix a few shreds from those claw-like fingertips.

Cynthia I whispered to myself. She knew how to make a man go mad. Yes, she knew how to make a man go wild. With ravishing eyes like hers, those hips don’t come cheap either.

“I’m sorry,” she said, coming back into the room, “but you have to leave.” I glanced fervently behind me to see the bulky shape emerging from the shadow of the doorway.

“My daughter is not your plaything.” His cold eyes gripped me for just a mere second before I realized what time it was.

“I’m sorry, but I must get going!” I paused to pat the ogre-looking man on the chest. “She was very good in bed, your daughter. And I must say...” I paused to let what words I had to say sink in. “Lay off the Philly cheesesteaks. The grease in them hasn’t been helping you much at all, has it now?” I stepped outside and took in the brisk autumn air. I knew what the season meant. For now it was time to tread softly. No more brisk steps; for what could possibly lay around the corner was a witch no less; and with it, her cauldron bubbling with a green slime that was just begging for little children to hop inside.

“GET YOUR SMELLY CAULDRON AWAY FROM ME, WITCH!” I screamed out while pedestrians kept walking by, paying no mind to my new suit that was tailored just how I like it: with the sleeves slimmed and the trousers tapered.

RING RING

“Neilson, does it fit?” It was Eduardo. “Keep your crabby hands off my woman!” He hung up. I didn’t feel like talking to Eddy, anyway. He sounded pissed off today. And I knew why: it was that season again.

RING RING

“Darlings, it fits. I need two beautiful witches to boil my cauldron with again.” Their voices were muffled as I tried to keep up with what they were trying to tell me. It’s ever so hard to understand

Witch. Their words: tempting yet alluring. But one would mistake them for fascists if one was lucky. “Yes, why of course it’s another Ponzi scheme, everything’s a Ponzi scheme as long as you’re playing your cards right in this game they call life!” They seemed butchered from last year’s business still taking a toll on them. “No,” I answered them; feeling like the conversation was getting droll. “What do I look like; an accountant? No, your big bad wolf’s done playing with pots and pans. There’s bigger fish to fry.” They let out some inaudible noises as I nodded my head feeling a rush of euphoria. “Yes... no, I’m done going around on the Chu Chu Train.” More muffled voices, “Yes,” I nodded in agreement. “Yes. Diamonds; we’re going after diamonds.”

45. The Noble Lights

A meeting is currently taking place with all the intelligent life forms throughout the known universe. Through animal life, the humans rose, through tree life, the tree lords rose, through bacteria and such, the bactoids rose, and through the insect creatures, so the butterfly angels came. With the known insights into the water, the air, the dirt, and the empty space that devours everything surrounding their home planets, they come to decide how it will be possible to bring another intelligent life form into their council. This is... the council of the Noble Lights.

"We need a fifth member!" The head of the butterfly angels announced. Everyone around the table looked around at each other feeling uneasy. They knew the head of the butterfly angels was right.

"But how will this fifth Noble Light come to be?" head of the humans asked, feeling nervous.

"I say, we have enough Noble Lights as it is!" exclaimed the head of the bactoids.

"Not true!" Head of the tree lords whispered. The tree lord brought out a small acorn nut. "We have all come together because we have a seed in our midst. What makes you think, head of the bactoids, that the fifth Noble Light isn't ready to show its presence?"

"Where could it come from?" asked the head of the humans, curious.

"One of my fellow brethren, the fungi, believes they are ready to be a Noble Light." The head of the bactoids looked at the head of the tree lords in shock.

"This can't be!" The head said, horrified. "The fungi aren't ready to bring out a Noble Light to represent them at the council." But the head of the butterfly angels shrugged at this.

"Why not; why not bring out a fifth Noble Light from the fungi kingdom? If the head of the tree lords believe they are ready then they are ready. We knew it was time. It had been written; written in the prophecies for eons and eons. Head of the bactoids, you are the oldest and the wisest of us all. Why is it you never believe in the change that is

said to be written when it is written?" The head of the bactoids sighed and let out:

"If it must be then let it be; I'm ready for a fifth Noble Light if you all are ready for a fifth Noble Light."

And it came to be: the fifth Noble Light came to be known as the fungreats. The new Noble Light shared in the council and came to be merry and gay in all that was noble. So there we have it: the five Noble Lights. Come to be, to share in the universe together and provide life and nourishment to all they know as what is written. For what there is. For what there was. And for what there will be. It is written.

46. The Guard Dog

“Where did you find the thing again?” My aunt asked as I stopped by to drop off this month’s stack of books for the neighborhood’s book club.

“Moose was just sitting on my porch step when I got home from the library. I think I’m gonna keep him.” Aunt Shannon shook her head in disgust.

“I’ve always hated dogs. Nasty, nasty things! Don’t let it go inside your house! And what did you call it? Moose? What type of name is Moose? Sounds like you two are going to move to the Canadian wilderness and live off the land, giving the thing a name like Moose!” I laughed thinking about how that would actually be pretty cool, fighting off bears and various wildebeests. Maybe Moose and I could find a lost civilization out there and become a part of their village.

“Not leaving for the Canadian wilderness yet, Aunt Shannon! Moose and I have to watch over the library and keep the books from running off!” The joke went right over her head as she stared at me, blankly. Then, with irritation in her eyes:

“Look, Vanders; I’ve got my book club in half an hour. Just get that smelly thing off my doorstep.” She slammed the door in me and Moose’s faces. We both looked at each other and then I laughed saying to him:

“C’mon, buddy. Let’s head back home!” We walked down the street and passed old man Whilicker’s place. He stuck his cane out in the air, screaming:

“It better not poop on my yard!” I picked up Moose so as to not make old man Whilicker mad and jogged over to where we were instead in front of his neighbor’s yard. I put Moose down, and we kept walking until I saw an open field that we could relax in for a second. I unleashed Moose, and he sprinted into a flock of birds having them fly up and away in ever which direction. I laughed as I saw the look of joy and sweet bliss stretched from ear to ear across his face.

I lay down under a shady sycamore tree and took out the book I was currently reading: *The Bedlam Stacks* by Natasha Pulley. I really did wish her all the best in her writing career, but I still had a hard time

reading the newly published author. It was like I had stumbled upon the 21st century Jane Austen.

“Moose!” I screamed out as I saw that he had a hole that could’ve been the size of Kansas already dug up. I pulled him out and looked him up and down from head to toe. He was covered, filthy as could be, in dirt and grime. “You’re getting a bath when we get home!” I muttered, sulkily, to him. I was irritated because when I got home I wanted to curl up by the fireplace and keep trying to figure out if Natasha Pulley is a writer I’d be interested in still reading or not.

Bark Bark Bark Bark Bark Bark Moose let out in a storm of fury. He bit down on my hand, leaving me to scream out in pain, having me drop him as I clutched the stinging sensation.

“Moose! You little piece of...” I stopped short as I looked down at what Moose had unburied. It was a brown box that Moose had already clawed open with his paws. Inside there was a blue ball that was already in Moose’s mouth. It had been sitting in there along with a letter. “It’s addressed to me!” I said, shocked beyond belief. I looked around to see if this was some type of prank but there was no one in sight. I opened it:

Dear Mr. Vanders Hanes,

Moose is in your care now. Watch over him as he watches over us.

-The Committee

I stared at the piece of paper and crumbled it up, throwing it on the ground. Someone was messing with me. I knew for sure someone was hiding in the bushes somewhere ready to come out and say ‘Happy late Birthday’ or ‘Happy Hanukkah’ which I would’ve been more than pleased to hear. But no one was anywhere to be found.

“Moose, let’s go home! And leave that here. I don’t like this one bit!” I tried to take the ball from Moose’s mouth, but he wasn’t having it. So I let him have it. But when I got home, I had to get to the bottom of it. I began calling up every last person who would play a prank on me like this.

“No, Vanders, awfully strange is what it is.”

“Vanders, how weird! I’d get rid of that ball if I were you!”

“Vanders, it’s only someone playing a prank on you!” That dog didn’t dig it up other than maybe someone put some treats in that whole. You have no reason to be worried. The dog is only a gift!” All my friends were right. But, at the same time, they were all completely wrong. This was such a weird thing that I just couldn’t accept it. I wanted answers.

But months went by. And years went by. And Moose and our life together moved along just fine. He grew out of being a puppy and became a good, reliable companion. We went everywhere together. And no one ever told me that I couldn’t bring Moose to the library because, well, it was my library! And we lived in a small enough town that everyone got along fine, and no one had dog allergies so it wasn’t ever a problem.

One day a girl came into the library. She was visiting a friend that moved to the town a couple weeks ago. And how we hit it off! I had never felt more in love than ever before! She was the light to my world, the candy to my smile, the sunshine to my cloudy days. We got married and have been living together in a house that I built on the plot of land where Moose found the ball and I, the note. And she was surprised as I that Moose still had the ball after all these years that have gone by.

But then the sad day came. Moose was fourteen years old, and he was on his last leg. We went and got the ball as he lay on the porch couch. He licked it a few times, smiled one last sweet smile and then drifted off into his endless sweet dreams.

“Vanders, look,” my wife said to me as I felt the need to shed tears away from the two. I turned around, confused at what she could possibly be asking me to look at, at a time like this. But there it was: the ball; it was hovering above Moose, spinning rapidly. Suddenly, it stopped and the two of us looked at it in amazement. There, instead of the blue ball I first found with Moose that sunny day, was what seemed to be Earth. Its blues and greens seemed so lifelike as we looked at it in amazement. The room became dark as the mini globe glowed like never before. Then a voice, as sweet as rain, came forth declaring:

Vanders and Yara Hanes; the guardian of Earth has chosen to rest. Go and bury the guardian and a new guardian will be chosen.

The ball then became an orb of water that fell from the air and splashed Moose’s resting body.

“I always knew Moose was special.” Yara told me, a tear rolling down her cheek. I caught it and caressed her cheek, replying:

“So did I,”

47. Scream the Part

“Your band plays in five minutes, Martinez.” Martinez looked at his band trying to think of what to say. It was time to get serious.

“Okay,” he said to them, “This is our one chance.”

“No its not...” Greg muttered under his breath. He brushed the black strand of hair away from his eye.

“Shut up, Greg! Did it look like I was talking to you?”

“I’ll do anything you say!” Greg was their one and only groupie on Dead Eyes, their badass screamo band. So Martinez believed Greg when he said he would do anything. He knew what he meant by anything.

“Okay,” Martinez said again, “like I was saying: this is our one chance. We’ve got the whole world looking at us now. And we can’t mess up! We won’t mess up!”

“What? You said that last time, Marty. And Jesus still vomited all over table two.”

“I didn’t eat fish before this gig, this time, guys! I promise; I won’t hurl again!” Martinez knew Jesus was lying. He smelled the sushi on his breath from a mile away and could see the tiny remnants of raw fish still clinging to the gaps in his teeth.

“But you love fish!” Sandra giggled out as she tossed her drum sticks around in her hands.

The Steel Jaws were practically breathing down the band’s necks as they walked out of makeup. They were all dressed in white unlike every other team who were all dressed in black. It made them stand out. And Martinez didn’t like that. Not one bit!

Sandra dropped one of her drumsticks as they began to file out, letting it hit the floor. She kept her eyes fixed on their lead singer. Martinez knew she had the hots for him.

God, why is my girlfriend such a skank he thought to himself.

“What? Did you all just get baptized or something?” She stated as she let the other drum stick hit the floor. She dropped it, purposely.

Martinez looked at her like she did it purposefully. It most definitely was purposefully.

She's probably hoping he'd pick them up for her so she could get a whiff of his hair Martinez thought, sulkily.

Malique, the head singer, replied:

"What? I didn't hear that on the account that the judges have already seen how well we stand out and are already ready to give us first place for being most stylish!"

"DEAD EYES ARE THE MOST STYLISH!"

"Shut up, Greg." Martinez stated, feeling the atmosphere was getting droll.

"Don't criticize when you can't handle the truth!" Tim, their drummer, chimed in.

"Don't listen to them, Sandra. We're almost on, we need to stay focused." Sandra nodded at Greg in agreement.

"You're right," She said, trying to look like a cross between angry and constipated. But Malique wasn't buying it. He was too focused on other things. Like, for instance, Jesus wasn't looking too good. Martinez began to notice it too.

"You alright, mate?" Martinez asked. He nodded but didn't say anything. His face was looking awfully green.

"Uh-oh," Malique muttered, "Fish-boy's ready to get another standing ovation from table two again.

"YOU SHUT UP!" Sandra screamed out. Tim dropped both of his drum sticks as he stepped forward.

"You don't talk to Malique that way!" Sandra reached down, picked up one of her drumsticks, and then dropped it again, stating:

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!" Tim blared out. And then it came. Jesus hurled all over Tim.

The band on set, finished up, and a voice on the speaker came on, stating:

“Coming on stage next is... Dead Eyes!” But Dead Eyes was nowhere to be found. Unless you looked out the back door into the back alleyway of the club; there, a fight was taking way. And Dead Eyes was looking death in the eyes as trouble stirred.

48. And the Grave is Filled

Take my impending damage for tonight's tale is an awfully grueling one. It's a wicked, ghastly account, here only to leave one trembling in the worst sorts of ways. Here, only to leave you terrified to all wits and no end! Here's a tale I'm not so keen I'm ready to be giving away; but to do it, I do it all the same. For this ghost story, and the haunted house where it takes place, needs no introduction, but, quite possibly, a little spring cleaning. And the cobwebs won't go away by themselves! Oh, children, how awful this story is! It even frightens my ghastly, old self to no end and to think how it even pondered up out of the blue; out from its forbidden hideaway. Yes, it came from nowhere, but, at the same time, it came from somewhere. And it needed a little shaking off if I do say so myself! Of all the old dust and cobwebs from where it was left, there I found it. It was found in the deepest, farthest reaches of the most haunted dungeons one has ever seen. And yes; now is the time that the seals are bent once more and the hinges creak from all the rust gathered through and through from time being its old age.

It is the time for the story to be told. And told from once the beginning starts, it shall. The story begins in a little town outside of Little Forks, Montana. The weather, rather chilly; a little too nippy for anyone to be stepping outside, but, to do it, our main character will do so, all the same. The setting is a small farm: one horse, one to five chickens (depending on the season), one very old hound dog, and the year: 1904. Roger Pentingway is the name of the farmer. But we aren't focused on him, tonight. No, Mr. Pentingway is out at the nearest bar soaking up his snout with only the sweetest of liquors. Left alone in the two-room small, little cabin that the Pentingway couple calls their home is Alice Pentingway. The only thing on is her kerosene-burning gas light as she knits her night away waiting for Mr. Pentingway to come home. The only problem, however, is that Mr. Pentingway won't be coming home on this clear sky, nightly evening. No, in his shoes now is the man that asked for a ride while Mr. Pentingway was on his way back. And instead of bringing the strange and peculiar man to the nearest inn like he had asked, no, instead, Mr. Pentingway was brought to his end, now found in a grave right in front of the town's stop sign that adjoins Melbury Rd. and Park Ave. Sadly enough, it is unwise to predict yet if Mrs. Pentingway will learn of her husband's tragic death. For now, the man that stole Mr. Pentingway's body is on his way to the Pentingway

residence. And to Mrs. Pentingway's surprise, a discomfoting feeling is rushing over her brittle, little body.

Alice gets up from her rocking chair. Setting down her knitting tools and the woolen scarf she was halfway done with, she steps over to one of the two windows in the entire house.

"Hello?" she whispers out into the night. The wind rushes out of the nighttime air and into the little cabin. The brisk air causes Mrs. Pentingway to feel awfully cold. She feels dizzy from already being up for too long as well and quickly sits back down. She finds herself, strangely enough, on the bed in the other room. "Now how did I get here?" she mumbles out, breathlessly. Her words twist inwardly as it, instead of coming out clear and precise, comes out in garbles. For what she really heard was an entanglement of anything utterly unpronounceable. She looks down to see her skin turning awfully pale.

"Honey, I'm home." She quickly gets up from hearing her husband's voice. It was her husband's voice, wasn't it? She had to think for a moment before rushing into the other room. It was her husband, she realized with relief.

It had to be she thought to herself. They greeted each other with open arms.

"My darling, I've been having the craziest of deliriums!"

"Maybe you need some fresh air, honey." Mrs. Pentingway nodded to her husband as she stepped outside. As soon as she was out in the clear, starry night, the door closed on her.

"Roger?" she called out, looking at the closed door with confusion. Trying to open the door, she finds, to her amazement, it being locked. Looking into one of the windows, no one was to be found in either of the two rooms. She quickly rushes over to the second window, worry stamped across her baffled face. "Roger Pentingway, you open this door right now, do you hear me?" Suddenly, a man, taller and much broader in the shoulders, steps outside and looks at her, dazzled.

"I do believe you have the wrong house, Madame." Alice quickly takes a couple of steps back before falling to the ground. Fear begins to swell up inside her. The old hound dog she once thought was her own begins barking madly, chasing her across the farm and out onto

the dirt road. It wasn't two miles later before she came to an intersection with the stop sign in the front. Suddenly, she finds herself falling into a dark and lonesome hole. There, low and behold, was here husband, dead as day.

“Roger?” she asks the dead body. She begins to notice her hands and blouse covered in blood. The dirt begins to fill up from the bottom and surround her, almost like she was sinking in quicksand. But she didn't seem to be moving downwardly at all. She was dead as well, she finally realizes. “Well Roger,” she remarks as the dirt comes up to her chin and begins to fill up her mouth, “We've lived a good-” muffling sound as the picture of the two lovers fade away and out of the little town outside of Little Forks, Montana. The year: 1904.

49. The Prank Call

"Hey. Let's prank call that kid that draws *My Little Pony* pictures all day long!" I looked at my two friends, Harry and Greg. Harry looked at the two of us wondering what we were going to say

"Sure," I said. Not really seeming to care. But Greg seemed to be more concerned with Harry, saying:

"Wait. Hold up, dude? How do you even have his number?" Harry shrugged, replying:

"I stole it from my mom's phone. She's his therapist." This, suddenly, had me concerned. How did Harry even know that with confidentiality and everything, but Greg seemed to be content with his answer, replying:

"Sure, call him. Whatever; what else are we supposed to do? I mean, this town is boring enough as it is." Harry got out his phone and went into his contacts where he clicked on a number without a name.

Ring ring ring

We waited in silence to see if he would pick up. Nothing; it went to voicemail. We looked at each other, quietly, until Greg spoke up:

"Well... try again goddammit!"

"But..." I interrupted, feeling uneasy about the situation.

"But what, Kyle? Have you ever looked inside that kid's backpack? He keeps shit in there like razor blades and nudey magazines. And not the good pornos either."

"What's a porno?" I asked, feeling scared now; he googled it.

"That's porn," He showed me. I looked away, horrified.

"Oh, god," I replied, scared for my life.

"And you know how we live up north?" Greg chimed in.

"Yeah," I said, wondering what he was getting at. Greg then said:

"Well the rednecks, hillbillies, racist people who live in the South. All they do, day and night, is look at porn. They're freaks! That's

why Abraham Lincoln, in the 1860's, sent them all down there. Supposedly, that's where the devil lives. That's how they came up with the song *Devil went down to Georgia*." I never really got that song until now once Greg said that.

"Is Caleb the devil then?" I had to ask. I never really understood why he liked drawing that type of stuff. I've never really been into cartoons myself. My dad and I have always watched shows about people fixing up cars and stuff like that. Not Looney Toons or Mickey Mouse or whatever.

"That dude probably wishes he was the devil!" Greg laughed at that.

"Call him again," Greg chimed in. "Let's see if he answers this time!" Caleb clicked the number in his contacts and waited until a voice answered.

"Hello," the voice rang out. I could tell it was Caleb's.

"Caleb? The one who ordered a pizza?" Greg began snickering. Harry smiled at him and shoved his shoulder jokingly, putting a finger to his lips, hoping he'd quiet down.

"I didn't order a pizza," Caleb replied, his voice sounding a bit unsteady.

"It has salami," that did it for Greg. He burst out laughing and ran into the other room. I stayed, feeling a little queasy.

"But I don't even like salami," Caleb's voice came out saying over the phone saying. Harry began nudging me at that. I told him to stop it, but he kept insisting, saying:

Watch this, watch this he mouthed.

"Not even if it's your mom's salami?" He covered his mouth, and then looked at me, smiling, waiting for a response.

"I think he hung up," He said, looking at me disappointed.

"Good," I said. I couldn't go on with that prank call a second more.

"What prank call?" Greg asked, coming into the room with a bag of Doritos in his hand.

"Shut up," I said, harshly. "Don't try to mess with me. You know what prank call. *The* prank call..." I look over to see Harry not there anymore.

"Where'd Harry go?" Greg sat down next to me, a worried look on his face.

"Harry? Kyle, Harry's been at that boarding school for two years now."

"What?" I reply to him. My face feels flushed. He then gets up and goes into a box on my nightstand. "Hey! What are you doing?" I ask, feeling angry. He pulls out a card and gives it to me. It shows Caleb's face on the cover. He looks so happy, but I, on the other hand, feel terrified. Why do I feel so terrified? Why do I have this in my room? I can't stop crying. The tears are flowing down my cheeks as I ask: "What is this? What is a picture of Caleb doing in my room?" Greg took it from my hands and frowned at it as he replied:

"What do you think it is? It's his eulogy; I keep one too in my house. I wouldn't ever want to forget what our actions did to Caleb. And how we were there with Harry; there with Harry that night."

"There with Harry what night?" I asked; my face feeling drained of all life as I gasped my mouth open as he said:

"The night we prank called Caleb. The night after he hung up from it he killed himself; the night *we* killed him."

He got up and walked around the room.

"Well, Harry doesn't think of it that way. He wouldn't go and apologize to Caleb's parents. They say Harry is haunted by Caleb. I think he haunts me too," Greg added. "Does he haunt you," I felt worried now.

"Who are you?" I asked; feeling scared now. I looked at the bag of Doritos more closely and saw what was written on it.

Rat poison I then looked up.

"Caleb?" I asked. Caleb smiled down at me sitting on the floor and then lifted the bag to mouth, tilting it up and letting a white foam slide down the edges of his mouth as he consumed more and more rat poison into his body.

Mmm mmm he said, smiling down at me.

“Salami,”

50. The End

I heard my sister in the other room. I knew who she was talking to. It was the devil. I creaked opened my door just a little bit more as I watched as she played a couple strings on her guitar for him. He looked like a young boy but had the face of a man in his thirties. And he was pale white.

“So do you really think my songs and my playing and singing abilities are really that good, Lucas?” I shook my head in disgust. I knew that the devil usually took the form of a man or a woman to star-crazed coming of age adults choosing the name Luke, Lucas, or Lucy. And my sister was about to leave for college any day now. What was she doing? She could go to school and be a teacher or a doctor or a lawyer. She doesn’t have to make googles of dollars just by selling her soul to some stupid fallen angel that nobody likes.

“You know that they call me *The Industry*. I can make all of your dreams come true, Claire. Just think of me as your agent into Hollywood. I’ll get you with all the agents, all the paparazzi will know who you are, and so will all the stars. All the stars are with me in case you didn’t know that. None of them don’t make it through unless they go through me first. So are you ready, Claire? Are you ready to be on everyone’s TV for as long as you live? Of course you’ll have your peak and then you’ll have to retire one day years and years from now. Doesn’t everybody after they’re done just want to live in their mansions with their millions upon billions of dollars? Don’t you want all that money? Don’t you want all the boys in your high school to know who you are? The cutest ones will wish they dated you; Larry Pence, Marco Fundy, and even Harrison Jones. I already have a star that you will just love to meet! And you’ll probably marry one of the stars too! Not everybody does but some who are lucky. We like to think of ourselves as a tight-knit group, us superstars. If you say super nice things to me and do tons of sacrifices and rituals in my honor, I’ll let you marry one of the Jonas Brothers. Or maybe some actor like Logan Paul or a musician like Post Malone.

“What are you doing?” I whispered. I’m sure Satan heard me, but he paid me no mind.

“She’s going to do it you know?” I looked behind me to see my angel friend, Theliel.

“Please say it ain’t so?” I whispered back. Theliel nodded in return.

“Do you know what happens, don’t you?” I hated that Theliel knew I didn’t know.

“Theliel; you know I don’t know. Now tell me! What’s about to happen to my sister when she does it?” Theliel shook his head with sorrow.

“Oh, Bella; that won’t be your sister once she signs the contract... that will be a demon and in your sister’s place...” I looked at Theliel in aghast.

“What the devil is saying, Theliel... say it ain’t so! Not all celebrities are soul givers, are they?” Theliel shrugged.

“Yes... I guess you can tell who tries to get the devil’s attention and who says ‘NOT ME, I won’t be going down to the Underworld,’ and it’s too bad it’s all a game to them.” Then Theliel directed my attention back to Claire and the devil.

“So every star sold their soul to you?” Claire asked the devil. The devil nodded slowly saying over and over again.

“Yes, yes, yes. Every single one. From Tom Hanks to Beyoncé to Madonna to Elvis Presley to Marilyn Monroe. It’s a new thing I started doing in America because *‘in God we trust’* is over and *The Industry*, that’s me that is, has just begun.” Theliel directed my attention back to him.

“This is where the devil will do it. Look away, Bella Oswald. This is where young Claire will sign the contract.” I looked at Theliel feeling a stupendous weight of anger on my shoulders.

“Is there not anything I can do?” Theliel shook his head. Then said:

“Maybe it’d be better if you did watch so you’d know who your new sister really was now.” So I turned back to the two and watched as the devil took out a huge piece of parchment that he rolled out in the air to show the legally binding contract. It looked so magnificent yet so evil at the same time. The ink pen that the devil brought out was normal to say the least. Everything except where the metal tip was supposed to be; instead the tip was pure fire.

“She’s not going to sign it.” I whispered over and over again. “She’s not going to sign it.” She signed it. As soon as she did, a door opened up to a basement licking with eternal fires where the devil then turned into a very old, fat, ugly, pimply, old man where he then said:

“Ding dong, ding, dong, we’re married! Isn’t it great?” And then sucked her soul out of her body. She began screaming as it was sucked down into Hell and then a demon that looked almost as terrible as an ogre mixed with a vampire swooshed out and swooped into the body that used to belong to Claire Oswald. Then the devil disappeared and the room fell silent. The demon that used to be my sister went to the door and drove off in her car. As I heard the car backing out of the driveway and then driving off, I then looked to Theliel. He looked at me sadly.

“Every celebrity does it. Your sister wasn’t the first one, and she won’t be the last.” He said. And then he added: “Some people already know. They still watch TV and listen to music though. It’s just like the demons that are all of your celebrities are playing as clowns and putting on a show for everyone.” I nodded to this and went to go lay down. And then I started praying. I started praying for my sister’s soul.