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## Mirrors And Vanities

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*University of Central Florida*



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MIRRORS AND VANITIES

by

LESLIE SALAS

B.A. University of South Florida, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts & Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2013

Director: Pat Rushin

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## ABSTRACT

*Mirrors and Vanities* is a multi-modal collection which showcases the diversity of working in long and short storytelling forms. Featured in this thesis are fiction, nonfiction, graphic narrative, and screenplay.

Using unconventional approaches to storytelling in order to achieve emotional resonance with the audience while maintaining high standards for craft, these stories and essays explore the costs inherent to the subtle nuances of interpersonal relationships.

The fiction focuses on the complications of characters keeping secrets. A husband discovers the truth behind his wife's miscarriage. A girl visits her fiancé in purgatory. A boy crosses a line and loses his best friend.

Meanwhile, the nonfiction centers on self-discovery and gender roles associated with power struggles. A schizophrenic threatens to ruin my mother's wedding. I rediscover my relationship with my father through food writing. Sword-work teaches me to fail and succeed at making martial art.

The title work of the thesis is a collaged story highlighting the tribulations of a physicist fixated on recovering his lost love by manipulating the multiverse. The multi-modal format implicates the nebulousness of physics theories and how different aspects of the narrative can be presented in various formats to best suit the nature of the storytelling.

Through the interactions of characters in mundane and extraordinary circumstances, the works in this thesis examine the consequences of choice, the contrast between reality and expectation, coming of age, and the Truth of narrative.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My utmost thanks and appreciation go to my thesis committee—Pat Rushin, David James Poissant, and Jocelyn Bartkevicius—for guiding me along this arduous path. Thanks to my colleagues in the MFA program who helped me through so many drafts and workshops of the stories and essays enclosed in this thesis. Special thanks to the Shine Street Writers for their constant criticism and moral support, and to the Writers Accountability Group for motivating me to write every day. And for my family and friends, thank you for your patience and understanding as I dropped off the grid to complete this thesis.

I have successfully published many of the works featured in my thesis as follows:

“Falia Takes Flight.” *15 Views, Volume II: Corridor*. Orlando: Burrow Press. Print.

\_\_\_\_. *15 Views of Tampa Bay*, Burrow Press Review. Web.

“On Maglev, I95 Southbound,” Burrow Press for *There Will Be Words*. Print.\*

“Picky Eater,” *Sweet: A Literary Confection*, Issue 4.3. Web.

“Justification,” (Comic.) *The Southeast Review*, Issue 30.1. Print.

“Justification,” (Prose.) *Sphere Literary Magazine*, Issue 5. Web.\*

\* These are earlier revisions of stories that appear in this thesis.

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## WRITING LIFE



Like most writers, I started putting pen to paper as soon as I learned the alphabet. I frequently wrote and illustrated books in elementary school, such as a hand-illustrated bilingual ABC book and a story about a presidential election told entirely in with newspaper articles, that went on to win Young Author's Awards.

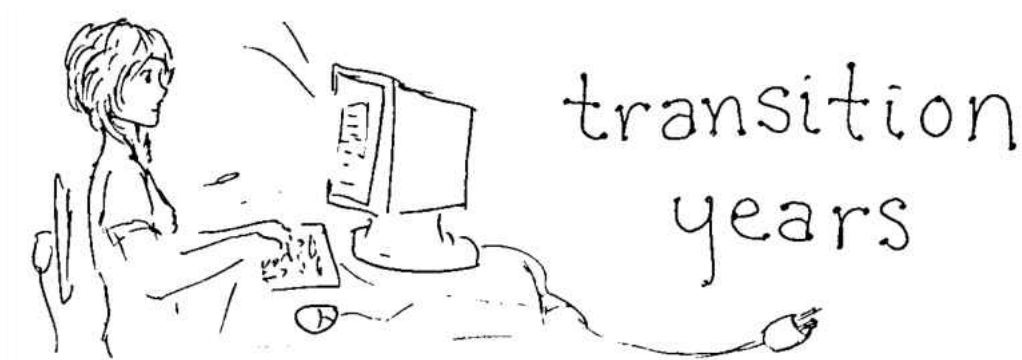
Although I loved to write, I hated reading—mostly because my parents weren't big readers. I had a tendency to read too fast and would skip a lot of the words. Once my dad had me read an entire *Little Critter* book backwards to force me to slow down and look at *each* word as I went along.

While I was in elementary school, some of my friends liked books and participated in a district-wide program called Book Battle. They convinced me to join the team. Together, we read sixteen books every school year—books like Louis Sachar's *Holes*, Lois Lowery's *Number the Stars*, and Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*—and then went on to compete in school- and district-wide quiz-bowl-type competitions focused on which teams knew the books the best. The questions in the competitions catered mostly to rote memory, but the experience was fun and got us excited about reading and being book nerds. Between Book Battle, Pizza Hut's Book-It program, and the Accelerated Reader program, I learned to devour books, even if I didn't like or have the maturity to fully understand some of the more ambitious books I tried to tackle.



I do remember once, perhaps around third or fourth grade, I checked out a *Peanuts* collection from the school media center. I was surprised I could get AR points for it, because usually those books were heavy with prose and thematic meaning, and hey, they were pictures! And I loved Snoopy! So I'd read through the hardback of old 3-panel comics, giggling every once in a while. My dad was upset with my choice though. He wanted me to read books with actual words. Not pictures. He told me next time I needed to pick a book that was more challenging. This comics stuff—it was childish.

I didn't touch another comic book for several years.



In middle school, I won first place in a Future Problem Solvers' State Writing Competition. I didn't win the *actual* competition, not the one where you wrote something ahead of time and sent it in. (No one had taught me anything about revision in creative writing. I just wrote based on the rules I learned as I read, like indenting when a new person spoke and creating a new paragraph when transitioning to a new idea.) But writing off the cuff under a strict time-limit—that I could do. FPS had a timed in-person competition at the state level, where all the writers who turned in manuscripts to the actual competition were placed into writing groups. The groups wrote a series of stories that would stand alone but also work together to tell a story in some sort of futuristic setting. My group's series was deemed the best, and

my story won first place. (I've looked for a copy of this story for years. I can't find it. But I remember it was a *Gattaca*-esque story taking place in a futuristic dystopia involving eugenics and the quest for a special serum that would change a family's genetic markup into something more "acceptable" to civilized society. My story was the last in the series—and I remember I put a lot of effort into making the ending a real tear-jerker. At the end, my protagonist, who worked so hard to retrieve this special serum, accidentally drops the stolen vial as he reaches his dying wife.)

The win was a huge boost to my self-esteem. The Young Author's Awards had been nice, but the huge trophy I earned from Future Problem Solvers was quite a sight. The trophy rose two and a half feet tall, consisted of three shiny blue tiers, and was topped with a silver winged woman holding a globe over her head. Looking at it, I thought, "I can do this. I can *write*."



Even though I was in the International Baccalaureate program at my high school taking a full load of IB and Advanced Placement classes, I still, somehow, in-between chorus and/or orchestra rehearsals and robotics team meetings, made time to read and write on my own.

I got into manga, reading mainstream (and bootleg translations) of now-popular Japanese graphic novels. In particular, I latched onto Yasuhiro Nightow's *Trigun*, a sci-fi epic

following the mishaps of protagonist Vash the Stampede as he searches for his brother, Knives, on the faraway planet, Gunsmoke. Although this series was marketed as shonen—or for boys—I enjoyed the balance between action and romance, especially with the complex characterization of each of the characters and their motivations for trying to help or hurt the population of Gunsmoke.

It's only now, in retrospect (and after reading Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*), that I realize the importance of reading such a wide variety of eastern comics as opposed to getting into the strip comics like *Peanuts* or the mainstream Marvel/DC comic books. Strip comics are punchy. Mainstream comics are largely plot-driven and focus on actions in quick succession. But manga tends to have a different approach. Panel transitions are quieter, subtler. Several panels may linger on a single object, forcing the reader to slow down and consider the object's significance to the storyline. This slow storytelling is an art in its own right. And while this type of reading served mostly as escapism for me, it set a good foundation (like Book Battle and Accelerated Reader) for me to build my knowledge on when I started to write comics myself.

I started doodling comics with my friends, usually strip-style nonfiction or renditions of inside jokes. I never knew comics could be considered literary. And in the lucky off-chance that there was a creative writing option in an English class, I always took the time (and went over the page-count) to *actually write a story*.

Despite all of this, I was The Lazy Writer. I *talked* about all of these great ideas I had (two plot-driven novels in particular—one about pirates taking over civilization and another set in a steampunk dystopia where a war-zeppelin is stolen), but never actually got around to executing them. I made frequent excuses—I was too busy. I didn't have time. Over and

over, this was my mantra. And it continued through high school and into my undergraduate career.

At the end of freshmen orientation at the University of South Florida, I was presented with a surprising challenge: declare my major. For months I had been waffling between getting a degree in physics (with the goal of becoming an astrophysicist or an engineer) or a degree in English (I had just found out that a degree in creative writing actually existed as a *thing*). When my Orientation Team Leader told us to split up by major, the humanities headed in one direction, and sciences in another. I loved both fields. I wanted to pursue both. I planned on double majoring, or minoring in one and getting the major in the other. But I couldn't decide which room to walk into.

I loved astronomy and astrophysics, but knew jobs in those fields were sparse. But I could make my living as an engineer, perhaps, and work on robotic prosthetics or metamaterials. A degree in physics could still get me that robotics job, and I could do it in one year less of school. So I walked in the room for the sciences and decided on physics, figuring that in the meantime, I'd minor in creative writing.

Toward the end of my sophomore year I had an off semester from physics—somehow I had gotten off track and needed to fill up my semester with electives before my major coursework began. That semester was the most enjoyable of my entire career. I took courses in Contemporary Literature, Fiction, Nonfiction, and even Scuba Diving. Heaven. For the first time in my life, I studied what I found interesting. The classes weren't rigorous enough for me. I found my niche. I wanted more.

I switched my major to English – Creative Writing halfway through my junior year and was accepted into the Departmental Honors program. That last year in undergrad was

incredibly influential for me, and was the first time I truly devoted myself to immersion in writing and reading as a professional career path.

Over that last school year, I found that I aligned well with postmodernist and modernist schools of thought. I wanted my writing to matter, like the modernists thought, but I also enjoyed the heavy experimentalism prominent in contemporary writing. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* blew my mind with its ingenious structure: weaving the beginning and end together so that the climax occurs at the end, leaving a strong, powerful image with the reader that begs for the book to be immediately reread. Not to mention her innovative use of language and exploitation of the child's voice with interesting characterization and spacing, or the luscious, rich images she vividly paints. On the other hand, Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* taught me the brilliance of embracing culture and enriching narrative with nontraditional narrative structures like excessive footnotes on the history of the Dominican Republic. His repeated use of the character Yunior, in this novel, several short stories, and his newest release, *This Is How You Lose Her*, inspired me to braid a central mythology across several works in multiple mediums.

The early modernists got me thinking about how politics and world events can influence writing—and the other way around. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, for instance, not only addresses Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the wake of World War I, but inadvertently addresses Sigmund Freud's "talking cure"—an action not intended by West, as she noted in a letter to the editor after a dramatic adaptation of her novella, but one that was perceived by her audience. This exchange sparked an interest in the difference between authorial intent and the relationship between the reader and the text, which I studied further in graduate school (and presented on at UCF's inaugural English Symposium).

I even learned about scriptwriting and dialogue in this time period. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was my first real introduction to scriptwriting, and taught me that it is possible to entertain an audience by having nothing happen twice. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on the other hand, taught me to pay close attention to dialogue, and how to play with double-entendres to the surprise and delight of the audience.

Through my mock Graduate level classes as part of the Departmental Honors program, I also gained an appreciation for Victorian-era literature and Shakespeare. While I wasn't too enamored by Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*, I loved the multi-modal *adaptations* of this classic, in comic, movie, and even novel form. The idea of reimagining a story from an alternative perspective or time period is fascinating and strangely original—not unlike the work of the Bard. I'd had a love-hate relationship with Shakespeare since high school (I hated the tragedies but loved *The Complete Works of Shakespeare Abridged!* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), but by studying his comedies, I gained a whole new appreciation for him, his art, and his revolutionary treatment of women in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Never  
Looking  
Back



My acceptance to the MFA program marked the point of no return. Finally—I was committed to a program where I would learn to hone my craft. Where I could focus on what I wanted to study: creative writing.

I came into the MFA program with several goals: I wanted to learn. I wanted to be challenged. I wanted to enculturate myself into the writing community, wanted to grow and become a better writer. A more dedicated writer. I wanted to stop that Lazy Writer nonsense, get my shit together, and *write like a motherfucker* (as *Rumpus* so kindly puts it).

Becoming a writer takes a long time. I feel like most of my growth as a writer has only really presented itself in the last few months of being in the program—when I've actually forced myself to write and/or revise every single day in order to finish my thesis on time. By learning other skills in the profession, skills like editing and teaching and how to make a chapbook and organize a conference, I can hope to make a living still doing what I love while also pursuing my writing.

I have to come to terms with the fact that my life as a writer will always be a balancing act—between whatever professional job pays the bills, making time to write every day, and any family obligations I may have. I may not have spent as much time working on my craft as I wanted, but I believe the other experiences have enriched my understanding of the profession in far more important and longer-lasting ways. For instance, I am now confident in my ability to be an editor, to work in publishing, to teach creative writing or composition. Because of the rigor involved with the past two years of my life, I know that I'll be able to handle that kind of professional workload on top of writing on my own.

In terms of what I've learned in the courses I took during the span of my MFA, I have certainly experienced a great deal of personal and creative growth while working on my craft. I've broadened my horizons, learning to write in a wide variety of mediums and studying different techniques through imitation and experimentation, attempting to distill meaning and attention to detail from each.



### On Fiction:

*When in doubt: make it weirder.* That seems to be my new mantra for fiction. This realization happened in a workshop class with Susan Hubbard—my writing was too “conventional,” she’d said. It was too boring, too predictable, too clichéd. Upon close inspection of some of my favorite fiction books I’d read while in the MFA program, I see she’s absolutely right. My stories had flat characters, acting because I’d told them to, not because that’s what they did of their own accord. I was distracted by the setting, not focusing on character development. I wasn’t contrasting the mundane with the spectacular. I wasn’t writing about characters I’d fallen in love with. So I looked back into those books and tried to take hints from the best.

I believe Alan Lightman’s *Einstein’s Dreams* was the first book I read in the MFA program. I had the pleasure of watching a dramatic adaptation of the book in undergrad, and reading the collection was equally enjoyable. I generally loathe the passive voice (normally because I am frustrated by its accidental creepings into my writing), but *Einstein’s Dreams* is passive voice done right. The book is entirely told, but it’s told in such a fresh, innovative way of exploring the permutations of the behavior of time that I can’t help but forgive Lightman.



Aimee Bender's collection of modern fairy tales and magical realism, *Willful Creatures*, is perhaps my favorite collection of short stories. The stories are fun and definitely weird. I try to emulate Bender's techniques for effective magical realism (just pretend everything is normal) and wordplay since she pulls it off so well.

What excites me the most about Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* is the fact that there are illustrations. This seems simple enough, but taking into consideration the time in which the novel was written, this is downright revolutionary. Plus the inclusion of a book within a book—the execution is strangely clever, and although the story is bizarre, *The Dead Father* works for me.

I have a special place in my heart for Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. This novel/memoir—well. That's exactly why. It's both a memoir and a novel. A fictionalized (ish? Maybe?) account of his life, his early adulthood, his dealing with being orphaned and taking care of his little brother. He disregards genre conventions, choosing instead to make fun of them—and us as readers—by giving us instructions on the order to read the book and including visuals, such as the random stapler at the end of the introduction. Eggers plays with form, and the execution is stunning. His novel/memoir arrogant and fun and startling and, in my eyes, does what we all as writers (should) hope to achieve: *tell a damn good story*.

Even some of the books I'd read before, books like *Holes* (with its weird punishment of digging holes in the desert for accidentally stealing a pair of sneakers) and *Number the Stars* (with its child's perspective of the Holocaust and ironic ending of wearing a crucifix saving a Jewish girl's life), I'd liked precisely because they were weird. They were unconventional.

This was a hidden aesthetic I'd enjoyed all along, but for some reason never internalized enough for it to show up in my own writing until after Hubbard pointed it out to me.

### On Nonfiction:

Perhaps the two most important books I've read in my study of nonfiction at UCF are John D'Agata's *The Next American Essay* and David Shields' *Reality Hunger*. D'Agata has influenced me most in his definition of the term "essay": to explore. When writing an essay, you don't know where you're going until you get there. Therefore, the essay should be a form of self-discovery. I'm a person who thinks best on the page, and I'd kept a journal for years since journaling helped me figure out what I was thinking. But I never applied the approach to creative writing until I took Ira Sukrungruang's nonfiction class as an undergraduate. Reading D'Agata during the MFA program just cemented the concept of writing as investigation. I finally understood why I was so drawn to writing in the first place.

Shields, however, created a powerful paradigm shift in my understanding of literature and the canon as a whole. In *Reality Hunger*, his collage structure, the reorganization and distribution of his words and the words of others to create something new, creates a new form of literature, something true and brilliant through its lies and deceit. Shields builds a concept of Truth supported by the idea that Fiction and Nonfiction are essentially the same—and this concept resonates with me. He invites me to push (and break) boundaries and I love him for it.

I'd always been drawn to stories with strange structures. Nick Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* is a lovely conglomeration of multiple mediums to tell the fragmented story of Flynn's fragmented relationship with his father. This memoir gave me ideas about

building a central narrative out of collage, a splintering of stories in various mediums that I hadn't considered since reading Jean Toomer's *Cane* several years ago. Flynn's use of white space marks him as a poet, but also has me think about the page in a visual way, as a cartoonist, as well.

Although it first started as a class assignment, I learned to imitate forms to attempt to learn more from the authors whose work intimidated me with their beauty. Like Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night*, Bob Shacochis' *Domesticity: A Gastronomic Interpretation of Love* also plays with breaking form. Shacochis transforms typical food-writing and recipes into lovely personal essays. Imitating Shacochis helped me discover my weird relationship with food, and how food plays such a strange and important role in my life and with my relationships. And through imitating J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, I discovered the power of the third person in memoir—a distance similar to that created by the medium of graphic memoir.

### On Comics:

Although I'd stopped reading comics at an early age from the argument with my dad over *Peanuts*, I picked up visual storytelling again in middle and high school with the Japanese form of manga. In high school I started drawing my own manga on an oekaki drawing board online, and since then I've been completely self-taught, occasionally buying a mainstream craft book, but mostly just fumbling in the dark.

I spent a semester doing an independent study on comics, where I worked through most of Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* and read out of David Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. These resources provided expert craft

knowledge on the subject of comics, but their value as teaching tools is arguable. I learned a lot about the history of comics, comic transitions, and the formal nomenclature of the medium, but reading advice cannot compare to receiving specific criticism from an expert. It's just not the same as working one-on-one with a cartoonist over a long span of time.

By reading more literary graphic novels, I learned more about the art of combining words with pictures. Memoirs such as David Small's *Stitches* and Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* illustrate the beauty of visual storytelling on a grand scale. These memoirs are provocative and speak to the inherent flaws in nonfiction and the imperfection of memory. The artistic lens helps the author/artist gain distance from his/her subject matter, regardless of whether the narration is minimal or heavy (as in each of these, respectively).

I also took the time to study a few cartoonists/comic writers/illustrators (there's no sufficient nomenclature in this field—for the sake of simplicity let's stick with “cartoonists”) in depth to get a feel for the strengths and weaknesses across multiple works. Craig Thompson's *Goodbye, Chunky Rice* is a lovely chapbook length fiction comic. He weaves various storylines and uses similar images of transitions to create an emotionally powerful story of friendship and longing. I believe his tightly-woven narrative is more well-crafted than Thompson's most recent work, *Habibi*. While *Habibi* is absolutely gorgeous, it unfortunately also serves as an example of going overboard. He painstakingly sets up the conflict in the first two thirds of the book, but rushes the last third. Dividing the narrative into a trilogy not only would have made this graphic novel more marketable, it would have given the story more space to breathe and grow into a true masterpiece.

Thompson, however, showcases his mastery of the long-form in his memoir *Blankets*, published several years before *Habibi*. The pacing in this memoir about young love matches

the emotions of the reader and the protagonist. The end offers a sad sense of closure that feels appropriate. As *Blankets* was published several years before *Habibi*, it's interesting that Thompson should lose steam on his third major work. After researching Thompson's process and learning that he worked on *Habibi* for seven years, I believe he may have tired of the project.

This kind of burn-out is all-too-common in my own writing: my stories tend to be very short, usually flash length. If they are longer, I find myself spinning them into epic novels—which I get bored of after fighting with their structure and contents for too long. There's wisdom in completing a work quickly, but there seems to be a fine line between working while they're still inspiration and just rushing it. I'm still trying to find this line, especially with the title story of my thesis, "Mirrors and Vanities."

Thompson isn't the only cartoonist whose projects have taken forever. Megan Kelso worked on her most recent graphic novel, *Artichoke Tales*, for an entire decade. In comparison with her collection *Queen of the Black Black*, *Artichoke Tales* is a comprehensive story spanning several decades. As an aspiring cartoonist, I found *Queen of the Black Black* more engaging and inspiring, as I could use her collection of short comics to view her progress as an up-and-coming cartoonist and learn from her mistakes and successes. Her exploration with forms and lettering styles, as well as how she tackles intense subjects like abortion, rape, and alcoholism, set a model for me to emulate in my own style.

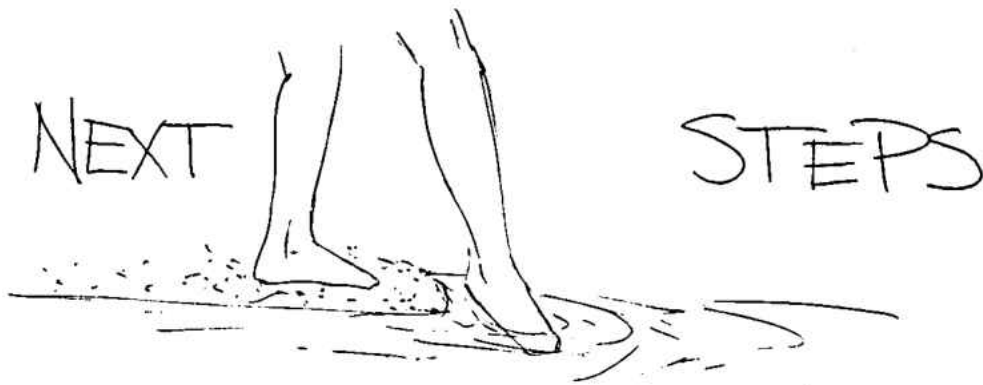
What has perhaps been the greatest asset to my growth in comics is studying graphic adaptations in *The Graphic Canon*, edited by Russ Kick. The *Canon* is a multivolume collection of human narratives from the stories of Gilgamesh to present-day. Each comic is drawn by a different cartoonist in a distinct drawing style. These range from newbie, pencil-drawn pulp-

style comics to rich watercolor illustrations to the vibrant, concrete images of computer aided design. The collection of various artistic techniques (shading, coloring, inking, and lettering, to name a few) and approaches to storytelling is lovely—not only to study, but to sit and enjoy as well.

### On Screenwriting:

I'm still relatively new to this medium, but I love the freedom it offers. I love the potential for surprise and creativity with the inherent collaboration between screenwriter and producer. David Trotter's *The Screenwriter's Bible* has been invaluable in teaching the nitpicky details of the form, and working with Pat Rushin in his principle genre is a treat. My work in screenwriting has forced me to hone in on the internal/external conflicts of my characters and how to represent those conflicts in visual actions, rather than hidden in dialogue or exposition. The goal is to be crisp and clear. Minimalistic: just the details. Drama = danger + desire.

I'm still working on it, but the more I screenwrite, the more I enjoy the challenge.



So now what?

There's this thing. This *thesis*. This collection of work from my MFA.

What's in it?

Fiction. Nonfiction. Comics. Screenplays.

The stories and essays I've chosen exhibit my best attempts at taking an unconventional approach to storytelling in order to achieve some sort of emotional resonance with the audience while maintaining high standards for craft.

For instance, in the flash fiction "Neighborhood Watch," I take a minimalist approach to the traditional creepy-neighbor story. I believe less is more, especially when dealing with suspense and the illusion of danger, using details like the whirring blades of the lawnmower and the man's keepsakes on his nightstand to allude to the vulnerability of the blonde.

In "So Long Soldier. Send Her Your Son," I embed magical realism into the story of a college girl missing her enlisted boyfriend, and how the couple uses their opportunity for one last goodbye when he is killed in combat. The harsh reality of dull classroom and the rigid formulas of physics are contrasted with the sharpness of the lovers' union and the gift the girl may have returned with after her trip to purgatory.

"Home Remedy" is a streamlined version of the flash fiction piece "Justification," which was originally published in *Sphere Literary Magazine* Issue 5. This second-person perspective studies a man's reaction to encountering his wife, Lillia, after she's had a bad day at work. It is an exercise in minimalism and restraint, focused on telling less and showing more.

The essay "Henna," is a somewhat braided form, where I contrast my experiences with getting henna tattoos and the opinions of those around me. My use of illustrations

works to propel a visual element of the story, and I break chronology to end the essay on the poignant note of ceasing to get tattoos altogether.

“Getting Off” began as an imitation exercise, practicing the use of the third person point of view as Coetzee does in *Boyhood*. It grew, however, into a restrained account of my mother’s loss of her trust in me, and the irony of getting caught on the day *after* I’d gotten in trouble. I utilized repetition and white space to heighten tension and propel the action of the story forward.

Another essay imitation, “Just Two,” comes from the chapter “Same Again” in Flynn’s *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, where he describes the action of getting drunk. As I’d never been drunk before, I applied this concept of fragmented thoughts and slurred speech to another vice: lust.

The essay “The Madwoman in the Family” was inspired by Jacki Lyden’s treatment of mental illness in her memoir *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*. “The Madwoman in the Family” is structured as a series of vignettes studying a family member plagued by schizophrenia and her potential to ruin my mother’s wedding. On a more subtle level, the essay also addresses my relationship with my mother and the conflicts I may have with respect to marriage. The focus with this story lies in keeping the scenes as short as possible, offering just enough story to keep the reader’s interest, but also forcing the reader to fill in the blanks of the extra details with his or her own imagination.

The comic, “Justification,” as published in Issue 30.1 of *The Southeast Review*, began as a flash fiction piece under the same name, originally published in *Sphere Literary Magazine* Issue 5, and later revised into “Home Remedy,” as seen in this collection. This eight-page, full-color comic utilizes light and dark to portray the mood as an unnamed husband



approaches his wife, Lillia, providing more back story to her usual temperament in relation to her current moodiness. He discovers the truth behind the termination of her pregnancy, and she begs for his forgiveness. The use of stick figures allows the comic to be more emotionally resonant to the reader since the reader is more easily able to identify with a character that lacks specific physical characteristics.

“Falia Takes Flight,” a five-page comic in black and white, functions as the fourth segment of Burrow Press’ *15 Views of Tampa Bay* anthology (and later put to press as part of *15 Views Volume II: Corridor*). The realistic drawings—traced from photographs I took of a my friend, Kaitlyn Casali, who so gracefully accepted the task of standing on top of the edge of a parking garage—add to the realistic feel of the fiction. Inclusions of small details, such as the backpack, the plane overhead, and Falia’s wings, provided opportunities for subsequent contributors to build on her story, while the one-sided telephone dialogue propels the conflict of the main narrative.

The only nonfiction comic in the collection, “Picky Eater,” began as an imitation of a dinner scene in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. This comic was published in Issue 4.3 of *Sweet: A Literary Confection*. The more realistic drawings represent real-life, while the stick-figure drawings represent the imperfect memory of the narrator’s mother as well as a childlike perception of the past. The comic feels unbalanced as it only presents my mother’s side of the story through her telephone narrative, yet I felt it was complete as a story because her perception of the narrative arc is complete. I considered adding a second part to the comic to convey my father’s perspective on the matter, but I feel it deserves its own essay. I currently lack the emotional distance to write objectively about my father and my relationship with him and food, especially as this relationship continues to mature.

The screenplay, “Nebula,” is yet another exercise in minimalism as James and Lillia, the couple from “Justification,” stargaze in their backyard. While James manipulates the telescope, Lillia considers her gynecologist appointment earlier that day. The tension slowly builds as the narrative shifts back and forth from the present to Lillia’s flashback, finally culminating in the truth that Lillia is pregnant again, and that James wants to keep their baby this time.

“Sticky Fingers” began as a sci-fi flash fiction by the name of “On Maglev Route I95, Southbound,” published by Burrow Press for *There Will Be Words* in a one-shot chapbook. When adapted to screenplay format, the story experienced substantial revision, losing its heavy political overtones for a subtler mood of old versus new between a woman and her stepdaughter traveling on a train. The woman recalls an accident in her young adulthood, when her fledgling career as a hand-made book binder in a print shop ended with the loss of two of her fingers while she watches her stepdaughter read from an old hardback book that is falling apart. In an effort to build trust with her stepdaughter, the woman offers to pick up the craft of bookmaking again and repair the old book.

“Space Invaders” was also adapted from a flash fiction piece by the same name. Set entirely in the basement, the narrative focuses less on the magical realism of Celia’s power and more on her best friend, Taito, and his reaction when Celia suddenly leaves before dinner after he has crossed a line between them.

The penultimate work in my thesis is the essay, “Making Martial Art,” a contrast between my first experience training with a bokken and my first experience training with a live blade. This essay began as a series of smaller, discrete essays about aikido and the relationships I gained—and lost—while training. I attempted to braid together the essays but

upon each attempt, I realized I was approaching the task like a book-length manuscript instead of a short, focused essay. I finally found a way to complete the essay by contrasting comparing failure, success, and ritual in my experience in aikido. However, I still believe “Making Martial Art” is part of an incomplete project that I will continue to work on by revising and extending this essay into a full-fledged memoir.

My thesis concludes with an ambitious collage story consisting of the fictionalized non-fiction comic “Pancakes & Parallel Universes,” the experimental graphic prose piece “Predicating Parallels,” and the screenplay “Mirrors and Vanities.” I utilize this multi-modal format to subtly indicate the amorphous nature of multiverse theory and how different aspects of the narrative can be presented in various formats to best suit the nature of the storytelling. “Pancakes & Parallel Universes” establishes the premise of the story with a fictionalized account of a conversation between the writer (“myself”) and her boyfriend, and how simply thinking of something makes it real in multiverse theory.

The next section, “Predicating Parallels,” is prosaic, but the prose is arranged in panels (such as comic book panels) to emphasize certain elements of each sentence and to regulate the speed at which the audience reads. Protagonist Alex creates Prime and Double Prime through proposing parallel worlds, and together they explore the concept that postulations and choices create infinite parallel universes. The stick figures included provide a visual interpretation of events that are difficult to describe in words. The use of different shapes and backgrounds, including speech balloons, help round out this narrative’s link to the previous one (comics), and helps prepare the reader for the next transition, into screenplay.

“Mirrors and Vanities” is a three-act short screenplay alternating between Alex’s visits to a parallel universe in which he is dead and Alex and Prime’s interaction regarding whether or not to tell the scientific community of their accidental discovery and the confirmation of multiverse theory. Again, I utilize repetition and understatement to place a larger burden on the reader to think and understand the story, but I break up this repetition with a strong narrative that moves forward the larger conflict regarding the confirmation of multiverse theory and its effect on the scientific community. In the end, this situation remains unsolved, but Alex is presented with a choice: stay with Bell or leave with a memento. The narrative breaks into two concurrent paths as Alex chooses both to stay and to go.

I expect to continue to work on this multimodal collection revolving around multiverse theory for at least a decade. I’ll continue to explore varying narrative paths in different modes of storytelling, branching not only into distinct art styles such as cubism and surrealism, but drawing in multiple mediums, such as watercolors and charcoals, and even branching into other areas of art, like sculpture, photography, and digital art. I believe this project may manifest into a sort of hyperlink novel on a digital space, all of which, unfortunately, fall outside my capabilities of completion within the confines of the MFA.

NEBULA

FADE IN:

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

A young couple stargazes in a lush backyard garden that runs alongside a tranquil river. In the distance: the dark arch of a bridge and the occasional set of headlights traveling over it.

JAMES, late 20s, crisp and bookish, sits on a short stool and guides a large Dobsonian telescope's eye.

His wife, LILLIA, also late 20s, is the circle to his square. She stands beside him, bounces on the balls of her feet and breathes deep, watching her breath dissolve into the sky.

FLASHBACK - INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Lillia, wrapped in a paper gown on an examination table, breathes deep. She wiggles her socked toes.

A poster on the wall breaks down the effectiveness of various contraceptives.

Another poster showcases the symptoms of various STDs.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

James unfolds from around the telescope.

JAMES  
Quick. Come look.

Lillia bounds over and leans in to the eyepiece:

A single, small white sphere with ring encircling it tracks slowly across the field of view: Saturn.

James rifles through a set of lenses.

LILLIA  
(looking in telescope)  
Lovely as always.

James holds up a rose-tinted lens.

JAMES

Yes, you are.

Lillia blushes and fidgets with her wedding band.

FLASHBACK - INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY (MOMENTS LATER)

Lillia's face flushes as she watches the childish mobile hanging above her. Her arms stretch over her head. Her socked feet rest in stirrups, knees apart.

The kindly DOCTOR sits at Lillia's feet, speculum in hand.

DOCTOR

We'll run a test to be sure.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT (MOMENTS LATER)

Lillia bounces on the balls of her feet.

James redirects the telescope to a different part of the sky and switches the lens.

JAMES

Let's see how the contrast turns out.

He leans in to take a peek, then leans back, grinning at Lillia.

Lillia walks over and sits in James' lap. He wraps his arms around her. She looks into the eyepiece:

A light blue sphere, larger than the last, with dark bands across the surface. Flanking the planet in an angular plane: four tiny dots.

LILLIA (O.S.)

Jupiter.

FLASHBACK - INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY (MOMENTS LATER)

Lillia stands, fully dressed, alone. She pokes at the mobile with a fingertip, watching its components spin.

The knob of the door turns, gaining Lillia's full attention.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT (MOMENTS LATER)

James straightens from arranging the telescope in a new position. He gestures to the eyepiece.

JAMES  
Best for last.

Lillia leans into the telescope. She sees:

Nothing.

LILLIA  
I know it's there, but-

JAMES (O.S.)  
Use your periphery. Approach it from  
an angle.

Still nothing.

Lillia steps away from the telescope and looks up, sighing at the sky. Faint red and green lights blink overhead, marking the passage of an airplane. Lillia's breath coils and dissipates.

FLASHBACK - INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY (CONTINUED)

The doctor places a small vial of pale blue liquid on the counter-top.

DOCTOR  
The verdict's in.

Lillia hugs herself and exhales audibly.

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT (CONTINUED)

James rubs Lillia's back, then checks the telescope's position.

A car's red taillights slowly arch over the bridge.

James gestures back to the eyepiece.

JAMES  
Don't look directly at it. Don't focus.  
Relax. You'll see.



Lillia presses her lips together, keeps her hands tucked under her elbows. She leans in.

Wisps of cotton bloom in inky blackness.

JAMES (O.S.)

Do you see it? The Star Queen Nebula?

Lillia keeps her eye on the eyepiece.

LILLIA

Yes.

JAMES

The Pillars of Creation. They're in there.

Lillia straightens. Her palms shift to her abdomen. She makes eye contact with James.

LILLIA

Not just there.

James presses his lips together.

JAMES

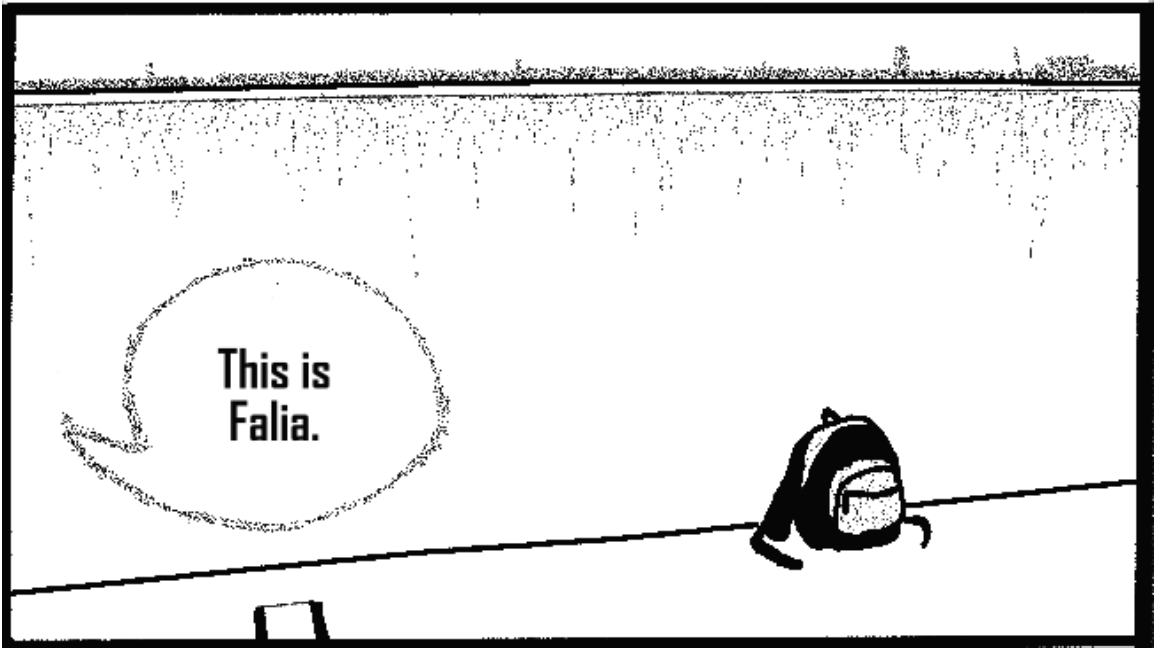
Can we keep this one?

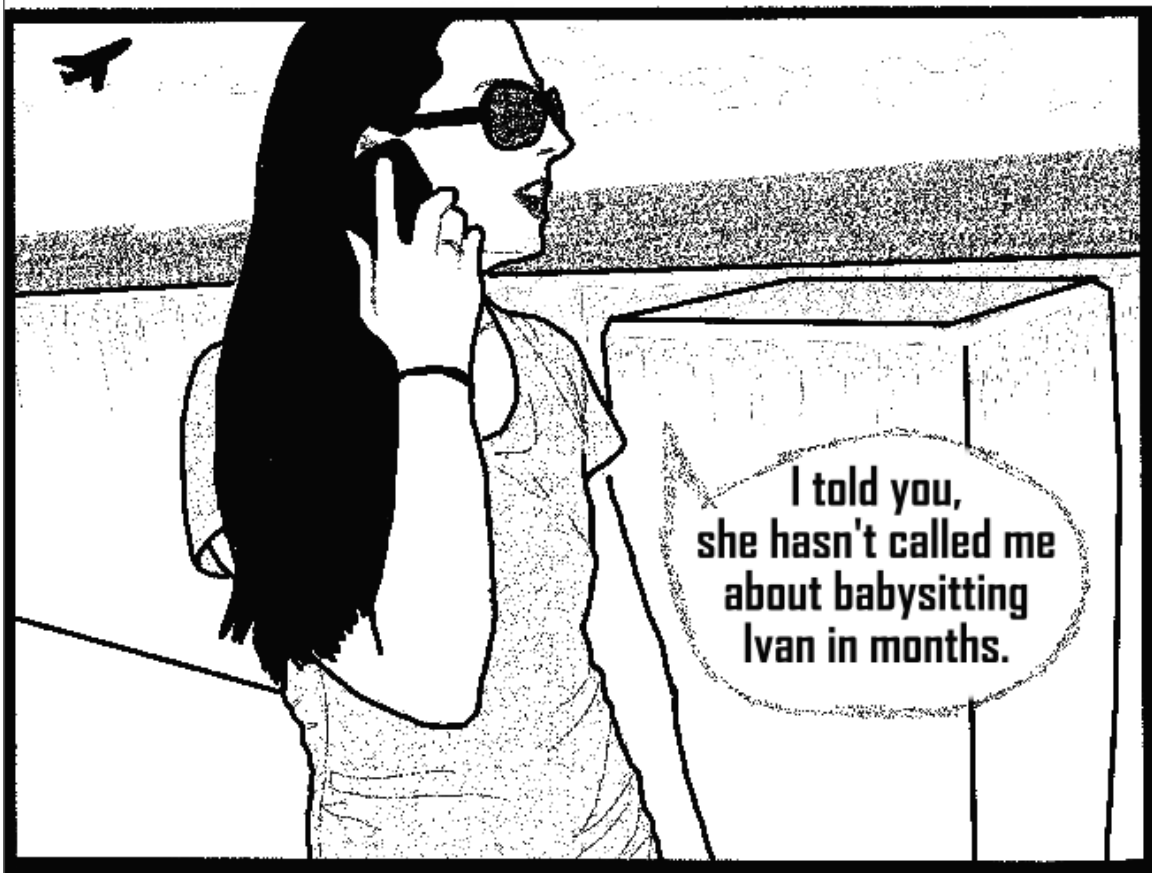
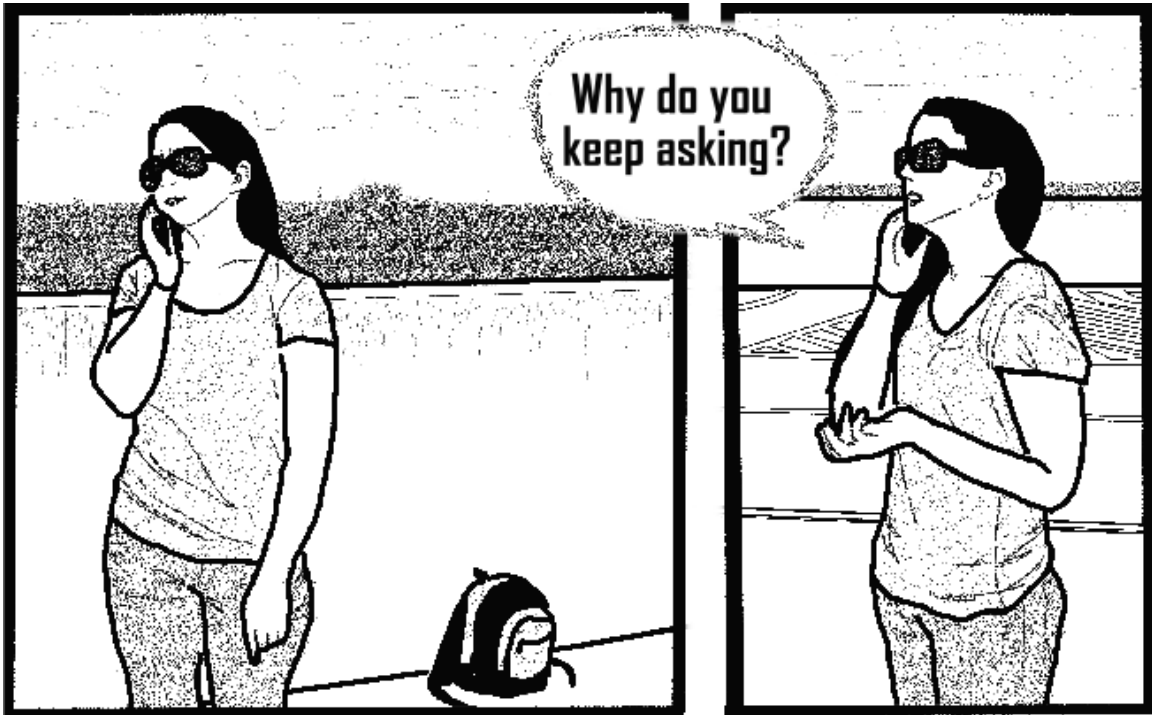
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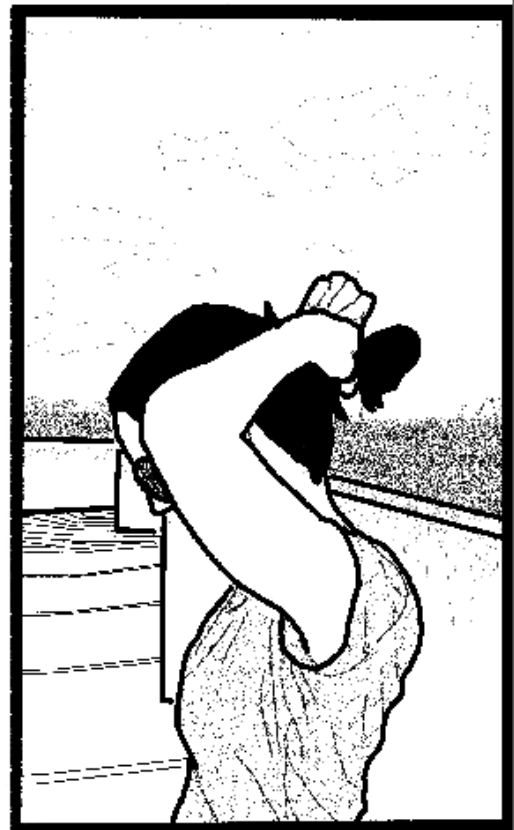
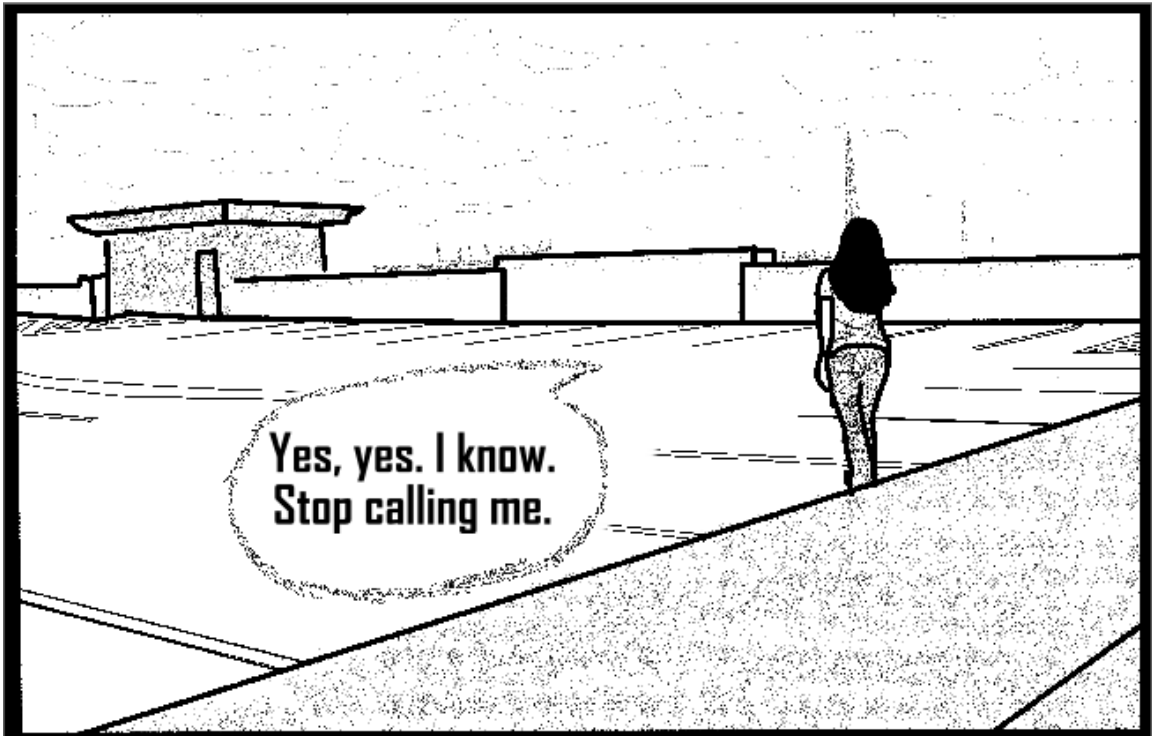
FALIA TAKES FLIGHT

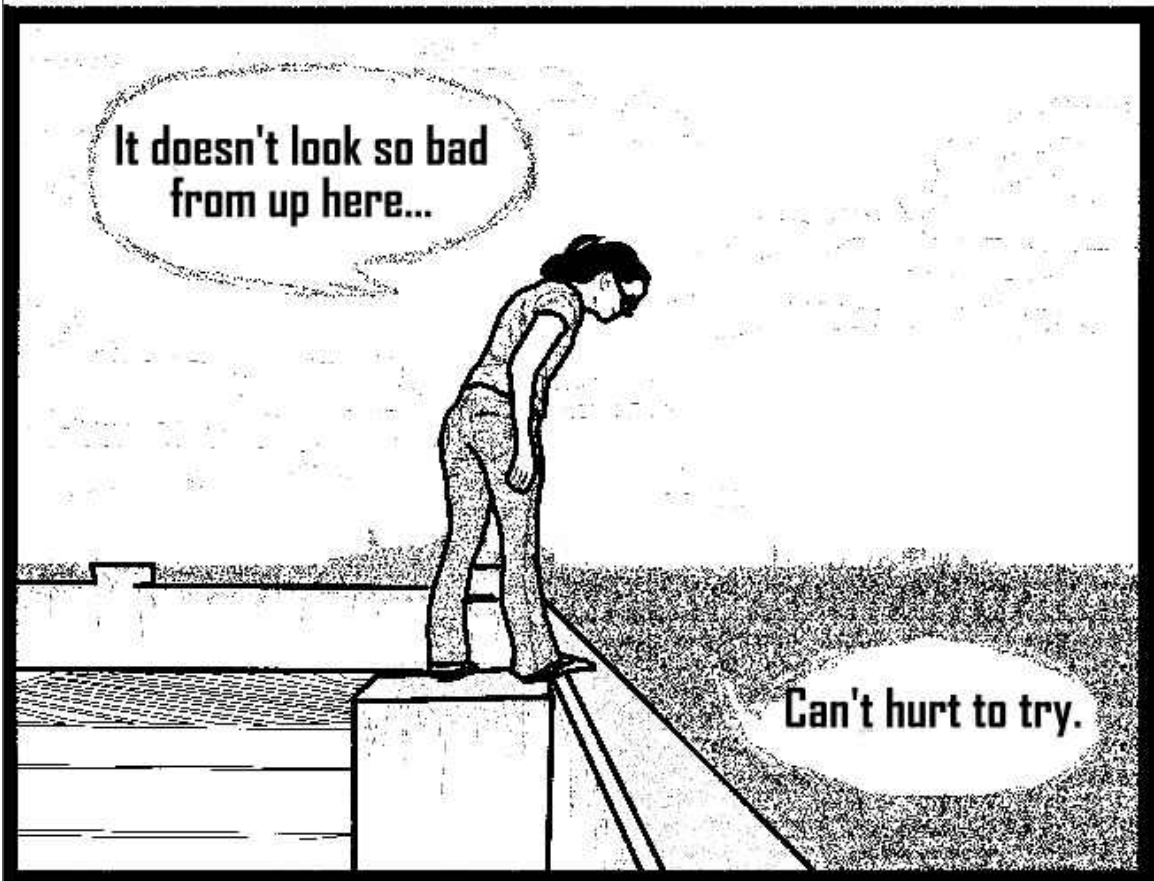
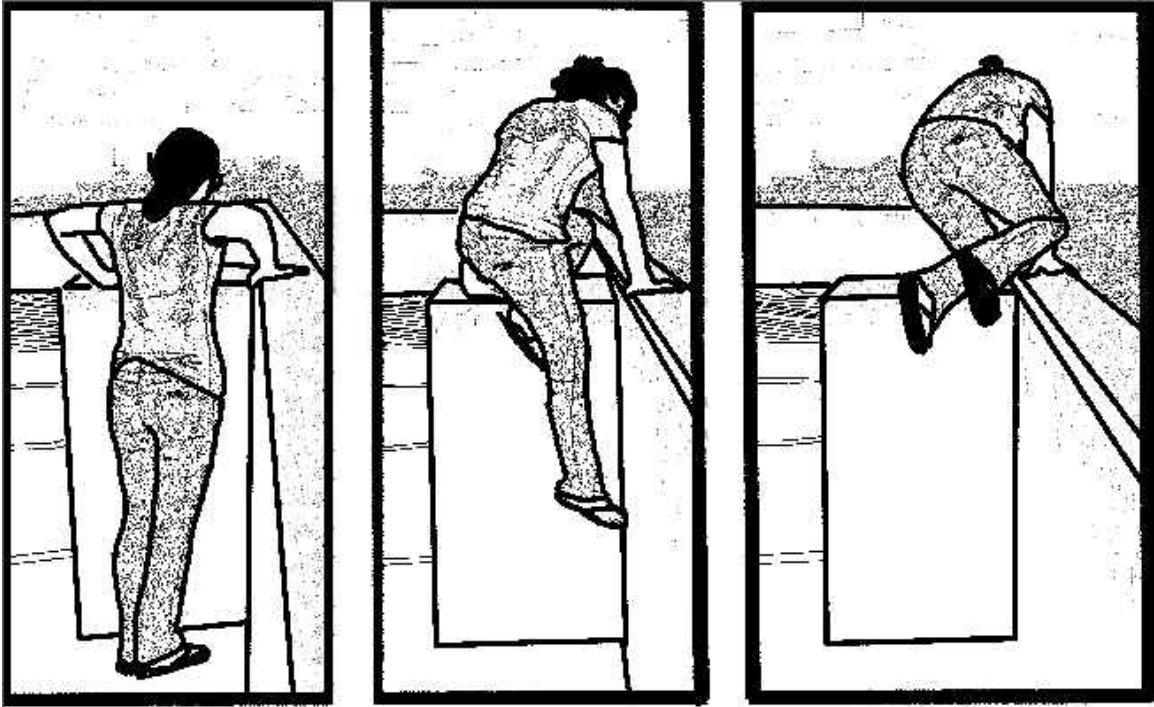
# Falia Takes Flight

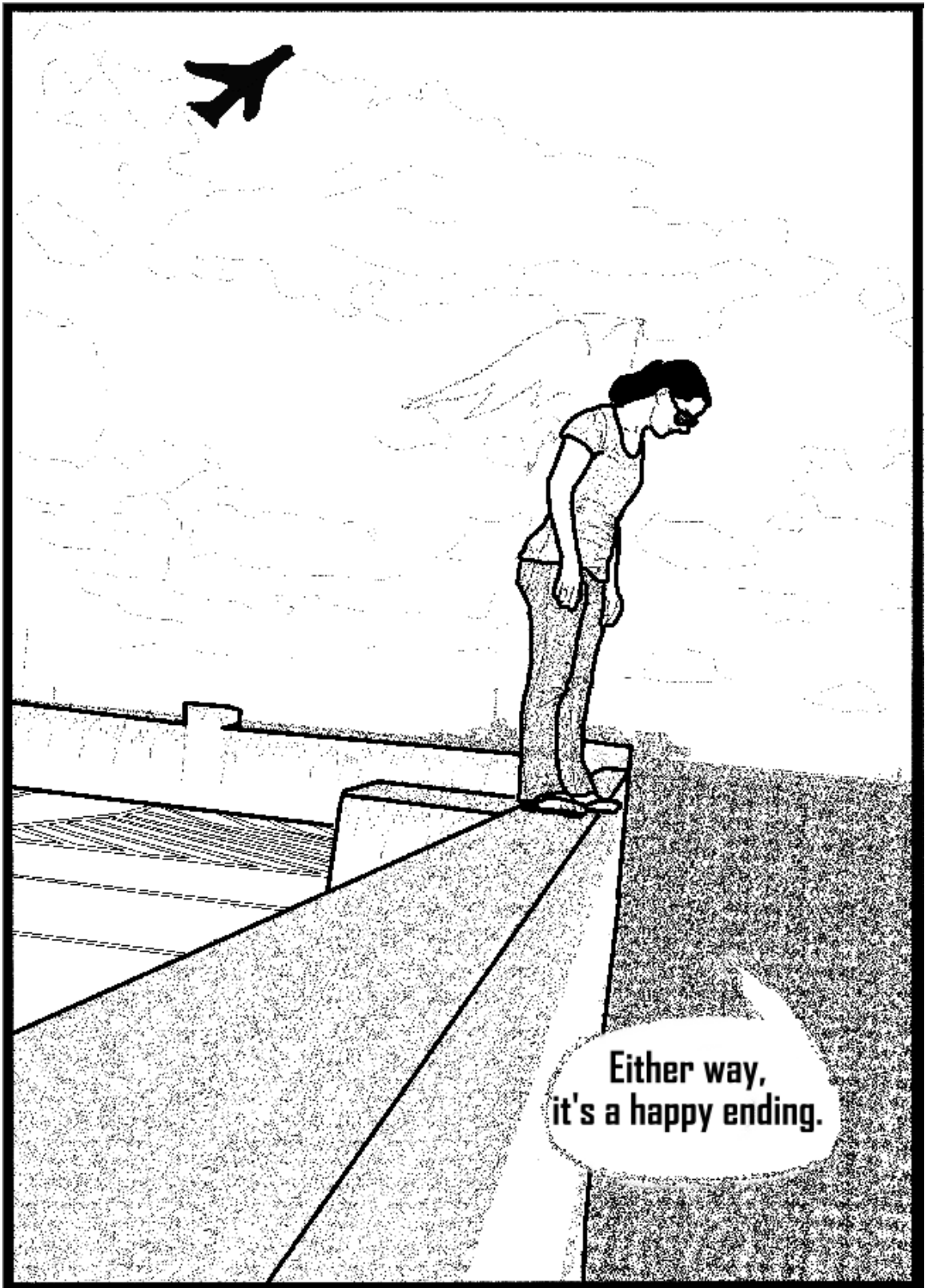
by Leslie Salas











## NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

The man across the street settled into his Lay-Z-Boy to watch her from his bedroom window. The bikini-clad blonde yanked on the cord before she got the motor to turn. Her old lawnmower sputtered and spat before it found its rhythm and hummed on the driveway, heavy and content.

The blonde slowly traced a light green outline of cropped grass around the old house. Her ponytail swayed behind her as she took long, deliberate strides, her muscles pulsing down her thighs. She'd left her shoes inside. She didn't want tan lines. Or maybe she just liked the feel of the grass between her toes. The man wasn't sure. But he knew that every other Saturday, the blonde donned a bikini and pressed her taut body into the heavy machine, its whirring blades just inches from her toenails.

The man also knew that the blonde had three bikinis. Today, she wore his favorite—the red one with the blue ruffles along the bust and hipline. Two weeks ago she'd worn a green string bikini with yellow stripes. The time before, it had been strapless, pink with purple polka dots. Sometimes she wore a bright ribbon in her hair. She liked bright colors. Last time, the ribbon had come loose and floated on the wind into her neighbor's yard. After she put the lawnmower away and went inside, the man ran across the street and snatched the ribbon. Now he had the ribbon in his left hand. He pressed it to his face. The blonde smelled of suntan lotion.

The smell reminded the man of the brunette with the metal detector whom he used to watch at the beach. Before the move. The man had the brunette's silver dollar on his nightstand next to the redhead's Hello Kitty keychain.



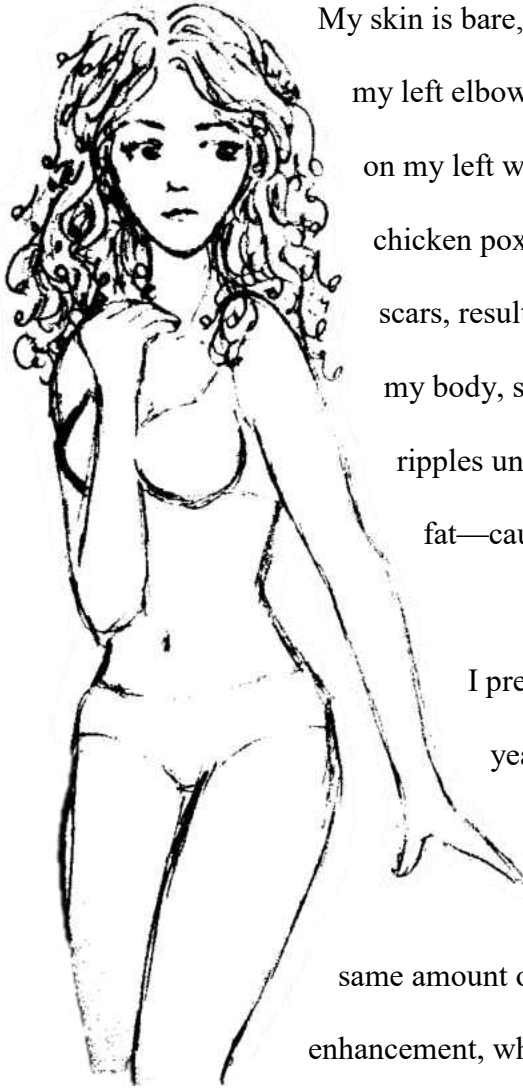
The blonde's mother stepped out of the house and waved at the blonde. The mother wore a dark muumuu and carried a small, bright backpack. The blonde stopped pushing the lawnmower but kept the motor running. The man wanted to hear what they said. The mother's gullet bobbed like she was saying something. The blonde's ponytail bobbed in response. The mother waddled her way to the open garage and got into the only car and drove away.

The blonde finished mowing the lawn. She even got out the trimmer and edged along the sidewalks and the house. The man thought she'd skip that step since she was now home alone.

*Alone.*

The man pulled on a pair of slacks and a stained Polo as the blonde returned the lawnmower and trimmer to the garage. The mother had left the house through the front door. If he was lucky, maybe the blonde would forget to lock it. The man stuffed the blonde's ribbon into his pocket. If the door was locked, maybe he could knock and say he was returning it. The suntan-smelling ribbon. He would smile. He would say he was the neighborhood watchman. He would tell her that he was just looking out for her. He'd say anything for the blonde to open the door just a little bit wider.

## HENNA



My skin is bare, relatively. There's a light patch on the inside of my left elbow where my skin refuses to tan. There's a blotch on my left wrist, a sunken dip on my forehead: remnants of chicken pox. My knees have several light white blobs, scab scars, results of clumsiness. Freckles lightly scatter across my body, stretch marks reach across my thighs. Subtle ripples underneath my skin—former muscle now turned to fat—cause me to cover much more skin than I used to.

By the time I entered graduate school, just 22, I preferred shopping in the *Misses* section. Only two years later, occasionally I'll wander through *Juniors* and muse on how long it's been—a decade?—since I fit into a size three. The same amount of time since my primary attempt at body enhancement, when I got my first cheap henna and learned to shell out good money for good art.

That first tattoo came during a summer in my tween years. I spent a day sunbathing with my mother and my older cousin, Nicol, and as we lay in the sand listening to the surf, Nicol told us she was determined to return to Georgia with a henna tattoo. I'd always

wanted a henna tattoo—I was obsessed with temporary tattoos and wanted something that looked more *real*—and begged my mother for permission to get one, too. My mother—still the cool mom in those days—was all for it, and drove us around the little emporiums on Cocoa Beach until we found a place that had henna. I don't remember what design my cousin chose, perhaps we matched, but I got a trashy sort of tribal tattoo at the small of my back, right between the dimples. (Looking back on it, that henna mix was all wrong. Black and tacky instead of brown and smooth and creamy.) The teen cashier used a stencil and didn't use it well. The pattern blurred and mushed as my cousin and I laughed, resting on knees and palms, butts in the air, waiting for the henna to dry enough for us to get back in the car and go home.

I noted the damage later that day as I peeled off the towel I'd been sitting on. The towel was stained, ruined. I scraped the crust off the back of my hips on my way to the shower. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I wasn't happy. That must have been the summer I stopped wearing low-cut belly shirts. There was no reason to show off that black smudge, and once I was out of the habit, the shirts worked themselves out of my wardrobe without my mother's urging.

I got my second henna freshman year of college in another tourist trap—Universal's City Walk. My father and I were meeting his brother at Islands of Adventure, but we were early for the rendezvous and had time to kill. I searched the colorful kiosks with their faux leather bracelets and tacky plastic key chains. Finally, I found the sign I was looking for: *Henna*.

I believe our conversation went something like this: “Hey, Dad. Can I get a henna tattoo?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want.”

(Not that, at nineteen years old, I needed to ask for permission.)

I looked at the patterns and prices and selected something about the size of a silver dollar: “love” in Japanese.

I pointed behind my right ear. “I’d like this kanji here,” I told the girl working the kiosk.

The girl had nails that were long, long, long. Like an inch long.

“You’d like what?” she asked, looking up from mixing the henna.

“This kanji. Ai.”

“I?”

“Ai. That’s how you pronounce the symbol.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

She didn’t take out a stencil but instead selected a long narrow paintbrush. She held the brush between her nails and expertly dipped the bristles into the creamy brown mixture.

And then she hesitated.

She looked between the laminated kanji in her pattern booklet and the space of skin on my neck.

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“I’m just thinking of where to start,” she said.

“Take your time,” I told her. I traced the proper order of the strokes for the kanji in my head.

The bristles tickled against my skin.

I watched the girl’s expression. She furrowed her brow. At one point she cringed, then quickly used the pointed back of the brush to wipe some henna away.

“Everything okay?” I asked. I looked at my dad. He shrugged.

“Yeah,” she said. “I messed up. But I got it off quick enough, so when you scrape off the dried henna you should be fine.”

“Okay,” I said.

I reviewed the kanji in the mirror when she finished. The top was blurred a little from where she’d messed up, but for the most part it looked great.

I felt pretty. Took a picture of myself and posted it on Facebook. “Like my new tattoo?” I asked.



When we finally met up with my uncle, he frowned at my neck.

“What’s that *thing*?” he asked.

I played stupid. “What *thing*?”

“Don’t tell me that’s real,” he said.

“It’s henna,” I said.

He looked at my father. “Did you let her do that?”

My father shrugged.

“You know,” my uncle said, “if my girls ever get a tattoo, I’ll disown them.”

“What?” I said. “Why?”

“Because it’s disgusting,” he said. “It’s trashy. You don’t need that crap on your skin.”

“I think it’s pretty,” I told my shoes.

“And I’ll disown you, too, if you ever get a tattoo,” he said, ending the conversation.

My cousin Nicol and I sat across from each other at a family dinner in a Puerto Rican restaurant in East Orlando about a decade after our henna tattoo nightmare in Cocoa Beach. She was down again from Georgia, this time with her husband. They had escaped the mundane for a slice of Florida and maybe some mofongo for a taste of the Caribbean as well. She mentioned that the rosary tattooed on her ankle needed to be touched up and said it was time for her next tattoo—the Taino fertility goddess above her left ovary. Remembering the trashy harsh black of that first “tattoo” against my whiteness, I asked my cousin if she’d do the goddess in black or brown, and she agreed the latter would be more flattering. A few months later, she’d have a pair of roses on her right shoulder instead.

I liked her tattoos, but they matched her personality, not mine. I knew I didn't want black and white like hers were. I didn't feel the need to copycat her anymore.

Instead I dreamt of full-color canvases scratching across my skin, vines and lilies from ankle to rib to wrist. I sketched complicated labyrinths in the shape of jewelry: necklaces, bracelets, anklets, a masquerade half-mask disappearing into my hairline and below my collarbone. I thought of blacklight sensitive ink, and how I could trace the skeleton beneath my skin. I wanted bright, beautiful skin.

Later at dinner, Nicol noticed the colorful shawl I had wrapped around my arms and tied behind my back. She mentioned I'd look good with a sleeve tattoo. I told her I was thinking about it.

"What?" my stepfather said, his silverware clanking on his plate. "Don't give her ideas!"

"No!" my mother said. "That's not nice looking. It's not right for girls, it looks bad."

My cousin and I shared a look—my mother was no longer the cool mom.

I told my parents to calm down. "One day, probably," I say. "I'm just waiting."

I thought of all the wedding shows my roommate watched—the ones where David Tutera makes the bride cover up her tattoos on her wedding day so she looks pure and lovely. "Maybe after I get married," I said. At least to keep up with appearances.

"I'll start on my back and work my way around to my arms," I said, envisioning the wings I'd wanted for a decade and how I could turn them into a full torso piece.

"Let's see what I can get away with at whatever job I get." I figured with my potential

career in academia, I needed to tread softly. “But it’s all going to be in white ink, and patterns done henna style, let the artist figure something out.”

My friend, Carrie, with her barely-noticeable white-ink rings etched around her wrists, cemented my decision on the color for my future tattoos. The subtlety of her bracelets gave me the idea that my tattoos would be easier to conceal when I needed to hide them.

“But what if you don’t like it?” my stepfather asked. “In ten years you’re going to regret it. Tattoos are a fad. It’ll die out.” We’d been having this conversation for months. He cited the tribal and barbed wire tattoos on upper arms that no one seems to get anymore.

“It’s different if it’s *art*,” Nicol, a painter, said. She gestured at him with a tostone.

“It’s not like I’m tattooing anyone’s name on my body,” I said. “Maybe my kids’ names—”

“See,” my stepfather interrupted, “I understand that, if it’s your kids or something, since that is never going to change.” He picked up his fork and knife and cut into his mofongo.

“Honestly,” I said, “I’d be happy with images in patterns, something organic and pretty.” I tried to diffuse the conversation. “We’ll see,” I said.

“You’re just going to do it anyway,” my mother said, “just to go against me. Because I don’t want you to do it.” For years, she’d claimed my personal choices were direct reflections on her parenting.



“No, Mom,” I said, trying my best to keep my voice level and calm, trying to prevent the disagreements from escalating into yelling, as was characteristic of our mother-daughter interactions since the day she found a half-naked boy in my closet. “It has nothing to do with doing things *against* you,” I said, “and everything to do with me doing what I want regardless of what anyone suggests.”

My third and favorite henna is the necklace I got while at the Bay Area Renaissance Festival junior year of undergrad. I waited in a short line and watched as two artists drew on skin. I gravitated toward the bohemian man with sandy hair. I’d heard of him—heard he was the good one. When my turn came, I handed the artist fifty bucks and told him to do whatever he wanted. He asked me to pick a part of my body, I opted for the upper chest. I didn’t want hands or feet—those were for special occasions, like weddings. And anywhere else probably moved too much and would cause the henna to rub off quicker. But the chest—that I could easily show off or cover up. Plus it was a large enough canvas for serious creativity.

The sandy-haired man sat me down and started free-drawing with henna. As he drew on me he asked me about my life, my interests. I mentioned my fascination with astronomy and books. Both passions he, as an artist, shared.

When he finished the lotus necklace, I noticed his acute attention to detail—the stars and moons he hid in the swirly patterns of paste that dyed my skin.

I vowed to see him again, that sandy-haired artist, at the next Ren Fest so that he could draw more on my skin. I wanted something a bit more bold, perhaps on the face. Or

I could wear the set of feathered owl wings I'd always wanted. Try them out for a few weeks before making the decision to make them permanent.

But I never made it back to see him. I was too busy, too stressed, too broke, too caught up in changing my major.

And though I haven't gotten a tattoo since, I still dream of swirls and patterns marking my skin. Vines. Feathers. Earth and sky. To ground me to art; to teach me to fly.



SO LONG, SOLDIER. SEND HER YOUR SON.

The girl in her favorite green sweater sat in Modern Physics when it happened. The professor was late. Her classmates made small-talk behind her. No one spoke to her. She preferred it that way. She arranged and rearranged her pencils. Parallel. Then perpendicular. Parallel again.

The door clanked open and the stale air of the basement classroom rushed toward the door. She and her classmates looked as Dr. Novak entered.

“Hello, everyone,” Dr. Novak said in her thick Czech accent. “Sorry I’m late!” She sashayed into the classroom, arms full of textbooks and papers. She set her stuff down on the desk and turned to the mobile chalkboards, arranging them in a neat line before picking up an eraser and smoothing out the ghostly smudges on the board. Dusty clouds puffed around her. Her long fingers were as white as sticks of chalk.

“Okay,” she said, smiling as she faced the class, “now that that’s settled, let’s get started.”

She turned to the boards, poised in front of the one farthest to the left, wrote in chalk:

$$t' = \frac{t}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}$$

Her handwriting was bold and elegant, her letters containing thick swirls and serifs foreign to the print of American professors. She said, “This formula should be familiar to all of you, is it not?”

The girl in the green sweater nodded, having read the chapter the night before. Time prime is equal to the original time divided by the square root of the quantity one minus velocity squared over the speed of light squared. An equation representing the dilation of time, dependent on speed at large fractions of the speed of light.

A keen sense of vertigo overwhelmed her: a rushing, fleeting feeling like the vacuum created by Dr. Novak when she'd opened the classroom door. The girl thought she felt her hair flutter around her face; the orangey-yellow of the overhead lighting was too much, too bright, too warm, too artificial. The girl squinted, closed her eyes, squinted them harder—

“Wren.”

His voice.

Her eyes sprung open. The dingy classroom was gone, replaced by an infinite canvas of white light, clear and consuming.

“Wren.” He repeated it. Her name.

She turned in her chair—the chair had come with her—and saw him, his figure at least, a small crumpled heap on a field stretcher, surrounded by the expanse of the white floor. The stretcher was not the hospital kind or the ambulance kind, not the metal kind with the soft mattress and the white sheets where you get wheeled around linoleum floors and where nurses add attachments to hang over—IV bags, blood bags, bags and bags to keep the heart pumping, to keep something circulating. His stretcher was the simple kind, not wooden plank simple kind, but the kind with two rods connected by a thick canvas, the kind that required two of one's buddies to carry and keep one from hitting the ground.

He must have been thirty, forty feet from her. She stood and suddenly she was there by his side. She knelt to him. Their fingers interlaced. He lay on his back, his bright green

eyes staring up at the white void above them. He wore the typical blouse and slacks of his profession. The patterned colors covered him from ankle to wrist to neck. She remembered when she'd first seen him in this uniform. How she cried. How he told her not to. He held one of her hands with both of his. Her left hand. With the silver band on her third finger. A place-holder, he'd called it. For when he came back.

She noticed the sand under his jagged fingernails. His lips: dry and cracked. His face: smudged with soot and haunted memory.

“Wren, I—”

“It’s okay.” She kept her voice soft, ran her free hand through the quarter-inch fuzz on his scalp.

Their gazes met.

She felt the full intensity of his eyes, bright and clear against his soiled skin. She felt tears brimming, felt them etch their way down her cheeks, felt them linger on her chin and drop onto his shoulder. They soaked into the fabric.

There were no blood splatters, no bullet holes, no rips in cloth or flesh. She couldn’t figure out how he was being taken. She pressed her hand, the one he held so tightly, to his chest. She felt the familiar percussion falter.

“I’m not sure how much time we have,” he said. “So fast. It was so fast.” His baritone voice shook, rattled in his chest. “Do you still want—”

“Yes.”

She must have smiled, because he smiled back.

“Wren,” he asked, “what if it doesn’t work?”

The girl leaned down and kissed him softly. “It will work, my love. It has to.”

He moved to sit up. She pressed his shoulders to the canvas stretcher settled under him. “Let me,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. She pulled her green sweater up over her head and threw it at his face. By the time he cleared his vision, another garment was thrown at him, each smaller than the last, until the girl pressed the length of her soft, bare flesh against his clothed muscle.

He fumbled at his belt. Her hands stayed his.

She undid the belt clasp and pulled the worked leather through the metal hoop. She untucked the front of his blouse and slipped her cool fingertips between his slacks and his stomach, pleased that his back arched at her touch

Her hands worked delicately. What she wanted wasn’t hard to find.

He’d always told her it was not a race, so she moved slowly, deliberately. She straddled him. His hands found her hips.

As she bent down to kiss him he clutched her close and rolled over so he could be on top. The girl giggled and wrapped her legs around him. She raked his back with her fingernails.

After, he slumped against the curve of her neck.

“Good?” she asked, tracing the edge of his ear.

He laughed and reached for her hand, sandwiching it between his palm and his cheek. “You have to ask?”

The girl smiled at him.

He rolled back over onto the gurney. He laughed a masculine laugh, saying, “Man, I needed that.”

“Good,” she said.

He coughed. When he pulled his hand away from his mouth, it was covered in splotches of blood. He and the girl both stopped smiling.

“What will you do?” he asked.

“Make do,” she said.

This satisfied him.

His breathing fell into the rhythm of sleep.

The girl lay with him, listening to the faltering beat of his heart. The room lost intensity and the white light started to dim. She’d heard stories of lovers and loved ones in comas, their minds lost to purgatory because they valued the dead more than their obligation to the world of life.

She had to leave.

She dressed, kissed his closed eyelids, and left him sprawled on his stretcher.

The girl shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her favorite green sweater and walked back to her chair, each step away from him slow and deliberate. In her left pocket she clutched the clinking metal of the tags she’d taken from around his neck. When she sat in her chair, she did not look back at him. She closed her eyes. She clutched the tags in her left hand, pressed the palm of her right below her belly button. She would bring part of him back.

Transient vertigo overwhelmed her.

“Very goodt, very goodt. Time dilation, that is correct.”

The girl blinked as she readjusted to the amber artificial lighting of the room. The blackboards looked the same, still held only the one formula written in white. Dr. Novak faced the class, chalk held high. The girl's left sweater pocket was empty.

“Now what is the other formula that we need to take into consideration for travel at speeds close to  $c$ ?” she asked. “Remember, the fabric of our universe is dependent on the inherent correlation between time *and* space.”

The yellow of the basement classroom hurt the girl's eyes. She kept her red-rimmed gaze on her pencils. One of her classmates coughed behind her.

The girl raised her hand. Illegible shapes were pressed into her palm.

“Yes, Wren?”

“Length contraction,” the girl said to her pencils.

“Very goodt.” Dr. Novak smiled. She turned to the board. “Can you give me the formula for that?”

The girl squinted against the yellow light. “Length prime is equal to the original length times the square root of the quantity one minus velocity squared over the speed of light squared,” she said.

“Yes, that is correct.” Next to the time dilation formula, Dr. Novak wrote:

$$l' = l \sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}$$

“Now,” she turned back to the class, “what do both of these formulas have in common?”

The girl wished she had picked a seat in the back of the room.

“They both have that square root,” a student called from the back of the classroom.

The dizziness from her trip back from the Void would not subside.



“Very goodt,” Dr. Novak said. “What is that factor called?”

The girl held her head in one of her hands.

Another classmate behind her coughed.

“No one knows the answer?” Dr. Novak asked, her hand on her hip.

The girl in her favorite green sweater sighed. “The inverse of the radical is called the Lorentz factor,” she said.

Dr. Novak nodded. “Very goodt,” she said. She moved to write the formula on the board, but stopped and frowned. “Wren, you are not looking so goodt. Are you okay?”

The girl shook her head.

“Go. Come see me later, during office hours.”

“Thank you,” the girl said. She stood, left her notebook and pencils in perpendicular. The rush of air pressure equalizing as she pulled the classroom door open calmed her nausea.

She still headed out. She wanted the sun.

The girl took the stairs up to the entry level. Her stomach cramped as she passed the Foucault pendulum in the lobby. She kept walking, out of the building, down the steps, across the grass. She lay under a giant oak tree by the water molecule fountain. The light of the sun filtered through the tree leaves, leaving a dappled pattern of light and shadow on her skin, not unlike the pattern on his uniform.

The girl wondered how long it would take before those around her realized she’d returned with a gift from the dead.

## GETTING OFF

She knows she shouldn't, but she does it anyway. She opens the front door and lets him in.

Her parents are at work. It's the first day of summer. He's here and she knows why. He has parked down the street. He walked here. He is not allowed in, but she lets him in anyway.

The door closes behind him. Their clothes come off. There's a tense rush about it. Her hands shake. He and she, they trip over themselves on the way to the shower: hot water and skin against skin. She wants more. She pulls him out of the damp room and brings him to her bed. They drip on the tousled sheets.

She lies beneath him—but he hesitates.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

She gives the slightest of nods.

“Really. Are you sure you want to do this?”

She sighs. Irritated.

But she gives him credit for asking. Perhaps he's not as stupid as they say.

He makes her say it: “Yes.”

They fiddle with mechanics, laughing nervously until they get it right.

He slides in.

She barely notices.

He smiles at her.

She looks past him, at the ceiling.

This is it?

This is what all of the hype is about?

This is nothing special.

But she fakes it anyway.

Loudly.

The house is empty. She might as well hear her own echo in it.

Her mother calls the house phone. Asks her to get dinner ready.

She dons a thick robe: soft blue with fluffy clouds. She doesn't bother tying it shut.

She stands in the kitchen, in nothing but the robe, and pours cream of mushroom soup into a crockpot. She adds chicken breast. Vegetables. She feels domestic. She smiles at him as she secures the lid. Heat on high.

They resume.

She fakes. She waits. She must be missing something. Surely this is not all there is to it.

He is too energetic. Too rough. Too quick.

He lies next to her, panting. He is finished for the day. He needs to go. Her mother will be home soon.

She lies to him: it was great, the best. She has no idea what she is talking about. She feels nothing.

Still, she invites him over again tomorrow.

But tomorrow, she isn't feeling it. She still can't understand the fuss.

He doesn't push it.

They lie on her bed. Cuddle. Naked.

Something nags at her subconscious. Something isn't right. He should leave.

They lie on her bed. Cuddle. Naked.

It is the second day of summer. Her mother calls, asks if she'd like something for lunch. She declines.

Her mother is suspicious. She knows it. He should leave. But she says nothing.

They lie on her bed. Cuddle. Naked.

The front door unlocks. Opens.

Panic.

He hides himself, poorly, in her closet. She throws on her clothes. Her shirt is inside out.

She thinks to throw her comforter over him in the closet, to pretend she is making her bed. This is the better choice. Instead, she steps out. Meets her mother and her mother's boyfriend by her bedroom door. Her cheeks are flushed. She's out of breath.

Her mother and her mother's boyfriend, they will not trust her anymore.

They ask her questions. She acts guiltier than she is.

Her mother and her mother's boyfriend, they find him hiding in the closet.

She who did nothing that day, she is no longer the favored, perfect child.

Her mother's boyfriend tells him to get dressed and takes him to his car. The car is parked around the corner.

He and she, they will be banned from seeing each other. Banned for two weeks. Banned until a family meeting—with both families—to establish rules. Rules constructed by her mother, presented by her mother's boyfriend. Accepted, but ignored, by all others.

But for now: she is alone.

Her mother and her mother's boyfriend, they have gone back to work.

She does not eat lunch. She contemplates the consequences. The breach of trust.

Later, her mother corners her.

“We weren't doing anything,” she insists. “We only took a nap.”

Her mother's boyfriend doesn't believe her. Why were they in her room? Why was she so disheveled? Why was he hiding in the closet?

She ignores him.

Her mother is crying. “Why are you doing this to me?” her mother asks. “After the way I raised you, you get back at me this way?”

She can't believe her mother takes this personally, thinks this is a deliberate attack against her. She stresses that no harm was meant, that nothing happened. She tells the truth. They lay in bed together. That is all.

Her mother asks softly, “Are you still a virgin?” This is her mother's only concern.

“Yes,” she lies. Her voice cracks. She feels her blush, her body language betray her.

Her mother nods.

Leaves her.

Never speaks of it again.

STICKY FINGERS

FADE IN:

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - DAY

Two figures sit across from each other in a cushioned booth in a clean, spacious rail car on a magnetic, levitating train.

The large window over the table of the booth frames lush Florida fauna whizzing by at 300 miles per hour.

KAHLILA, late-teens, with sultry features but a homey disposition, sits with her socked feet tucked under her. She peels an orange as she reads from a large, antiquated textbook in her lap.

Across from her, TRUDY, early-40s, austere and streamlined, CLICKS her manicured nails along the back of her eReader. She watches Kahlila from over the top of the device.

Kahlila slowly turns a page.

INSERT - BOTTOM HALF OF KAHLILA'S FACE.

Kahlila chews an orange slice slowly. Some juice trickles down her chin. She wipes it with the back of one of her hands. She smiles, cheeks rosy.

BACK TO SCENE.

Trudy, still watching Kahlila from across the booth, presses her lips together.

Kahlila lifts her dark, lush lashes. She gestures to the half-peeled orange on the table between them.

Trudy shakes her head.

Kahlila shrugs and takes a new wedge from the fruit. She sucks on it softly as she returns to reading her book.

INT. PRINT SHOP - DAY - FLASHBACK

The print shop canopy, entirely made of glass and steel, modeled after a geodesic dome, filters sunlight into the workplace. A light sprinkling of snow falls on the grass and trees outside.

A hundred-year-old press sits on one side of the shop. A PRINTER, late 40s, with calloused hands, pumps the foot lever and manually slides paper into the press.

YOUNG TRUDY, early 20s, less severe but still sleek, sits at a workbench surrounded by books in various levels of construction. She sews the spine of a book.

Young Trudy knots the string and cuts close to the knot. The rhythmic whirring of the hand press sounds OS.

She flips through, caressing the pages with her fingertips.

She lays archival glue to the outside pages and affixes the cover.

Young Trudy holds the completed book in front of her. She opens the cover to the title page.

INSERT - TITLE PAGE OF BOOK.

"Dangerous Instincts"

BACK TO SCENE.

Young Trudy leafs through the book. OS - The sound of the press stops. Printer grunts.

PRINTER (O.S.)

*Trudy!*

Young Trudy looks up, alarmed.

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Kahlila sticks the last orange wedge into her mouth as she continues to read from the heavy book. She sucks on her fingertips. Orange rinds are littered around her.

Trudy sucks the inside of her cheek. She sets the eReader down and watches Kahlila.

TRUDY

(softly)

You should wash your hands.

Kahlila remains engrossed in her book.



TRUDY

Kahlila.

Kahlila holds up her index finger.

KAHLILA

Just a sec.

She reads one last line and dog-ears her book. She sets it on the table between herself and Trudy. She looks at Trudy from under her long eyelashes.

KAHLILA

You were saying?

Trudy blinks at Kahlila.

TRUDY

Your hands.

Kahlila rubs the pads of her fingertips together. She smiles at Trudy and shrugs.

Trudy brings two fingers to one of her temples and looks out the window. She is missing her third and fourth finger on that hand. Scenery slips by the window: palms, oaks, and pines in parallel. The train hums.

Kahlila collects her orange rinds into a small pile.

TRUDY

You know, your father--

KAHLILA

Tell me about the old printer.

Trudy lifts an eyebrow at Kahlila.

TRUDY

What? That old dot matrix?

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY - FLASHBACK

A late-80s home office with a dot matrix printer next to an early PC. The printer SCREECHES as it prints each line of text on long reams of wide continuous paper printed with green and white stripes.

TRUDY (V.O.)  
Made a complete racket. Slowest printer  
ever.

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - CONTINUOUS

Trudy smiles at Kahlila from across the booth.

TRUDY  
But still the most efficient.

Kahlila presses her lips together.

KAHLILA  
The person.

INT. PRINT SHOP - DAY - FLASHBACK

The Printer, hand stuck in the gearwork of the old press,  
moans. Young Trudy frantically pulls on various levers of  
the old press, trying to get Printer's hand free.

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Trudy folds her hands on the table.

TRUDY  
(seriously)  
Chopped my fingers off because I touched  
a manuscript with sticky fingers.

KAHLILA  
Ugh. *Fine.*

Kahlila stands and walks to a washroom at the end of the  
train car. She slams the door shut behind her.

Trudy smiles after her.

In the window, wetlands speed past.

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - WASHROOM - CONTINUOUS

The washroom is narrow but neatly furnished with clean  
lines and bright light fixtures.

Kahlila washes the soap from her hands and splashes her face with water. She stares at her reflection in the mirror, hands moving from her mouth to her ears.

She keeps her hands in front of her, palms toward her. She watches the backs of her hands in the mirror. She tucks the last two fingers on one of her hands into her palm. Eight fingers. Flexes them out again. Ten fingers.

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - BOOTH - MOMENTS LATER

Kahlila slides back into her space in the booth across from Trudy.

Trudy flips through Kahlila's heavy book, inspecting the spine and the cover.

TRUDY  
Been through a lot.

KAHLILA  
That's my mother's.

Trudy traces a finger down the binding of the book.

TRUDY  
Is this any way to treat an heirloom?

Kahlila fidgets in her seat.

TRUDY  
How about this: let's trade.

Trudy offers Kahlila her eReader.

TRUDY  
Keep this for your trip. It's got all your favorites, and some of mine.

Kahlila hesitates before taking the eReader.

TRUDY  
Plus it won't be as heavy as lugging this thing around.

Trudy gestures to the giant book.

Kahlila watches her uncertainly.

TRUDY (CONT'D)

I'll keep this safe. By the time you're back, this will be good as new. Well, the binding, at least.

Kahlila holds the eReader as if she's afraid to drop it.

Trudy shakes her index finger at Kahlila.

TRUDY

No sticky fingers. Deal?

Kahlila hugs the eReader closer to her.

KAHLILA

Deal.

INT. PRINT SHOP - DAY - FLASHBACK

The Printer struggles at the press, fingers caught in the gearwork.

Young Trudy sticks her fingers by the Printer's.

YOUNG TRUDY

Hang on.

She wiggles her fingers wide enough to stretch the gear work open, leaving enough room for the Printer's mangled hand to come free.

The Printer's attempts to flex the hand, but stops and whimpers.

The machinery slips. The gears move, pinching Young Trudy's hand.

YOUNG TRUDY

Shit, shit, shit.

Young Trudy and the Printer try to stop the gears from turning. They fail.

The machine pinches off the tips of the last two fingers on her hand. She stifles a cry.

Blood mixes with the wet ink on the printed page still in the press.

The Printer brings Young Trudy a towel and wraps her hand in it, raising the hand above her head.

PRINTER

Keep it elevated.

With his/her good hand, the Printer reaches for a corded phone on the wall of the print shop, dials three numbers and waits.

Young Trudy, clearly in substantial pain, does not cry. She keeps her hand held above her head. The towel soaks through with some blood.

YOUNG TRUDY

(voice cracking)

What now?

The Printer gives Young Trudy a sympathetic glance.

PRINTER

No deal. No more.

INT. MAGLEV TRAIN CAR - BOOTH - MOMENTS LATER

Outside the window, the wetlands have turned to open ocean. The window polarizes. The bright orange sun kisses the turquoise sea and melts into the horizon.

Trudy leans her head against the window. She holds Kahlila's tattered tome in her lap.

The eReader illuminates Kahlila's face.

TRUDY

Since you're trusting me with your book,  
and I'm trusting you with my eReader...

Kahlila's lashes lift. She watches Trudy from over her eReader.

TRUDY

Let me tell you about the Printer.

The glow of the eReader switches off.

Kahlila slides the eReader onto the table top.

Trudy places Kahlila's book next to it, then rests her hands palm-down with the hand missing fingers on the book and the whole hand over the eReader. She speaks MOS.

The cerulean sky acquiesces to indigo twilight. The orange peels rest on the table. The train hums.

FADE TO BLACK.

## HOME REMEDY

I find you curled in the chair-and-a-half in the den, facing the empty fireplace. No fire is lit, no candles for comfort. The blinds are drawn shut to the twilight outside. Your knees tuck to your chest and the thick white robe you've wrapped around your small frame slips off your shoulder. Disheveled and damp, your auburn locks cast carelessly about your face and bare shoulders.

In your delicate hands rests the crystal of a glass, half-filled with red wine. Its rim just kisses your pale lips.

"Lillia," I say your name softly into the room. I hope my voice does not betray the weight in my chest.

Your eyes fixate on the empty fireplace. The glass never leaves your lips.

My feet make soft footprints as I tread farther into the room. I kneel down next to you, just below your eye level, and try again. "Lilly?"

The room darkens; I'm colorblind in the twilight. Not even the copper hue of your hair survives the lighting of dusk. Only the red of your wine stands out—bold as the blood on our sheets.

I touch the backs of my fingers to your robed arm and you start, sloshing the wine around in the glass. Some of it escapes the crystal's lip and trails across the pale knuckles of your left hand. Your steel eyes shift to me as you bring your hand to your lips and lick the wine away. You are a sphinx merely grooming. Your lips adjust the diamond ring on your third finger. You regard me blankly.

"You okay?" I ask quietly.

“Same as always.” You look down to the still wine in the glass: absurdly red, stark and maddening in our monochromatic den. “Trish, from work,” you say, “the one who was gone on that trip with her husband for like a month,” you glance at me briefly while I nod recognition at the name, “she—she asked me today about the baby.”

I swallow audibly. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” You sip your wine. “And the whole office just stopped to listen.” There’s an edge in your voice.

I swallow again, less audibly. “What did you say?” I ask.

You take another sip of wine. “I lost it.’ And I walked into my office and closed the door. Nobody bugged me for the rest of the day.”

“No one said anything?”

“Not really.” You glance sideways at me. “I mean, there were the occasional I’m-so-sorry’s, and a few people even sent me e-mails, just saying that if I wanted, needed, help, they were there for me.” You huff. “The usual crap.”

You take a large gulp of wine and look at the empty fireplace. “I mean, I guess I never really told them what happened. I just stopped talking about the baby and they stopped asking and it was fine. But, I mean, what did they expect? That I should just flat-out tell them when the doctor told me the baby might have—that the baby might be—you know! That when he told me that I freaked out and didn’t want to handle the responsibility? That I went home and shoved fresh parsley up my kooch for three days straight and drank nothing but parsley tea and Vitamin C pills until I bled?”

I close my mouth and smooth my face.

You don’t notice my effort. You take another large swig of wine.



“Was I supposed to tell them my whole life story? That it hurt like a mother and I’m still scared and sad? That I didn’t even consult with you or any doctors beforehand because I thought I’d be talked out of it? Should I have told them that their Human Relations liaison was bigoted against her own child and couldn’t bear the thought of not having a baby that was normal?”

You finish off the wine and fling the glass into the fireplace. The crystal shatters against the brick wall.

The room darkens considerably from the twilight. My eyes adapt to the darkness of the room. I see tears on your cheeks.

“You don’t hate me, do you?” you ask. Your voice skids on the crystal shards in the fireplace. “I wanted the baby, I really did. But I wanted a baby with a chance in life, more than a baby who would suffer and struggle.”

You grab my hand. Your eyes find mine for the first time in months. “You understand, right?”

PICKY EATER

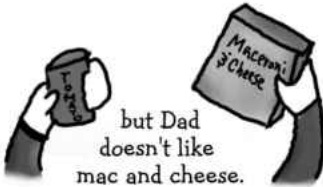
# Picky Eater

BY:  
Leslie Salas



## ~RUMMAGING IN THE PANTRY FOR DINNER~

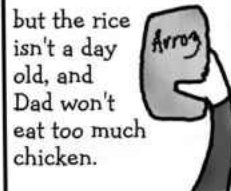
There's hamburger in the fridge,  
I could make chili mac



I could make  
chicken alfredo



I could make stirfry



I could make fresh rice  
with corned beef



Later that week



Hello?

Hi, Mom.  
I'm not interrupting,  
am I?

No, no, you're fine.



How are wedding plans?

Fine. We got the stuff  
for the capias today.  
They're pretty.



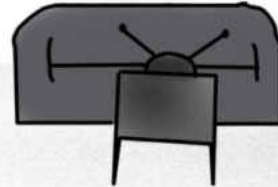
I'll have to send you  
pictures.

Oh, great. Listen, Mom,



I have a question.

When I was little and I didn't like my food, what happened?



Your dad had you sit there for hours --



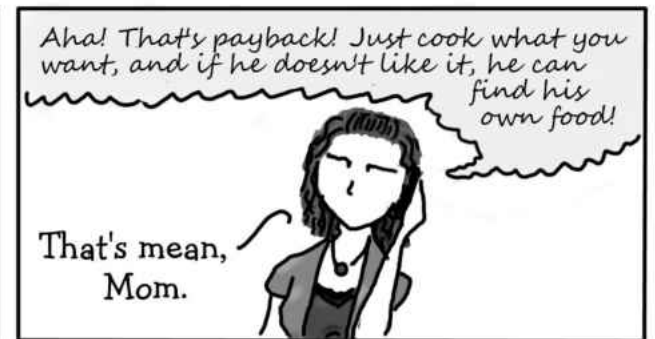
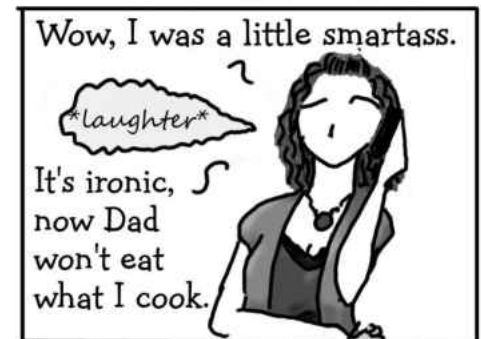
-- until you finished it.

\*laughs\*



Your father didn't understand what to do. He thought you just didn't want to eat, so he tried to be strict.





## THE MADWOMAN IN THE FAMILY

My mother and her boyfriend, Shane, started dating when I was in middle school. It's been four or five years since then. I've known him even longer, since fifth grade, when he regularly visited campus to pick up his adopted daughter, my best friend. He's a nice man with blonde hair and blue eyes, your perfect Anglo-Saxon poster boy, completely different from the dark features my mother and I earned from our Latino heritage. Shane always smiles, always gives advice, always does his best. When his first wife, my Gifted teacher, was diagnosed with a terminal disease (brain tumors) he never left her side. It was only after his wife's passing that he and my mother found each other in their loneliness.

And it's only now, halfway through high school, that he and my mother sit me down to tell me the secret about Shane's mother and her mental illness. She arrives tomorrow, and will be staying with us for a few days.

"Be careful with her," my mother tells me in a hushed tone. "Don't take her seriously."

Shane nods. "Schizophrenic," he says.

I mouth the word. It feels foreign on my tongue. A mental disorder, I know, but I have no idea what that means. For her or for me.

"She's usually nice," Shane says, "but half the time she doesn't know what she's talking about."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Don't worry," he says. "Just take everything she says with a grain of salt."

I turn to the Internet for answers about what I should expect from my encounter with Shane's mother. The U.S. National Library of Medicine tells me:

*Schizophrenia is a complex mental disorder that makes it difficult to:*

- *Tell the difference between real and unreal experiences*
- *Think logically*
- *Have normal emotional responses*
- *Behave normally in social situations*

There is a long list of symptoms I scan and memorize, things to check for when I meet her.

I find it hard to believe Shane's mother is a madwoman. After all, he's been so steady, so giving and logical and well-grounded. I find him more like a dad than my own father. How could this man, a firefighter, be raised by a woman completely out of touch with reality?

We're at the house my mother won in the divorce when Shane's mother arrives with a flourish: loud and bright and happy. Platinum-dyed hair, clear blue eyes, and sun-worn skin. She seems normal to me. Maybe a bit eccentric, with her giant bug-eyed sunglasses and oversized glittery purse, but normal. She smiles big and brilliantly, gives me a long warm hug. She wraps her arm around my shoulders and speaks to me as if she has known me forever: "It's *so* nice to see you. How are you?"

She's just settled into what I thought would be a family gathering. Yet my mother and Shane excuse themselves. "We've got to go *somewhere*," they tell me. "Will you be okay alone with her?"



“Sure,” I say. I find out later that the *somewhere* they’ve gone is the new house Shane has built while the housing market is still ripe. But I won’t find out about this house for another year or so. They are keeping the house a secret from Shane’s daughter, my (former) best friend, who they will later kick out when she turns eighteen due to her unruly behavior.

Shane’s mother and I sit facing one another slightly on Shane’s futon in the living room of the house my parents once shared. The walls are painted the brownish-pink of a Frosty from Wendy’s, covering the bright Floridian teal my mother decorated the house with a decade before. The rest of the room is sparse, still missing half the furniture my father took with him two years before.

I remain pleasant in my chat with Shane’s mother. She’s not exhibiting irritability or flat affect. She’s draped herself on the edge by the window, and frequently peeks between the shades to view the grass and the fence and the sky. I sit with my feet curled up under me.

She asks me about my life. I tell her about my high school experience: how I’m always super busy keeping up with my demanding IB/AP classes and managing a large robotics team. “But I like being busy,” I tell her. “I enjoy the challenge.”

She asks me if I have a boyfriend, and I can’t help but smile, thinking of the cute, spontaneous boy I met in robotics from a rival high school. “Yes,” I say, “but I don’t see him very often.”

“Well, look at you, you’re glowing! You love him very much, don’t you.”

I blush and nod. I think of the question he told me he was planning to ask. How I told him I’d say yes. He has the hair, eyes, and complexion of Johnny Depp with the jawline and cheekbones of Orlando Bloom. All the girls on the robotics team crush on him, but he is mine.

“Well, where is he?” Shane’s mother asks, gesturing wildly. “Why aren't you with him right now?”

I shrug. I think about my mother’s hysteria the day Shane found him hiding, naked, in my closet.

I don’t tell her about the double standard of my mother’s prudery—that my mother lives with Shane in the house my father’s parents put the down-payment on, but I can’t be in a house alone with my boyfriend. Because, according to her, she has nothing left to lose. She’s been married before. There’s no illusion of lily white virginity to maintain.

“Oh honey,” Shane’s mother says, “you're only young once! You should be with him right now! Invite him over!”

I tell her he can't come over if my mother isn't home.

She pouts. She wants to meet him.

I pout with her. I want to see him, too.

This is a woman who speaks my language. She's not crazy. She makes the most sense out of everyone I know! It's a shame my mother and Shane won't listen to her. She has great things to say. Pity they say she's mad.

She mentions her lucky charms, she's a lucky person. I reevaluate my diagnosis. “God made me lucky,” she says, leaning over to put a hand on my leg. “I always get great parking spots. Always. It's a gift. He gave me the gift of Great Timing.”

“Oh?” I say. “That must be convenient.” I wonder if this counts as a delusion or just religious fervor.

“Oh, it's wonderful!” she tells me. “It's great. And you know what else He gave me?”

“What?” I ask, leaning in towards her, really giving her my full attention.

“A wellspring!” She tucks a lock of platinum blonde hair behind her ear. “Do you know what a wellspring is?”

“No,” I say slowly, straightening up a little.

“Oh, it's just beautiful,” she says, “absolutely gorgeous. The first time I saw one I was in the kitchen of my house down in Miami, and it was kind of sprinkling outside, like a normal little summer shower, and then I saw something out of the corner of my eye, and there it was, in my backyard, this beautiful fountain of water streaming up, making these gorgeous designs.” The madwoman motions with her hands, making little upward circular motions. “I started yelling at my other son to come look, saying Craig, come see this, can you see it? It's beautiful. But he took forever and by the time he got there it was gone. And the rain had stopped coming down and there was just the prettiest rainbow up in the sky.”

“Oh, wow,” I say. “That's incredible!” I mentally check Hallucinations off my list.

“I told my pastor and he said that's very rare, and I'm very lucky.” She peeks between the blinds again. “He told me Craig wasn't supposed to see the wellspring, it was just for me. It's a sign that God is with me, and that I'm in the right place.” She turns back to me. “In the past few months I've found three of them on my property! That's why I'll never move.”

“Yeah,” I say, running a finger down the side of the futon. “I wouldn't move either if I had those in my yard.”

I don't see the madwoman over the next three years, though I hear about her from my mother. She sends my mother long, handwritten notes in gorgeous calligraphy, thanking her for being such an important part of Shane's life.

I am absent when Shane asks my mother to marry him. I'm a little offended he didn't talk to me about it first—I mean, I'm her daughter. Isn't this supposed to work like asking her parents for permission?—but I let it go.

I receive a phone call from my mother while I'm studying for an undergrad General Physics final in one of my friends' dorm rooms. It's uncharacteristic for my mother to call me in the middle of the day. I excuse myself and answer.

"I'm engaged!" she tells me. She sounds young, very young. Giddy like a school girl. Ever since she started dating Shane, it seems she has regressed.

"Congratulations!" I say. It's been eight years since they started dating. It's about damn time. "How'd he do it?" I ask.

"Well, since everyone was here for his fortieth birthday party, he figured now would be a good time. He got his parents together and Mami and Papi, and he asked in front of both of them!"

"Oh, that was nice!" I say.

"Well," her voice lowers, "not really."

"Oh?"

"Shane's mom was not happy," she says, each word sharp.

"What?" I ask. "Why not?" The madwoman always acted like she loved our family. I think of those letters she sent to my mother. I can't believe that she wouldn't be excited.

“I don't know,” my mother says, voice soft. “She got mad and just left. And Shane had to follow her and talk to her. I don't know what happened, but now she won't talk to me.”

“Well, that sucks,” I say. What else am I supposed to say?

She sighs. I look at the Queen posters on my friend's wall.

“Well screw her,” I tell my mother. She's always such a worrier, over every little thing. “You're getting married and that's what counts.”

“That's the thing,” she says. “I'm scared she's going to do something.” She makes it sound ominous.

“*Do something?*” I ask. My mother is forty-five-fucking-years-old. How the fuck is someone going to prevent her from getting married? I get looks from my friends across the room. I lower my voice. “Mom, what's she going to do? She can't stop you from getting married.”

“Yes, she can. At the church. What if she says something?”

“You really think she's going to pull a *Jane Eyre*?”

“What's that?”

“Never mind.” I should know better than to use a literary reference. My mother doesn't read. “You think she's going to *object*?”

“Well, I don't know. She could do anything. You know how she is.”

I don't know how she is. All I know are stories. I hear she's crazy. I hear she's nuts. All I know is the day we talked on the futon. “Mom, don't worry about it. Everything will be fine.”

“I hope so,” she says, unconvinced.

When I get off the phone, my friends ask what happened.

“My mom just got engaged,” I tell them as I settle back down in my corner of the room, “and she's worried her groom's mentally-deranged mother is going to ruin her wedding.”

One of my friends, Kim, raises her eyes from her notes. “Seriously?” she asks.

The owner of the dorm room, Jon, strokes his frizzy mustache. “What do you mean by ‘mentally deranged?’” he asks.

“Schizophrenic,” I say. “But she’s probably exaggerating.”

“I dunno,” says Alex, rounding out the room. He’s affectionately known as our friend with the worst family relations. “I’ve dealt with some schizophrenics,” he says. “When things go wrong, it’s not pretty.”

In the midst of my first semester in grad school, I come home for half a week to help prep for my mother’s wedding. I rush from bridal shop to bridal shop with my mother. We are searching for the perfect mantilla, like a bridal veil but used as a shawl, for part of her wedding ceremony.

I haven’t seen or heard much about Shane’s mother in the past two years of what I consider an excessively long engagement for a couple that’s been together for a decade now. But I know that there’s still some tension between her and my mother. The tension is so bad that when Shane goes to Miami to visit his mother, my mother has to stay behind.

“Are you still worried about Shane’s mom?” I ask on our way to yet another boutique.

My mother looks sideways at me. “No,” she says. “I think it will be okay.” She wrings her hands. “Shane talked to his brother and his cousin. They’re going to make sure she takes her pills.”

Pills? I didn’t know they had pills for schizophrenia. But I never really did in depth research in the first place. I haven’t checked back to see what kind of cures technology offers for this kind of disorder. I wonder how these pills work. How they affect the brain. I wonder if these pills replace chemicals that cause worry and paranoia, or if they just cover up the symptoms.

I see the madwoman for the first time in several years after the wedding rehearsal. My new boyfriend, Jesse, and I stand in the courtyard of a bizarrely modern catholic church with other members of the family. My mother and I both wanted the old cathedral for her ceremony—*that* looked like a church for a wedding, with real wooden pews and white vaulted ceilings filled with glass chandeliers. But the church decommissioned the cathedral and built this multi-million-dollar peach monstrosity, all sharp angles and smooth edges, structured so the parishioners sit in a circle, surrounding the priests and altar at the center of the room. The architecture bothers me.

I find myself uncomfortable. Not because I no longer identify myself as Catholic or because I should be labeled a whore or even because this is the also the church my Johnny-Depp-Orlando-Bloom-look-alike-now-ex-boyfriend attends. Perhaps I am bitter. I will not be able to get married in the familiar old cathedral, either. Not that I’m getting married. Not anymore. I waited for four years for Depp-Bloom to get his shit together. I couldn’t wait any longer.

I spot Shane's mother tracing the labyrinthine pattern of the floor tiles in the courtyard. Her hair is still a sunny yellow, her sun-worn skin a bit more wrinkled than before. She's dressed in a casual, bohemian outfit.

I squeeze my boyfriend's hand to excuse myself. Even though we've been dating a year, I know he's uncomfortable with so many new people around. I tell him I won't be long. He nods and lets me go. I watch him for a moment, dressed in all black, so serious, blue eyes and dark black hair and a shadow of a dimple on his cheek.

I turn back to the madwoman. I say hello and give her a hug. It takes her a moment to recognize me. "You've grown so much!" she finally says.

She seems cordial enough—but she's distracted. Distant. She blinks up at the giant torch in the center of the courtyard, eyes wet and shimmery.

Since Shane will be my new step-father, this is supposed to be my new grandmother. But she doesn't seem grandmotherly at all.

Her eyes never seem to focus. I finally understand what it means to have *glassy* eyes.

I leave her and return to Jesse. I take his hand. I smooth the hem of my new dress, pleated and pink. With this much family around, I take the time to dress well. With this much family around, I know how they'll talk. Puerto Ricans, as well-meaning and passionate as we are about family, are also horrible gossipers. I know the impression I'm supposed to make.

The day of my mother's wedding, I poke my head out of the bridal chamber and spot Shane's mother gliding across the church lobby. Gliding.



She wears what I can only describe as a horrendously ugly and out-of-fashion brown smock. I can't bear to call it a dress. Its sleeves are sheer. The geometric patterning across the length of it is unflattering at best.

I hope her wardrobe is the worst of her decisions for the day.

The madwoman finds Shane—my soon-to-be stepfather. He wears a khaki suit with a white guayabera, an embroidered Puerto Rican dress shirt. He spreads his arms and they embrace. She gazes at him in a loving, yet lost, manner. She is muted. Hazy.

High.

The woman is high.

This is what the pills have done to her.

I duck back into the bridal chamber.

My mother wears a cathedral-length bridal gown beaded with rhinestones. She sits at a vanity. With her makeup and hair done, she looks ten or fifteen years younger. She could be my older sister. I walk to her and help arrange her veil as a photographer captures the moment.

I watch us, my mother and myself, in the mirror. The sage-green of my bridesmaid dress contrasts nicely with the olive of my skin. Much better than the deep coral color of the dresses my godmother and aunt wear. Their richly-bronzed skin contrasts the coral much better than my pale skin could. All three of our dresses have differently cut tops to accentuate our different figures. Yet all of the dresses corset-laced in the back and all satin dresses sweep the floor.

My mother wanted a plain dress. Not a gown. Not like *I* should have for *my* wedding, she'd said. After all, this would not be *her* first wedding. But I argued that she needed, no,

deserved, to look like a *bride*. Every dress she tried on with me she hated. I gave up trying to look for dresses with her. Weeks after she bought it, I found out about this gown, a floor sample marked down to only \$300. She'd hung it in my closet.

I have to admit she did a good job. The dress is beautiful.

I tell my mother what I saw in the lobby: her future mother-in-law dressed in drowsy drapes. My mother shrugs. Too late to do anything about it now. She knows how our family will talk.

During the wedding, I stand at my mother's side—the third and last of her bridesmaids. I am not her Maid of Honor, but at least my dress is a color that looks good on me. That is enough.

I watch the madwoman. She sits between Shane's cousin and Shane's father. I find it interesting that Shane's mother and father can still be friends, even so many decades after their divorce, the divorce being a direct result of Shane's mother's mental illness. My parents can hardly be in the same room with each other, and as far as I know, they're both sane. I wonder how my parents will tolerate each other during my own wedding. Whenever I get married.

I'm not even sure I want a wedding anymore. I have not reacted well to the hints Jesse has dropped over the past week. Later tonight, after misunderstanding my frustration and stress, Jesse will break down. He will accidentally propose to me, claiming that he doesn't know what I'll say if he asks. I will tell him yes. Like the other proposal, this will not be official. I will tell no one. A year and a half later, I will still not be married, or even officially engaged.

During my mother's ceremony, Shane's mother stares at the skylight in the center of the church's ceiling.

I hold my breath. I wait for the moment where the priest asks if anyone objects to this union between my mother and Shane.

The moment never comes.

My mother must have asked him to skip that part.

The priest declares them Man and Wife.

They kiss.

We cheer.

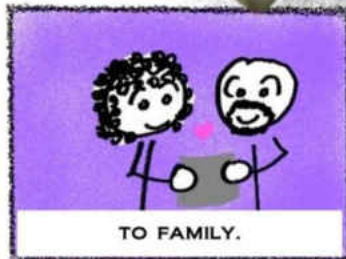
I breathe again.

## JUSTIFICATION

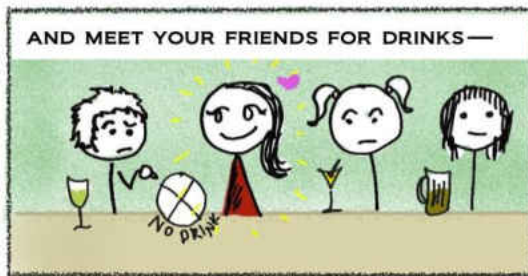
# JUSTIFICATION

By LESLIE SALAS

I WONDER WHAT MADE YOU DO IT.



AND YOU WERE SO HAPPY.



AND ALL I CAN REMEMBER  
IS THE WIDTH OF YOUR SMILE  
WHEN THE NEWS SPREAD.

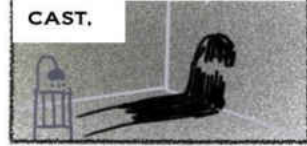


IT'S BEEN MONTHS NOW.



AND OUR HOUSE IS QUIET.

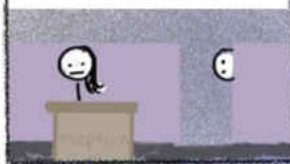
DARK SHADOWS ARE CAST.



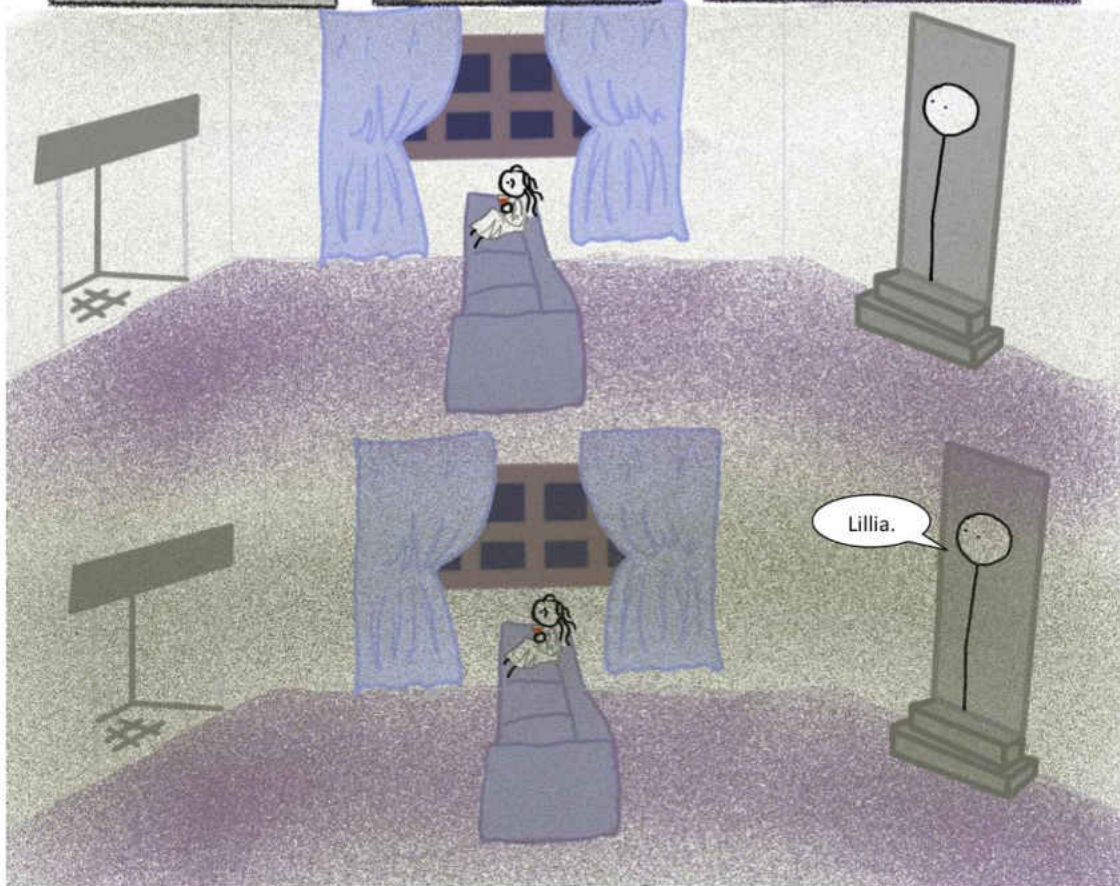
LITTLE TAGS UNCUT.

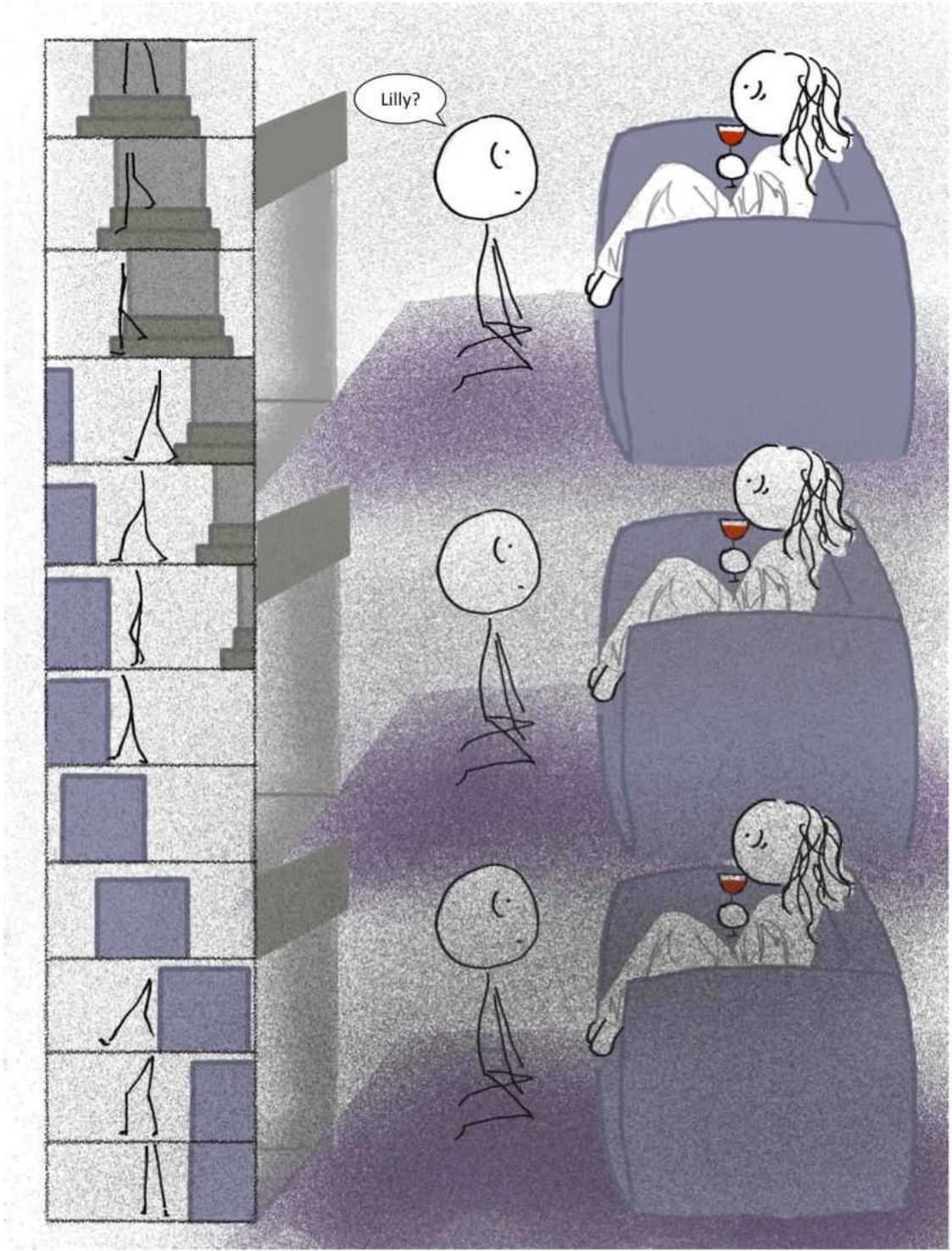


THE KUDOS ARE ALL GONE NOW.

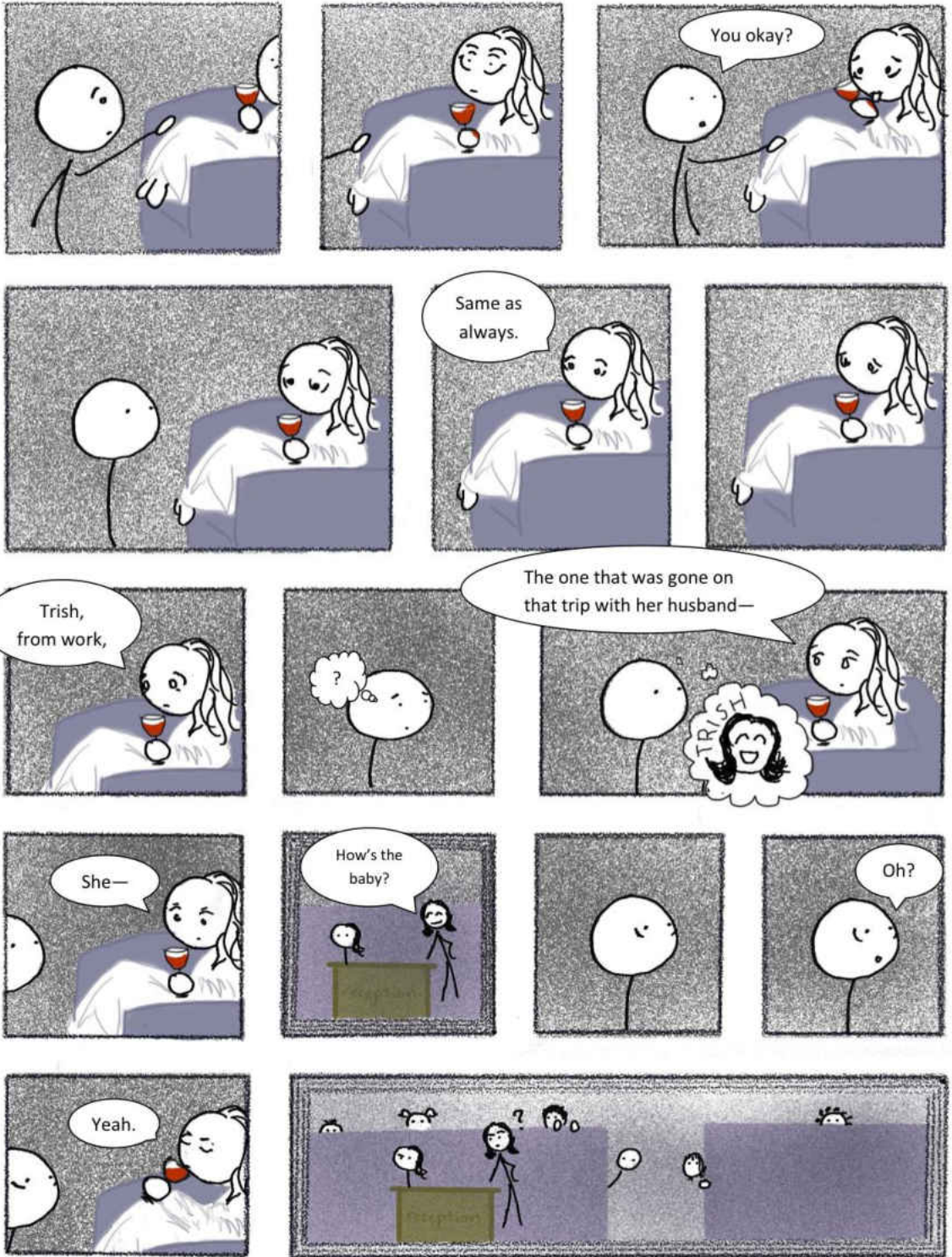


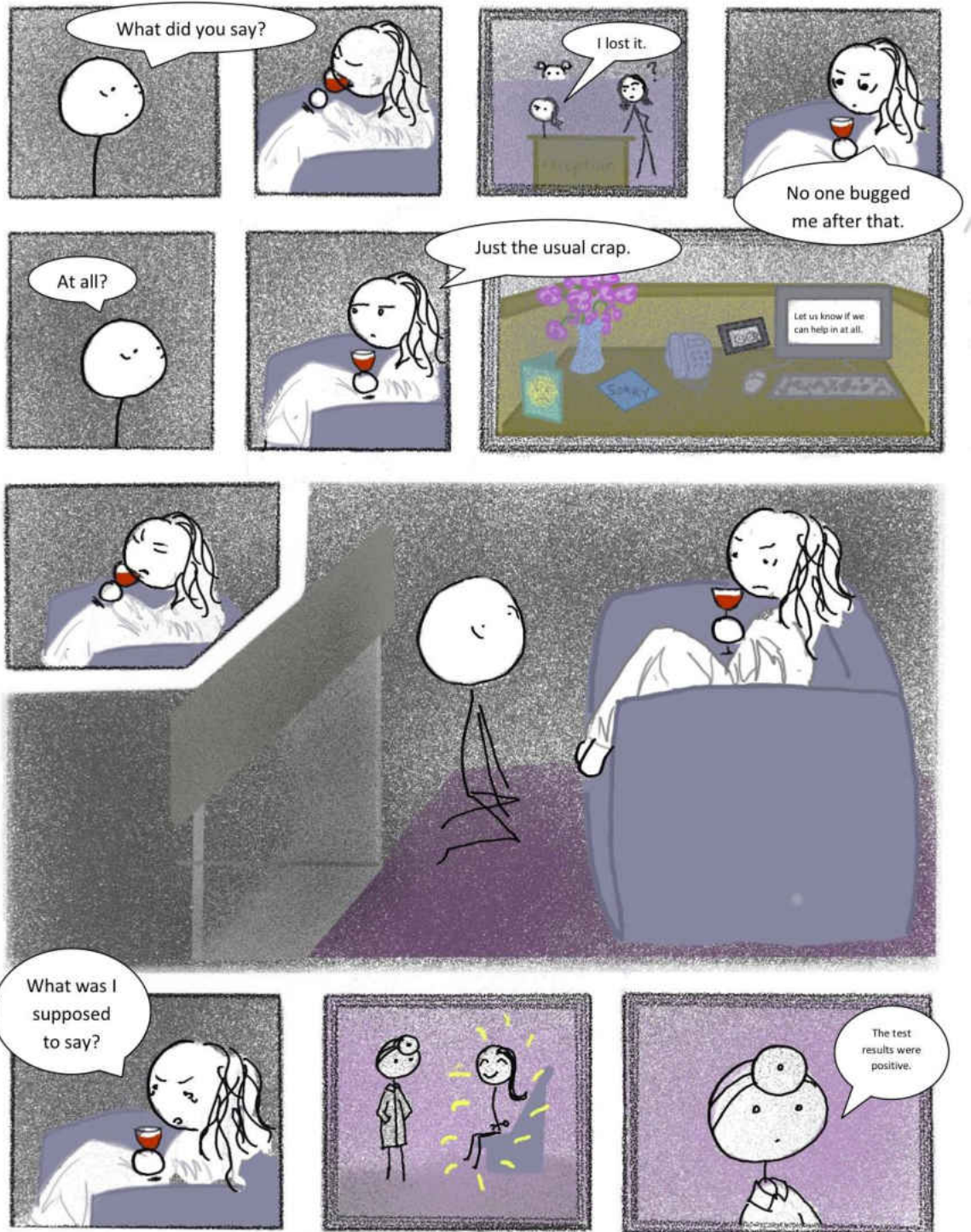
YOU ALWAYS DRINK MORE THAN YOUR FAIR SHARE.



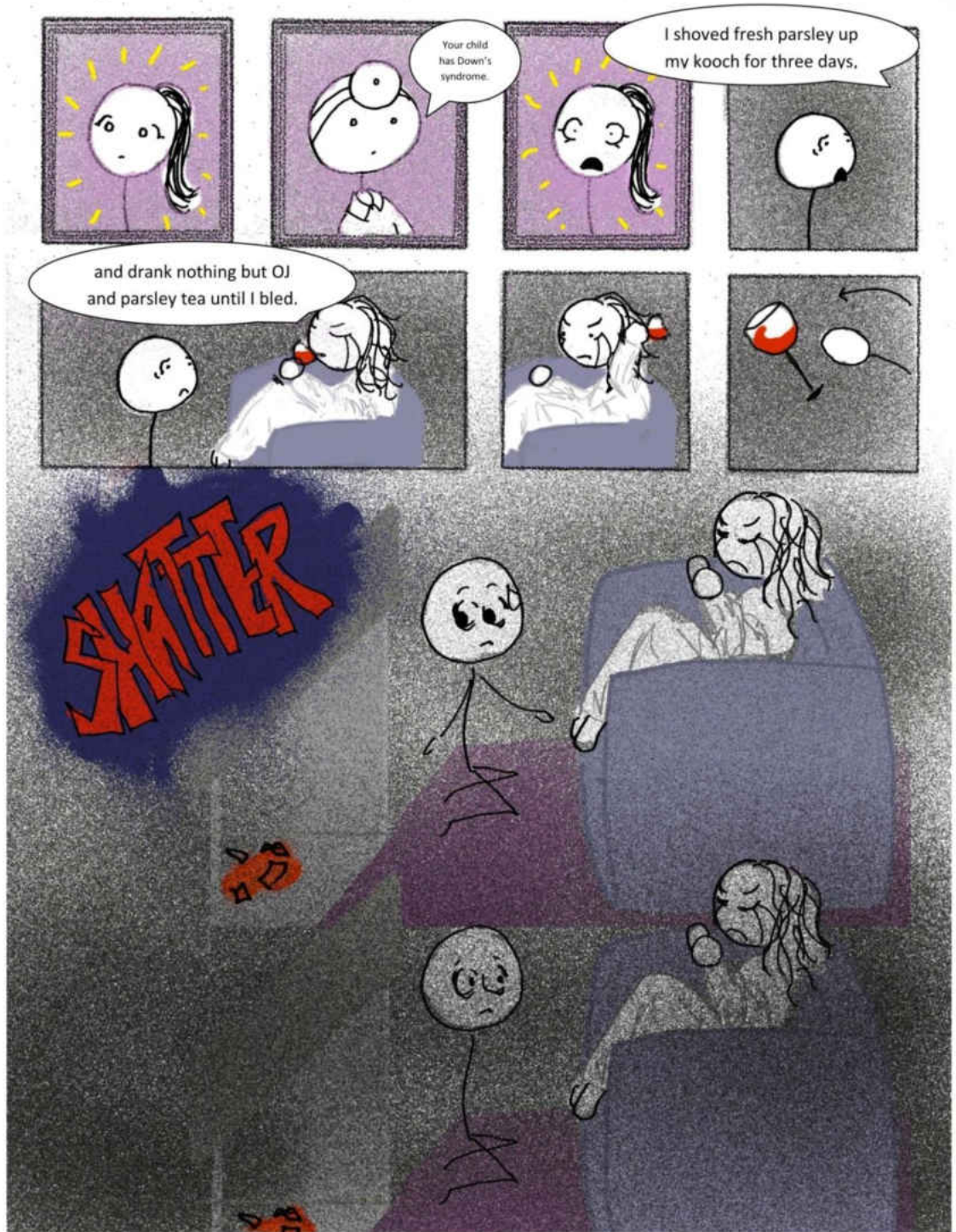


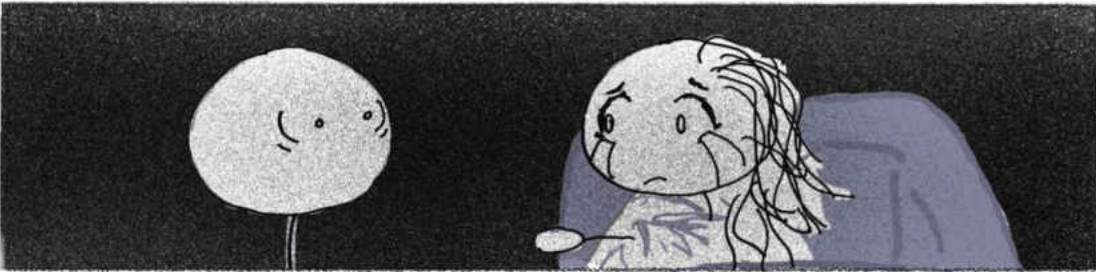
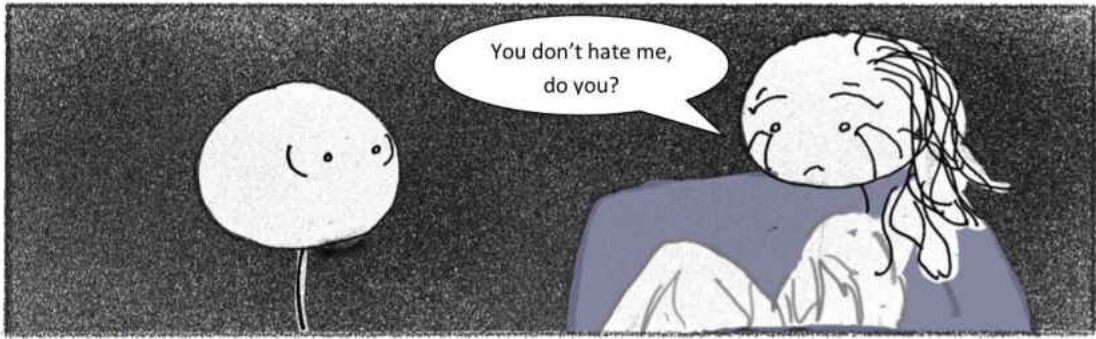












## JUST TWO

A kiss. A touch. A question. Caress. Grip. Hair. Tongue. Ground. Dirt. Weeds. Pine trees. Autumn. Starry night. Stings. A hand. Up shirt. Shirt off. Nothing below. Not this week. Hands. A promise. The clock. Walk home. Pink dots. Bug bites. Outside. Bad idea. Next week. Next month. Sloped driveway. A Scion. A Nissan. Toyota. Winter. A hand. In pants. Not stopping him. Not complaining. Next week. Next month. Next year. Short skirts. Long skirts. Carpet. Concrete. Back seat. A finger. Two. Not three. Nothing. Something. Sort of. But not everything. Front seat. Sparkles. Sequins. Suit. Pants unzipped. There it is. Looks funny. Off to the side. No questions. Just suck. Just pump. When's it over? Will I know? Quickly. I know. Never think to spit. Spring. On floor. No clothes. Legs spread. Please? No? Please? No. Not eighteen. Stupid answer. Sixteen counts. Summer. This is it. This is it? Movement. Mechanics. Two-body problem. No sensation. No release. He sleeps. Something: missing. Four more years. All the same. More. More. More? Not enough. Never enough. On bottom. From behind. Rug burn. Ripped tights. Bed. I want a bed. Mattress. Sheets. Pillows. His sister's stuffed animals? No, not this bed. University. Visit. Too far in-between. My bed. Too small. Tosses. Turns. Turns away. Neglected. More. More? A prospect? A threesome? Rejected. Too jealous. Tiptoe around feelings. Stroke ego. A promise. Not to keep. Someone new. It happens. Hands. Hips. Lush. Lips. Top. Bottom. Front. Behind. Standing. Sitting. Lying. Loving. Lattice. Just happened. An accident? Six hours. Two runs. But the first O. That's what counts. **O!**

Oh. My. God. What I've been missing.

The first four minutes. More than in four years. And just hands. Now hands free.

A gasp. An arch. A fistful of sheets. Straight as an arrow. More length. More girth. Just what I want. I need. His need. Release. Relief. Lines traced. He names them. Iliac crest. Clavicle. Scapula. Femur. Tibia. Cervical. Lumbar. Smart. Osteologist. Anthropologist. Wiggles his phalanges. Again? Can't walk straight. Don't want to. Big spoon. Little spoon. Next week. All night. Once a week. Next month. All night, every night. University. Restraint. Grades. Graduation. A touch. A kiss. A question? No. Not yet.

SPACE INVADERS

FADE IN:

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

Dim basement adorned with old-school video arcade paraphernalia. Two backpacks are strewn by the foot of the stairs.

An old CRT TV displays pixelated monsters marching, zig zag projectiles periodically falling. A cannon scrolls the bottom of the screen, hiding below a bunker.

An oversized chair in serious need of reupholstering rests in front of the TV. A joystick balances on the arm of the chair.

TAITO, 17, scrawny yet smooth, runs his fingers through his long black hair. He sits on the chair, squished next to CELIA, 16, light and airy, even in her sleep.

He watches her even breath. The aliens continue their march OS.

Taito leans over her. He props himself up on his elbow. He tucks a lock of hair behind Celia's ear. She nuzzles the pillow and stays asleep.

Water runs and dishes clank upstairs.

Taito looks up at the continuing noise. He half-smiles.

He reaches for the hem of Celia's skirt. The marching alien noises from the TV grow more frantic.

He gently lifts the skirt. Thumbs the edge of her panties.

Her cheeks flush. Her eyebrows furrow. She presses her knees together. Even though she's not awake, Celia's body still says *no*.

The TV beeps. The cannon is consumed by the marching aliens. "Game Over."

Celia's eyes spring open. She sees Taito silhouetted against the glow of the TV and jerks away from him.



CELIA

*Get off.*

A blinding flash. A crash.

Celia pants, eyes wide, curled on the chair. Alone.

Taito stands from the foot of the staircase. He rubs the back of his head and blinks repeatedly.

The door at the top of the stairs slams open.

TAITO'S DAD, early 40s, a burly, scruffy man in a frilled cooking apron, lumbers halfway down the stairs. He wears an oven mitt on one hand and holds a spatula in the other.

TAITO'S DAD

(demanding)

What's happening down there?

Taito's Dad looks between Celia and Taito.

Celia, wide-eyed and pale, chews her lower lip. Taito brushes himself off.

TAITO

Nothing. I tripped. Down the stairs.

Taito's Dad frowns and shakes the spatula at Taito.

He turns and walks back up the stairs. In the doorway, he looks back down into the basement.

TAITO'S DAD

Dinner'll be done in five. Don't be late.

He leaves the door open behind him. The sounds of cooking waft down the stairs: a timer beeps, a tray slides out of the oven, slow chopping of vegetables.

Meanwhile, Celia concentrates on Taito. Her lips make a tight, thin line, mirroring her narrowed eyes.

The TV plays a demo game. The cannon shoots at the marching aliens aggressively.

Taito takes a tentative step toward Celia, palms toward her.

TAITO  
(gently)  
Hey, listen.

Taito takes another step.

TAITO  
Let's just--

The area around Taito's palms glows white. He presses his hands against the glow. The surface is solid.

TAITO  
What the...?

Confused, Taito stretches out his hands, probing the surface. A translucent bubble with a radius of about four feet surrounds Celia. The film gives a little under Taito's gentle touch, rippling when he drags his fingers across it.

TAITO  
Are you doing this?

Celia nods once, face still flushed with concentration.

OS - dinner plates clunk against a wooden dinner table.

Taito winds up and attempts to punch through the bubble. Like a non-Newtonian fluid, the bubble solidifies at the sudden, sharp application of force. Like punching concrete.

Taito winces and cradles his hand. He blinks tears away.

Celia's expression lightens slightly. The demo game on the TV starts over. The aliens march slowly.

He leans his back against the surface of the bubble shield. He rubs his knuckles and stares at the open door at the top of the basement stairs.

TAITO  
I crossed a line, Celia. I'm sorry.

A mother ship on the TV whizzes over the aliens. The cannon nails the ship for bonus points.

The bubble vanishes. Unsupported, Taito loses his balance. He stumbles, catches himself, then runs a hand through his hair like he meant to do that.

TAITO

So, uh--

CELIA

I have to go.

Celia stands, pulling the hem of her skirt down as far as it will go. She steps forward, but Taito blocks her path.

CELIA

Move.

TAITO

Cel--

CELIA

Don't make me.

Taito scoots out of the way like a gentleman.

Celia pushes past him. She grabs her backpack and heads up the stairs.

TAITO'S DAD (O.S.)

Dinner's ready!

Celia stops. She takes a deep breath.

Taito stands at the foot of the stairs, looking up at her.

TAITO

Why didn't you tell me?

She huffs and looks back at him.

CELIA

I never thought I'd need to.

She shakes her head and heads back up the stairs. She disappears through the open doorway.

Taito tucks a hand below his other elbow. He scratches underneath one of his ears.

A new demo game starts on the TV. The cannon is instantly obliterated by a falling lightning bolt. "Game Over."

TAITO's DAD (O.S.)  
Leaving before eating?

CELIA (O.S.)  
Yes. I'm sorry. I just--  
(sniffs)  
--I need to go.

Taito crosses both arms and leans against the basement wall at the bottom of the stairs. The deep rumble of Taito's Dad's voice echoes down the stairs. The words are unintelligible.

Taito scratches his arm. Celia's light trill mumbles in return. Upstairs, a spoon scrapes against a pan, a Tupperware container locks shut.

Celia sniffs again. A new demo game starts on the TV. The aliens march slowly.

CELIA (O.S.)  
Thanks.

The aliens continue marching. From upstairs, a deep unlocking noise, a heavy door swings open, then closes, and locks again. Heavy footsteps approach.

Taito sits at the bottom of the stairs. Twiddles his thumbs. The aliens march faster.

Taito's Dad's burly frame blocks out light from the doorway.

TAITO's DAD  
Son. Is there something you'd like to tell me?

The aliens on the TV march faster and faster.

Taito makes himself as small as possible at the bottom of the stairs.

FADE TO BLACK.

## MAKING MARTIAL ART

It's my first night training in a martial art. I hold a bokken, a wooden training sword shaped like a katana. I've been waiting for this moment for almost a decade. My older brother trained when he was in high school and I was about to go to middle school.

"Mom," I'd say to my mother, tugging on her shirt-sleeve, "can I train, too?"

"No," she'd say. "You're too little. You need to wait until you are older."

So I waited. And in the meantime, my brother dropped out of training. He didn't stay long at the dojo. But the impression was there. I remembered the bright white uniforms, the pleated pants, the swords and knives and staves. I still wanted to train.

After a few years, when I reached an age I thought my mother would find appropriate (when I was in high school, the same age as my brother when he started training), I tried again. "Mother," I'd say, "may I train, now?"

"No," she'd say. "Martial arts are for boys. It's not safe for you to train."

So, again, I waited. I did my research, looking up different martial arts, what their practices were, where I could find clubs that were taught by real martial arts instructors. I focused on aikido, the art my brother had started all those years ago. Something about the redirection of energy and momentum aikido was known for seemed right.

In my first week away from my mother, living at a university on the other coast of Florida, my first act of freedom involves taking this class.

The rosewood bokken, worn smooth from the calloused hands of many novices, feels unfamiliar in my hands. My research over all of those years told me aikido is a Japanese martial way that stems from sword work and focuses on blending, harmony, unification, and

synchrony. I have none of these characteristics. But I want to learn.

My right hand grips the bokken tightly in front of my left, just as Gary Sensei shows us. I lift the sword above my head. I swing downward as I take a slide-step forward with my right foot. I stop the bokken before its tip hits the ground. I reset to chudan with the sword held at my center. I lift the bokken over my head and swing-slide-step again.

About ten or fifteen other students and I, almost half of which are girls, spread out on the wrestling mat in a group exercise room. We work individually, trying to perfect the synchronous movements: lifting, swinging, footwork. Shomen. Shomen. Shomenuchi. Downward strike or cut to the top of the head.

This is a real strike with a real weapon. A bokken well-wielded can easily break bones. This is why we start practice alone. We do not want to accidentally break our training partners.

Gary Sensei, a gruff-looking man well over the hill, walks around the mat slowly in his beat up judo dogi. As an average Caucasian male, he is not necessarily what one would expect an instructor to look like. But from what I have read from the club website, he trains actively in multiple martial arts: aikido, karate, tae kwon do, hapkido, kun tao, tai chi, kali... This man has been training longer than I have been alive. Twice as long as I have been alive. Gary Sensei's heavy uniform, yellowed and ragged on the edges, evidences decades of movement and sweat. The frayed and greying blackbelt under his hakama, formal training pants, underscores his commitment to training. The harsh lighting of the university gym shines on his bald head. He walks to me, watches me as I swing-slide-step, swing-slide-step.

"Am I doing it right?" I ask, lowering my bokken. I have not learned the etiquette yet. You're not supposed to ask.

Gary Sensei scratches his thick, long beard, a soft salt-and-pepper against his tanned skin. “No,” he says quietly.

I keep my voice meek. “What's wrong?” I ask. This strategy has worked with teachers my whole life. I want to please him. To be the good student. The best student.

He gestures at me lightly. “Everything,” he says.

I press my lips together. “How can I fix it?”

“Well,” he says, stepping closer to me, “there's a lot to fix.” He motions to my hands. “Put your palms on top of the sword. You'll be more in control.”

“Like this?” I ask. It feels awkward, like my elbows are too close to one another. The other students continue their individual drills, ignoring Gary Sensei and I.

“Relax your elbows,” he says. “And make sure the pinky of your left hand is right on the edge on the bottom of the handle.” I raise my eyebrows at him. “That'll do. Now make the sword an extension of your center,” he gestures away from the knot in his belt, “like it's coming from your himo. Project outward.”

I try to project. I do not own a dogi yet, so I have no belt, no knot, no himo. I think of a string attaching my belly button to the handle of the sword. I imagine pulling the string taut, pointing the tip of the bokken at the throat of a hypothetical enemy.

I look sideways at Gary Sensei. He is barely taller than me, so our faces are close. He does not look pleased.

“Is this right?” I ask. I am trying to project. I am trying to have the form he showed us. I think of my feet: level. Knees: bent. Hands: on top. Elbows: bent. Intent: forward. I want it to be right. At least something should be right. Should be better. I want to show improvement.

He pats me on the back. “You'll get it,” he says. “Just takes practice.” He turns away and claps twice.

We line up at the back of the room for the next lesson.

Even after four years of training, I still won't have it right.

Over the next few months, I learn the etiquette. I learn to breathe. I learn to move. I learn to worry less about pleasing Sensei. I learn to worry less in general.

Ten or so dojo members and I do mundane drills on the mat. We partner up, facing one another, each holding a bokken in chudan. While one aikidoka swings downward to attack, the other swings upward to block. The movement back and forth is almost identical. We walk forward and backward up and down the mat in pairs. Up down, up down. The sliding sound of the wood grazing when the bokken touch is slight. Quieter than I expect. If the sound is hard or thunky, everyone on the mat can hear the technique is wrong.

I train with Joe, a tall, solid man with sandy hair. Off the mat, his disposition reminds me of a teddy bear. On the mat, he is one of my sempai, a student who began his training before me. He is stronger than me. Faster than me. His proficiency with the bokken far exceeds mine. But he is a good partner. He starts slowly, lets me find my pace. And soon we move in rhythm, up down, up down, up and down the mat.

The bokken I hold is mine. Heavy, solid white oak. Long enough to compensate for my short reach, but not so long to make me clumsy. The bokken becomes an extension of my limbs. Through my palms, into my core, down to my feet and the earth below me, I feel my movement through the oak bokken. I feel the rippling resistance of air, the textured scrape as my sword makes contact with Joe's for each split second. Up down, up down.



I do not watch my sword. I do not watch Joe's sword. We make and keep eye contact, moving in tandem. I do not think. And soon, I do not see. My eyes are open but I surrender to movement and periphery.

And then I feel it. Perfection.

I am the sword.

My palms on top.

Right hand in front. Left in back, with the pinky hanging off the edge.

I am the ground.

The left hand swings. The right hand aims.

I am movement and I am stillness.

The bokken arcs downward.

I am breath.

I project with my center, straight from my himo.

Connect.

CRACK.

Follow through.

I hold my sword in chudan, middle stance. The tip points at Joe's throat.

Joe also holds his sword in chudan. But the tip of his sword is missing.

I have broken his bokken.

Our classmates have stopped their own training to look at us. I feel my face flush.

"I'm so sorry," I stammer, lowering the tip of my sword.

Joe inspects the severed tip of his bokken. "It's okay," he says. "It was about time to get a new one anyway."

Guy Sensei approaches us with the tip of Joe's bokken. At six-foot-four, Guy Sensei towers over most of his students. For being middle-aged, he is in excellent shape. Like Gary Sensei, Guy Sensei holds rank in multiple martial arts (aikido, judo, karate, kendo, tai chi, lokhupbafa, yoga) and has been training much longer than I've existed. His short black hair and goatee are neatly trimmed. A small, single black curl sways in front of his forehead. His dogi and hakama are crisp and clean. The man commands presence with his posture and poise. He is our dojo cho, our head instructor.

I covering my mouth with one of my hands, "I'm sorry, Joe," I say.

"Don't be," Guy Sensei says. His voice is level and calming. He is the man I trust most on the mat. He hands Joe the tip of the bokken. "Do you know what happens next?" he asks me.

I shake my head no. I think I have to buy Joe a new bokken.

"Joe will sand that down to a tanto," Guy Sensei says. "And he'll present it to you."

What? I get a present for breaking someone's sword?

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yeah," Guy Sensei says. "That's what happens."

Joe and Guy Sensei smile at me.

I don't know what to say.

My classmates resume their training. Up down, up down.

A few weeks later, Joe gifts me a new tanto, a wooden training knife, fashioned from the broken tip of his bokken. He gives it to me before class, quietly, without pomp or ceremony. He simply offers the tanto to me in his upturned palms, bowing slightly. I bow in return and thank him with much gratitude, "Domo arigatou gozaimashita."

This ritual is rare. In my life as an aikidoka, only on one other occasion do I hear the resonant crack of a bokken breaking.

I keep the tanto in my weapons' bag, training with it regularly over the next three years.

Aikidoka do not usually train with live blades. Even some of the yudancha, the students who have blackbelts, who have been training for over a decade, are unfamiliar with the weight and danger of sharpened steel. In preparation for a special tameshigiri seminar, where we have invited a special instructor to teach us how to cut, several members of the dojo, students and instructors alike roll tatami, a type of straw mat, in a sunlit backyard. When soaked in water overnight, the rolled tatami substitutes for human flesh. If we had fresh sticks of bamboo to roll into the tatami's center, cutting through these rolled mats would simulate cutting through a human arm or thigh, depending on the thickness. Some tatami has been rolled and soaked from earlier, and a handful of members have brought live blades to practice.

I borrow a sword from Jesse, a kohai, or fellow student of mine who started his training after me. Although he started training a full year before me, he has quickly moved up in his standing in the dojo. Not only does he outrank me, but our interactions on the mat have led to him becoming my boyfriend.

Jesse's sword is named Ochiba, meaning "Falling Leaves." Its tsuba—the hand guard—features a unique negative space design. The only solid spaces are what appear to be drake or elm leaves. I move to the giant oak tree in the backyard to practice my swing. This sword, this honest-to-God katana—sharpened folded steel through the tang—intimidates me. The sword is longer than my familiar white oak bokken. The weight in my palms is two

or three times what I'm used to. I swing-slide-step, swing-slide-step, over and over again. Not shomenuchi this time, but yokomenuchi. A diagonal cut or strike: ideal for entering through the collarbone and exiting through the false ribs. My muscle memory does its job, but my forearms and upper back burn. It's been too long since I've done drills like this.

The yudancha volunteer to go first: to try slicing through simulated flesh. Both men and women, their blades sing through the air, the tatami thunks to the ground in chunks, sometimes unraveling to reveal long patterns of fiber cut in sinusoidal oscillations. I think of giant pinking shears.

I volunteer to cut next. Guy Sensei, stops rolling tatami to give me some last minute guidance. He stands from his kneeling position. I feel tiny next to him. Tiny, but safe.

*Aim high*, he tells me. I watch the muscles in his forearms flex as he projects empty-handed and motions the action of cutting. *Remember to follow through with your cuts. Swing all the way through.* He measures with his hands. *And don't get too close. You only really want to cut with the last six or seven inches of blade.* Guy Sensei looks me in the eyes. *And if you screw up, no one is judging you.*

No pressure.

I do not think of this exercise as practicing violence. I do not think of violence at all. I think only of form and technique, of breathing and movement.

I check my distance with the sword, lifting it at arm's length in front of me, parallel to the floor, so I know I'm within range of my target.

I arrange my hands—right on top, left on the bottom, pinky almost hanging off the edge. It's the left hand that swings, the right only aims. Palms on top.

I pull my feet together as I lift the blade above my head. Breathe.

The sword is so heavy my arms can barely keep it up.

I step and guide the sword down at an angle. I let gravity do the work—all the strength I have left is to make sure I don't drop the sword as it comes down.

No blade singing. No soft thud. The rolled tatami mat sits high and proud on its stand. Untouched.

I check my distance, try again. Nothing.

“You're aiming too high,” someone says.

I had been aiming for the top third of the mat. Now I aim for the center.

Check my distance.

Check my hands.

Raise the blade.

Guide it down.

No whistle. No thunk.

Follow through.

No resistance.

A small collective gasp.

Several of my fellow aikidoka run up to the mat to inspect it.

“Wow, great cut!”

“Look at that! That's beautiful!”

I've made a nice clean cut. Straight through. Just shallow. The tatami farthest from the blade remains intact and keeps the whole mat together.

“Do it again!”

I try again. Check myself, check everything.

Cut.

Thud.

No whistle.

Gary Sensei, who has been quietly watching from my periphery, comes forward to pick up the severed top of the tatami. My second cut was exactly one inch below the first, at exactly the same angle.

“Wow, Leslie, great job,” he says, scratching his beard.

“Thank you,” I say.

“No, really,” he says, animated and excited. “Excellent cut.” He motions to my tatami nub. “Just look at this nice clean cut. You weren't going that fast. That's why your blade wasn't making any noise. It was almost like watching it in slow motion. And you got it right, *exactly right*, consistently.”

I feel my cheeks flush. Praise from Gary Sensei doesn't come very often. And not this overwhelming.

He pats me on the back, hands me my tatami nub. “You should keep that on your desk or something, it's a great memento. You've got natural talent, there. You're a natural swords-woman.”

I thank him with much gratitude.

I plan to keep the tatami nub. In a few months, I will leave the dojo. I will stop training for two years. I know this will happen, so I need the ritual and the memento. To remember to breathe. To remember to stop thinking so much. To worry less. To move more. Palms on top. Follow through.

PANCAKES & PARALLEL UNIVERSES

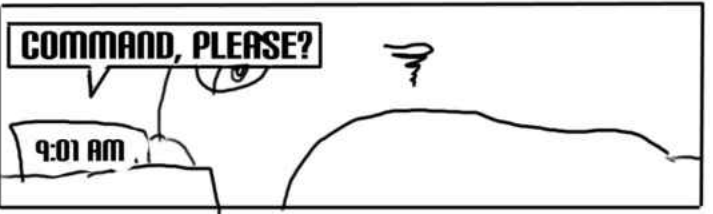
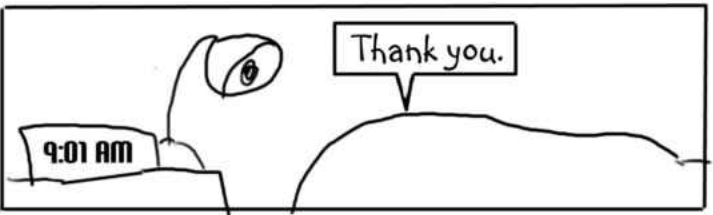
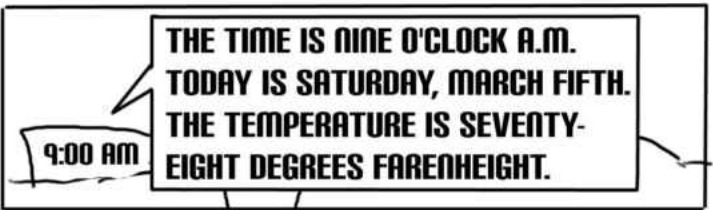
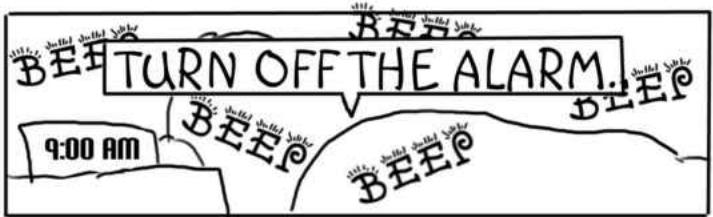
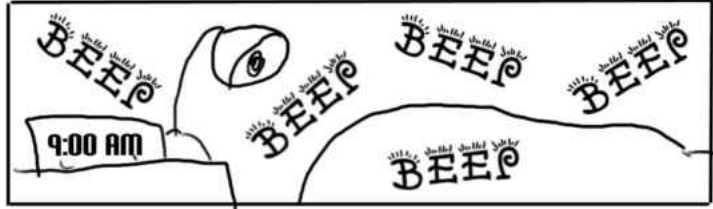
# Pancakes & Parallel Universes



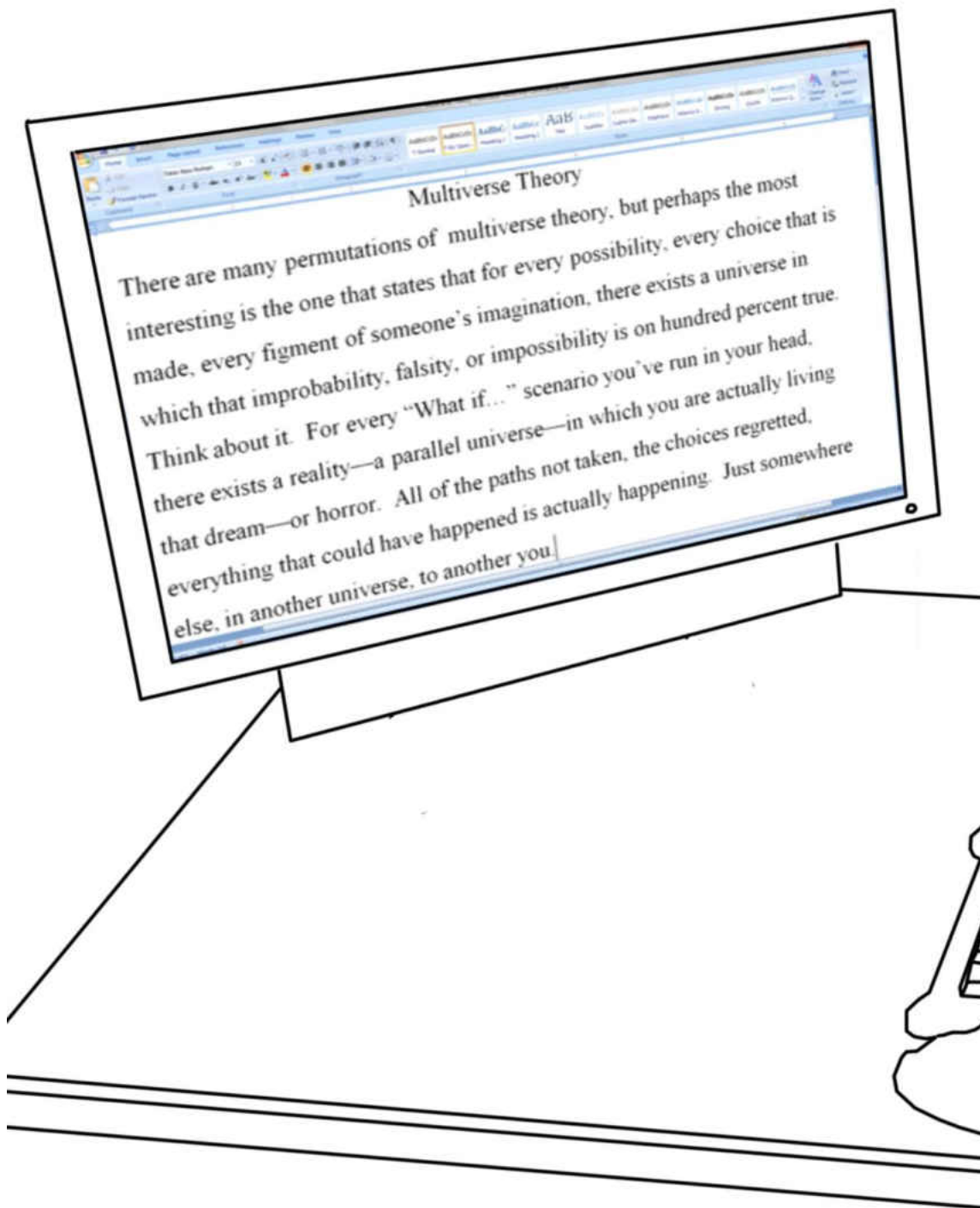
Written and Illustrated by  
Leslie Salas



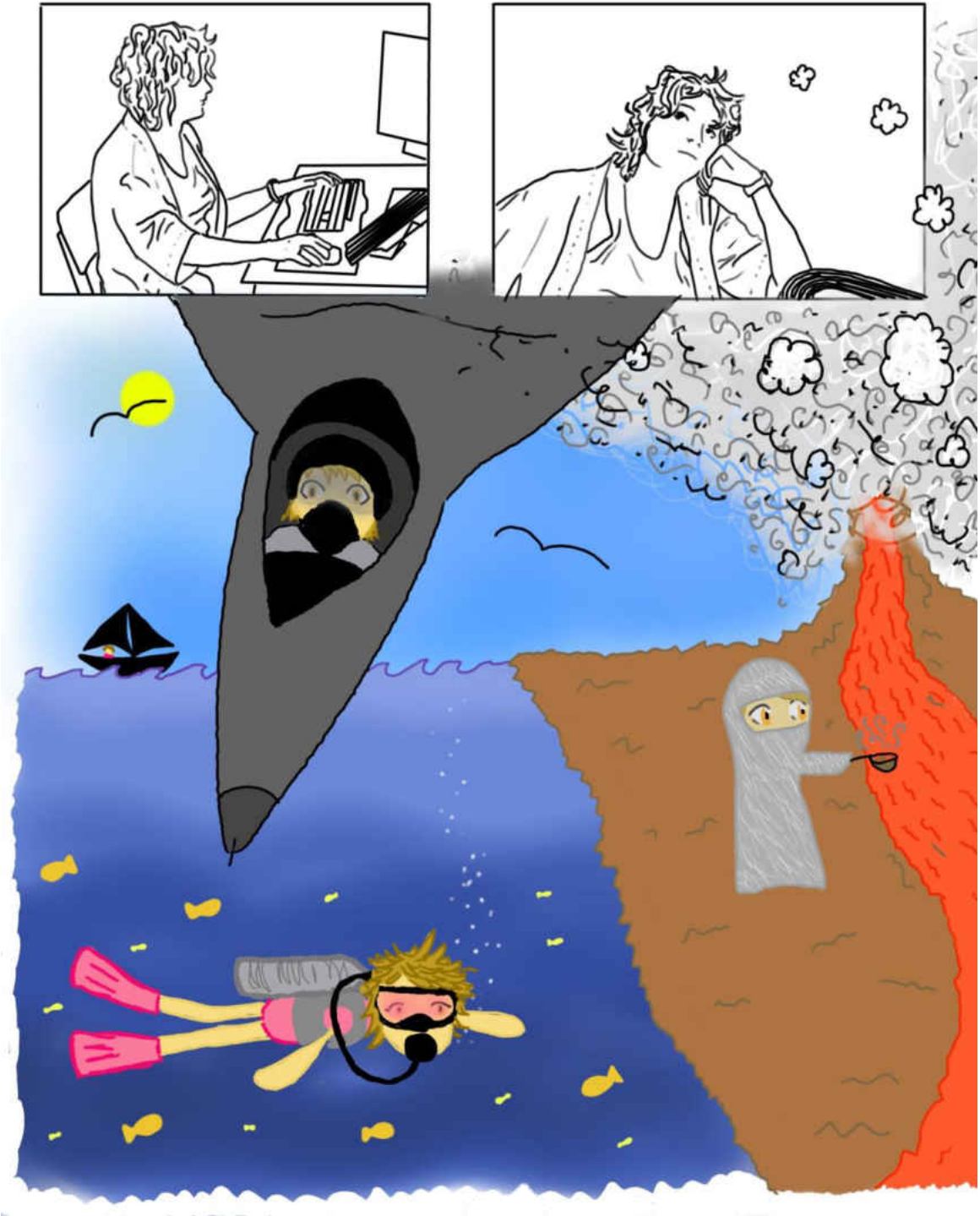
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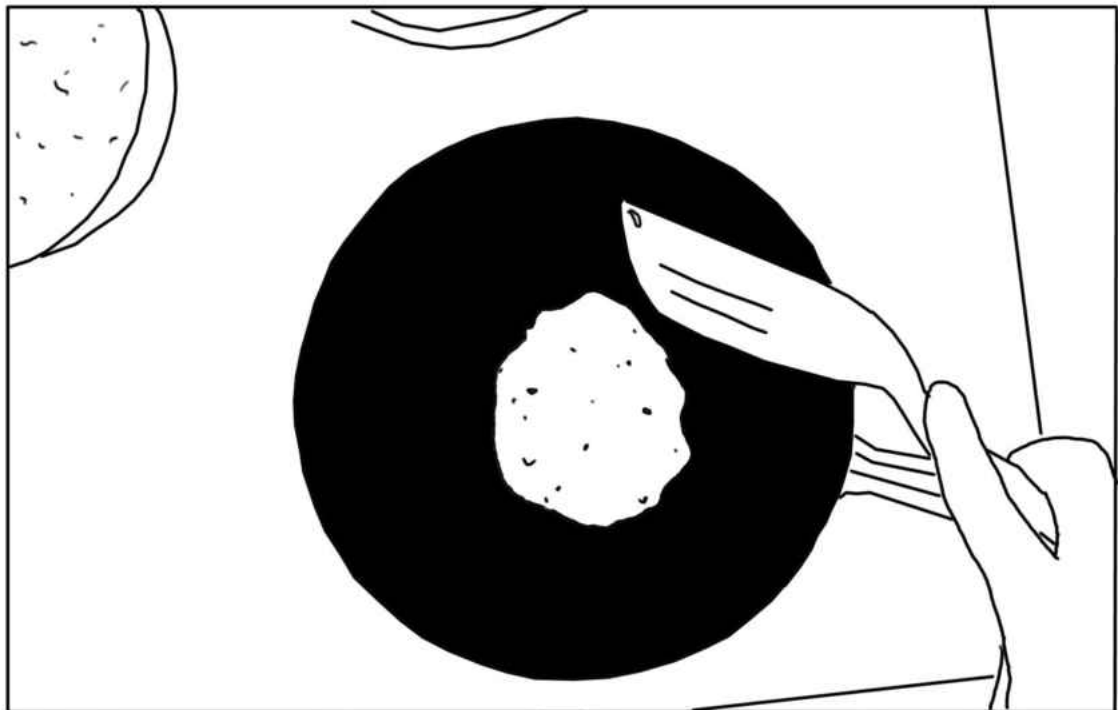
















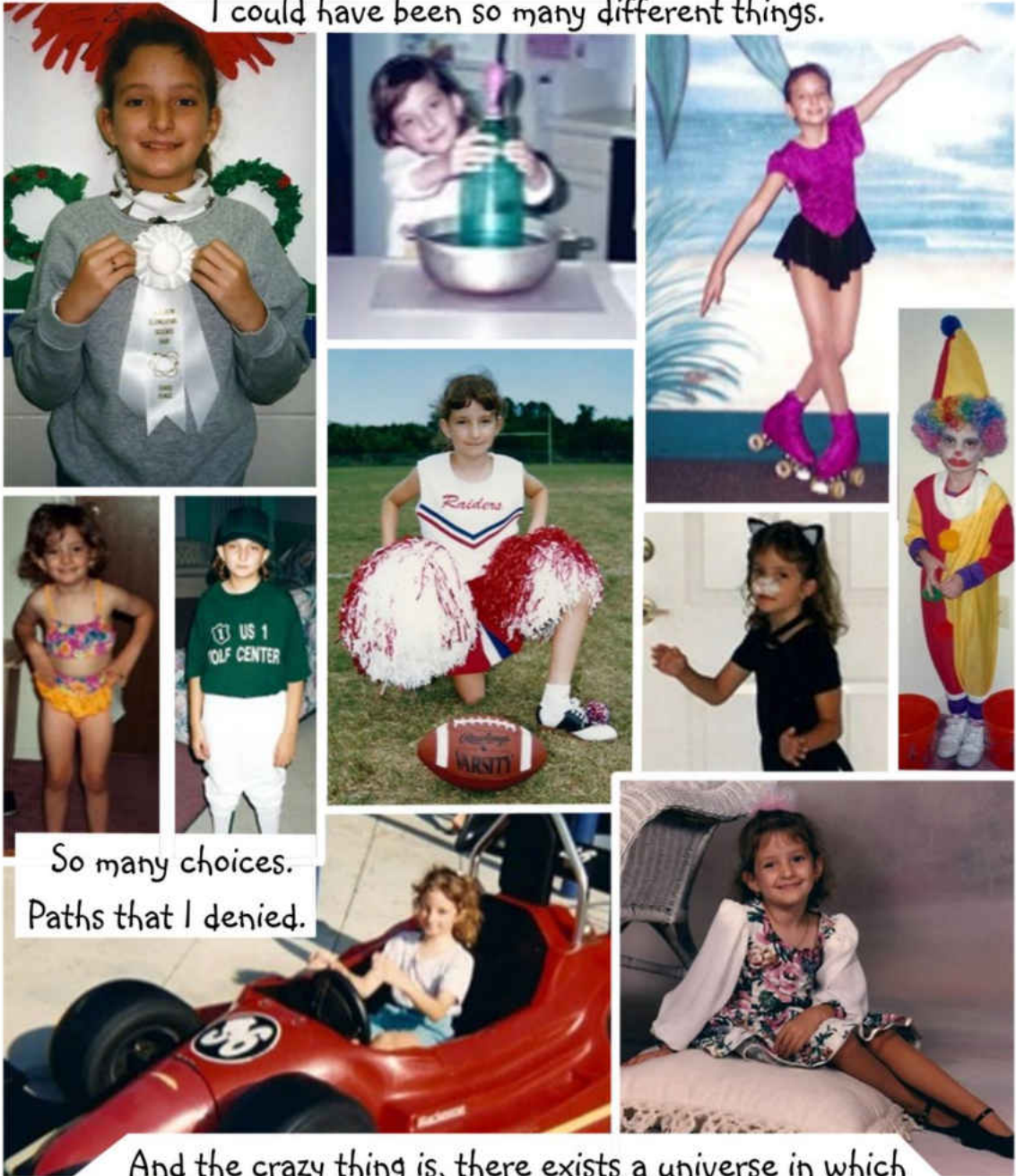
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There were so many possibilities throughout my life.  
I could have been so many different things.

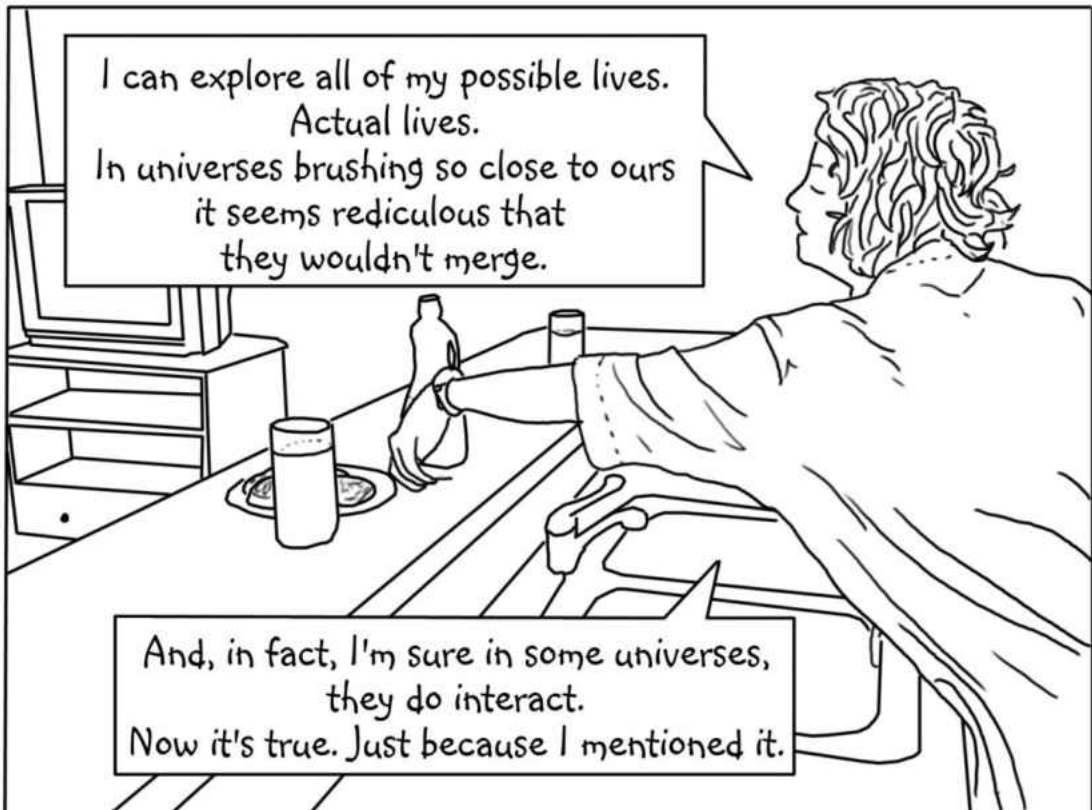


So many choices.  
Paths that I denied.

And the crazy thing is, there exists a universe in which  
I followed through with all of the paths I eventually left behind.



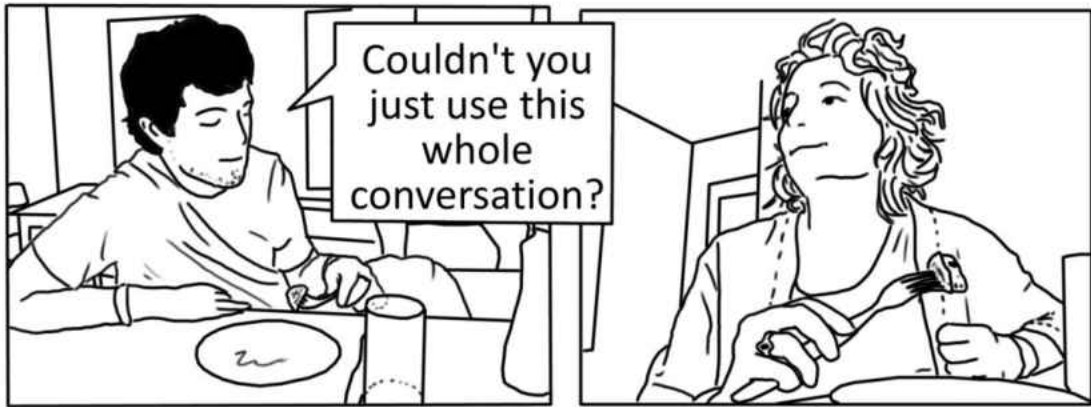






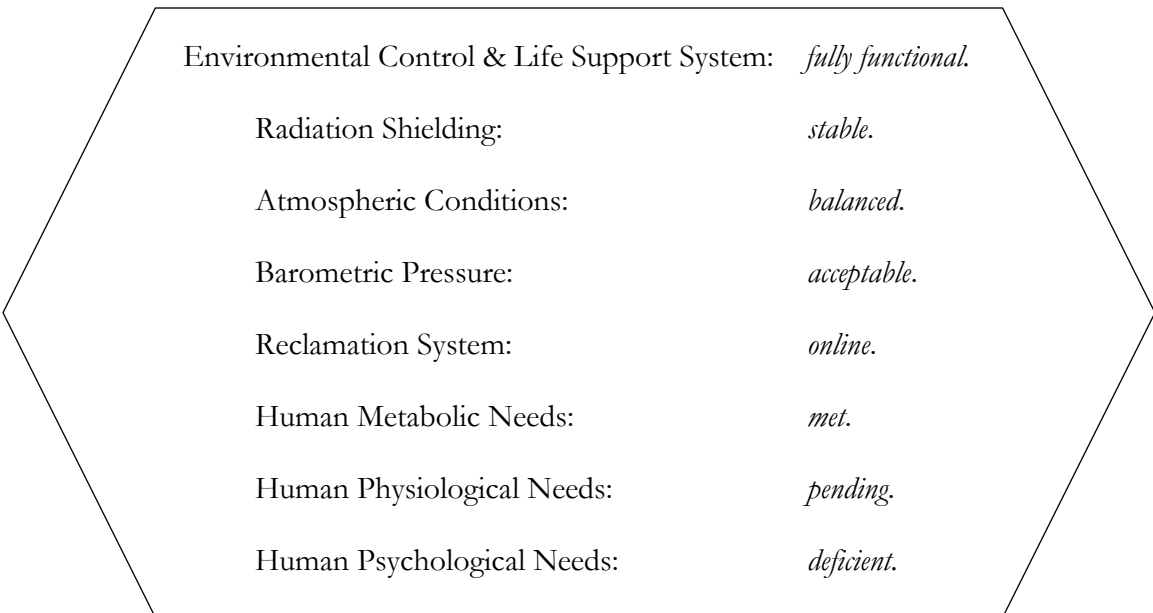
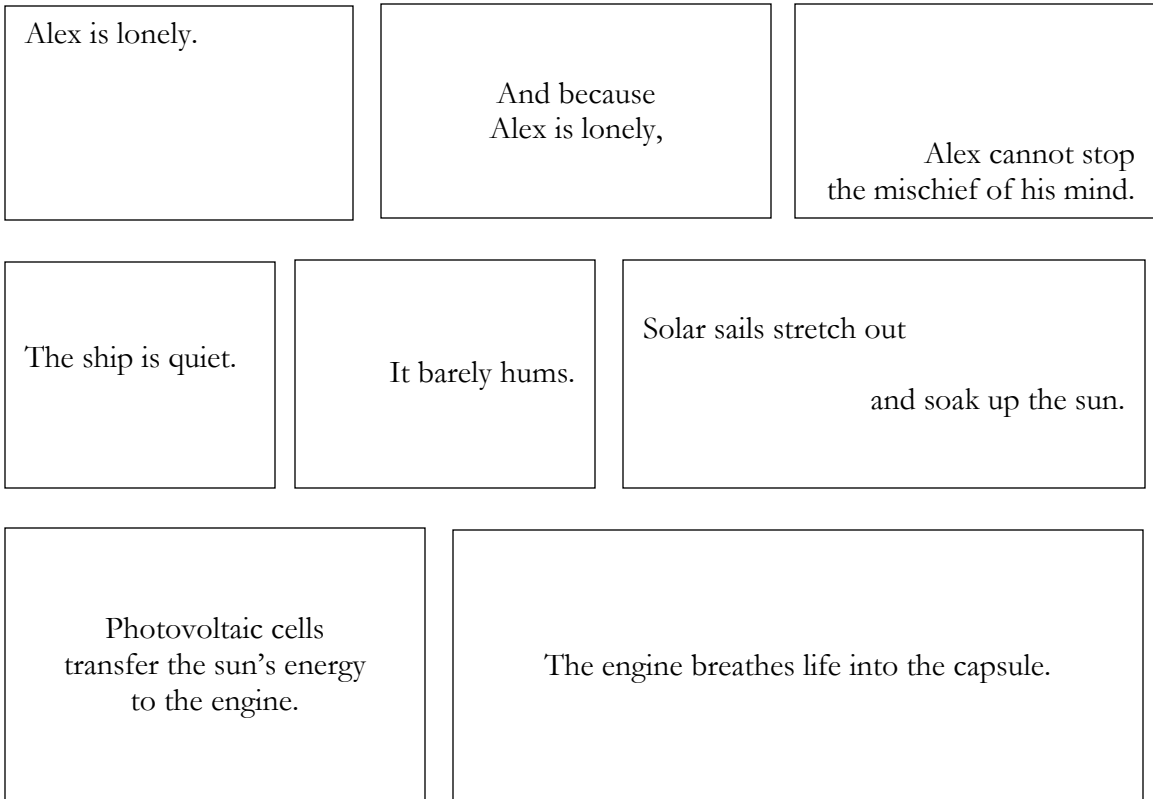








## PREDICATING PARALLELS



Alex glides through the vacuum of outer space.

The quiet gives Alex plenty of time to think.

Time to think and to learn.

Time to think and to learn and to tinker.

To tinker and to transgress.

Alex knows about the essential instability of the laws of physics.

He knows the act of observation adjusts the intrinsic qualities of the observed, preventing omniscience.

He knows the actions of a single cell are characterized as sentience; that sperm traveling toward egg counts as choice.

Alex knows that for every choice made, a perfect parallel exists in which the opposite choice was taken.

He knows that thoughts in one parallel become realities in another.

He knows this theory of multiple universes is predicated on vibrating strings of ether.

He is, after all, a physicist.

All physicists  
know  
these theories.

But not all physicists  
are lonely,

and not all physicists travel  
through space-time on the whims  
of politicians and private funds.

The math is messy.

Alex tires of the data.

Inconclusive.

Incongruent.

Unified Field Theory.

Still outside his grasp.

In his loneliness at a Lagrange point,

Alex seeks the Void,

the space between,

the quiet breath that keeps the glistening Films

—like the skins of soap bubbles—

from entangling.

Alex persists and finds the Void,

that perfect balance between parallels.

Alex finds the Void.

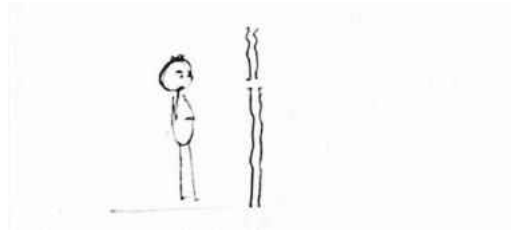
He destroys it.

The quiet is too much.

He needs Bells.

Alex presses the Films together,

and takes a peek.



The Earth hovers in the window of the capsule,

a tranquil blue balloon,

tilted and twirling.

Cumulonimbus

billow and swirl

across the Earth's prickled skin,

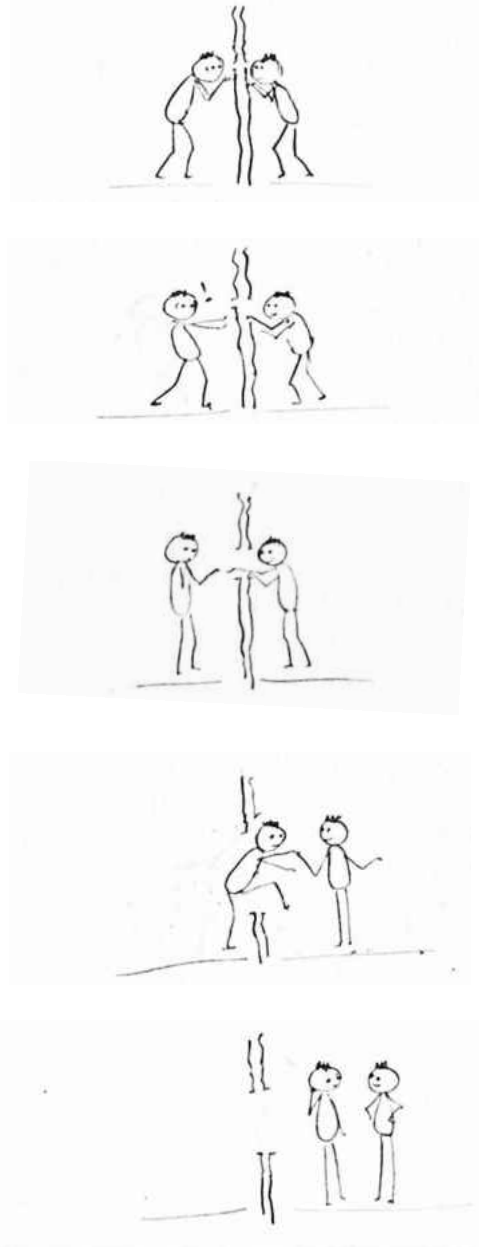
obscuring most terrestrial scarred features.

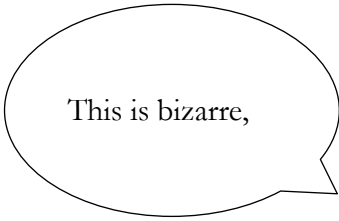
Having nothing on the other side is worse than being lonely.

Lightning sparks up from the atmosphere into space:

a soundless sprite discharging electrons.

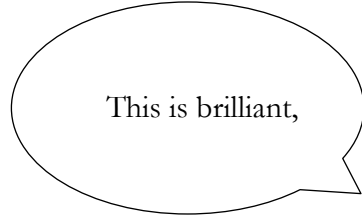
Wouldn't it be interesting if there was another Alex, staring right back at him?





This is bizarre,

Alex says.

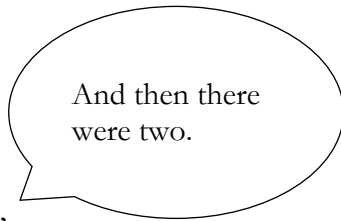


This is brilliant,

Prime corrects.

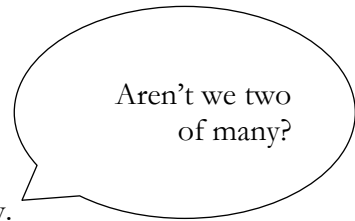
Alex keeps tugging  
at the nape of his neck.

He looks through the gap in the Films  
toward the Earth outside his window.



And then there  
were two.

Alex says,



Aren't we two  
of many?

Prime cocks an eyebrow.

Slight static erupts from the Void,  
a quiet hiss like white noise.

The Films of the universes shimmer and buckle like accordions.

Alex and Prime peer  
into The Void and see

their reflections mirrored infinitely,  
never-ending parallels,  
like a meandering hallway pleated  
with looking glass.



Upon close inspection, they notice

all transformations of Alex sport varying hairstyles.	Half are men, the other half are women.	All sit in their humming ships, staring out their windows into space.
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Now, what? We can't just leave them,

Alex turns to Prime.

Prime says.

Prime disrupts the liquescent Film separating him from another Alex.

What are you doing?

Alex asks.

Alex<sub>1</sub> slides his hand through the film, an offering to the woman on the other side.

Prime keeps his eyes level with Alex.

The same thing I did for you.

Prime says,

Alex presses his lips together.

Alex Prime pulls Alex Double Prime through.

I'm sure you recognize the place.

says Prime to Double Prime, arms wide with welcome.

Not much variety among us, not yet.

Double Prime surveys the cabin of Prime's ship.

Why don't you welcome our newest guest?

Prime nudges Alex.

Alex looks from Prime to Double Prime. Side by side, symmetrical structures, except the span of his her rounded longitude of her legs his height her hips his hair her lips his cleft chin her delicate décolletage his Adam's apple

Alex says,

This is happening too fast.

Let's get an alternate opinion, shall we?

Prime lifts his hand to unsettle another Film.

Wait.

Double Prime says, catching Prime by the wrist.

We all can't keep occupying the same place and time.

You know how this works.

Heisenberg's and M-theory.

Alex says.

Alex Triple Prime sits at her desk in the capsule on the other side of the Film.

I'd rather be cautious,

Double Prime says.

For now.

Triple Prime tosses her pen up and lets it slowly float back down.

Alex says,

We need a plan.

So now what?

Prime retracts his hand.

The ship quietly hums.

The Earth floats outside of the view of the window.

Alex stares hard through the Void, looking down the resonant accordion hallway.

he quotes, *Two roads diverged in a wood,*  
and I *and we* say Prime and Double Prime, in chorus.

We took the one less travelled by,

says Alex.

I wonder what's the difference?

Static and shimmer.

MIRRORS AND VANITIES

FADE IN:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Palm fronds tangle in the breeze.

Bouquets by headstones relinquish their white petals to grass pushed smooth by wind.

His heels a SOFT RHYTHM in the quiet of the Florida cemetery, ALEX, early 30s, melancholic and well-dressed. He walks along a gravel walkway.

SUPER: "Visitation: Parallel 348. Discrepancy: Deceased."

Alex pulls a trinket of brushed steel from his pocket; its silver chain dangles delicately, reflecting in the afternoon sun.

He presses lightly on the latch at the rim of the pocket watch: one side springs open like a scallop, revealing a compass instead of a clock for a pearl on its tongue.

INSERT - A love note engraved into the mirrored surface of the door reads, "May you never lose your way."

The needle of the compass wavers as Alex walks.

The needle spins; Alex halts.

The needle points to a granite headstone.

Alex clasps shut the mirrored door of the pocket compass-- CLICK. He slips the trinket back into his pocket.

He bends down and runs his palm along the surface of the stone.

INSERT - HEADSTONE

Alex traces the embossed end-date: "1 May 2010".

ALEX (O.S.)  
High school.

BELL (O.S.)  
Yeah. It was rough.

BACK TO SCENE.

A leggy lady stands beside him, figure flattered by a sundress. This is BELL, mid-30s, elegant and mysterious. A wide-brimmed hat shades her eyes. She carries a bouquet. Alex looks up at her.

SUPER: "Unexpected confrontation. Plan of action?"

BELL  
Are you family?

Alex runs a hand through his hair.

Bell tightens her grip on the bouquet.

BELL  
You look just like him.

SUPER: "Plan A: Run away."

Alex stands.

ALEX  
I have to go now.

Bell's eyebrows twitch as he passes her.

The gravel CRUNCHES under his feet as Alex heads down the path.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - FLASHBACK

LATE-TEEN ALEX passes a note to LATE-TEEN BELL.

INSERT - NOTE reads "1 + 1 = 3"

Her eyebrows twitch as she looks at him from over the note.

BACK TO SCENE.

The breeze ruffles Bell's hair.

INT. SPACESHIP - DAY

Small and streamlined, the ship's duties are clearly divided between controls and office space. Large port-side

and starboard-side porthole windows flank a disorganized desk. Books and diagrams clutter the office space.

Using the artificial gravity to his advantage, ALEX PRIME paces. Prime is physically identical to Alex. A light track has worn into the carpet. The ship HUMS.

A circular mirror with fuzzy edges at the back of the ship perfectly reflects the ship's interior, with the exception that Alex sits at his desk.

ALEX

We should tell someone.

Prime stops his pacing.

PRIME

No. Not yet.

ALEX

I--We're up for review. We haven't made any progress.

PRIME

Are you serious? No progress?

Prime motions between the two of them through the open Window.

PRIME (CONT'D)

This conversation we're having? How is *this* not progress?

ALEX

*This* still can't account for gravity.

PRIME

*This* is pretty damn groundbreaking.

ALEX

So let's tell someone. Anyone.

PRIME

No.

Alex puts his forehead on his desk.

Prime resumes his pacing.



The Earth arches across both ships' portholes.

Alex lifts his head off his desk.

ALEX

Let's ask Double Prime.

PRIME

Let's not.

ALEX

You only want a second opinion when it works in your favor.

PRIME

Yeah.

ALEX

So let's ask Double Prime.

Prime stops pacing.

PRIME

She asked us to leave her out of this.

ALEX

(grumpy)

She probably already said something.

PRIME

Doubtful.

ALEX

What if she did?

The edges of the Window shimmer briefly.

PRIME

We have got to stop doing that.

ALEX

Infinite permutation. Transformation. Variation. Combination. All the alternatives--bound to happen.

PRIME

So what do *you* want?

ALEX

Let's just tell someone. Turn it in for review. Win the Nobel Prize and go home. Done. Forever.

PRIME

And then what?

Prime gestures to the Earth outside his window.

PRIME (CONT'D)

There's nothing for us there.

ALEX

Sure there is.

EXT. BEACH - DAY - FLASHBACK

Late-Teens Bell smiles. The wind ruffles her hair. Waves CRASH onto shore.

BACK TO SCENE.

ALEX

*She* was there.

PRIME

Didn't *she* say she'd rather marry what's-his-face-with-the-hipster-hair-and-the-cat-named-Apple?

Prime picks up a Hobbes plush toy (modeled after the toy tiger in *Calvin and Hobbes*) from his desk.

PRIME

Oh, wait-

Prime throws the Hobbes plush through the Window and pegs Alex.

PRIME (CONT'D)

--that's *exactly* what she did. And then she died on their honeymoon from a brain aneurism. Not an option.

Alex picks up the Hobbes.

ALEX  
(to Hobbes)  
Let me dream.

PRIME  
No. No stupid dreams.

The ships HUM in resonance.

Alex stands and walks to the Window.

ALEX  
Alex. Seriously. Why don't you want to  
tell anyone?

PRIME  
They *left* us up here. No one wants to  
hear from us.

Prime scratches his chin.

PRIME  
And don't you think we should do some  
exploring first?

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The breeze tangles the fronds of palm trees. Roses by  
headstones relinquish their white petals to grass pushed  
smooth by the wind.

Alex walks along the gravel walkway, his heels a SOFT  
RHYTHM in the quiet of this same Florida cemetery. He wears  
sunglasses.

SUPER: "Visitation: Parallel 349. Discrepancy: Diseased."

Alex pulls the trinket of brushed steel from his pocket. He  
presses the latch to open its face, takes a peek, then  
clasps it shut. CLICK.

He stops again at the granite headstone. He slips the  
compass back into his pocket.

Bell in a wide-brimmed hat approaches with a bouquet.

She points her toes with each long step she takes, walking  
like a supermodel on a runway.

Alex looks away.

They stand a polite distance apart. Polite for strangers.

Alex shoves his hands into his pockets.

The palms rustle.

Bell clutches the bouquet tightly.

BELL  
Are you family?

The wide brim of her hat shades her eyes.

BELL (CONT'D)  
I'm sorry. It's just--

She motions to the headstone.

BELL (CONT'D)  
--you look just like him.

Alex scratches the back of his head.

SUPER: "Plan B: Bluff."

ALEX  
Oh. Yes. Cousins.  
(turning on the charm)  
Alex and I were cousins. His dad was my  
mom's half-brother.

Bell's eyebrows twitch.

Alex twiddles with the collar of his shirt.

ALEX  
He wrote about you, sketched you, all  
the time.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Late-Teen Alex sits surrounded by open notebooks featuring handwritten prose and poetry, charcoal sketches of Late-Teen Bell: her pointed toes, willow wrists, luscious lashes, narrow navel with a tantalizing loop of silver.

BACK TO SCENE.

A gust blows between Alex and Bell, pulling some petals from Bell's bouquet. The petals scatter on the grave.

ALEX  
You're still beautiful. You're older,  
though. Older than he sketched you.  
Obviously. I mean--

Bell leans toward Alex.

BELL  
Do you have them? His notebooks?

ALEX  
Those old things? No, no. Just read them  
a long time ago. After, you know.

He nods to the slab.

BELL  
He never wrote in notebooks. Alexander  
kept a blog.

ALEX  
He hid them from you.

BELL  
Doubtful.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Late-Teen Alex shoves his notebooks into a portable file box and shuts it.

INSERT - Label on the box reads "Tintinnabulation."

Late-Teen Alex slides the box into the back of his closet.

BACK TO SCENE.

Shorebirds call overhead, circling in the summer sky.

Bell places the bouquet by the headstone. She brings two fingers to her lips, then presses her fingers to the name embossed on the granite. She has a thin, silver loop on the third finger of her left hand.

BELL

Chamu.

Her pointed toes CRUNCH the gravel as she walks away.

INT. SPACESHIP - NIGHT

Alex and Prime stand in Alex's ship, facing the Window. The Window now reflects a vast array of mirrored panels, each depicting the same scene with slight variation: an ALEX-LOOK-ALIKE sits.

Across the grid, each Alex-Look-Alike alternates evenly from male to female. Toward the center of the grid, the Alex-Look-Alike sits at a desk in his ship.

At the grid's edges, Alex-Look-Alikes and their surroundings shift from the familiarity of the ship to differences such as ANTHROPOLOGIST ALEX in a dojo, ENGINEER ALEX in a lab, and VIOLINIST ALEX in a concert hall.

Alex gestures to the expanse of alternate universes at their disposal.

ALEX

(to Prime)

So where do you want to go?

PRIME

(with some thought)

Let's try that one.

Prime points to a panel on the edge of the grid, where a LINGERIE-CLAD LADY-ALEX bends over in what appears to be a lap dance. She is too thin.

Her deep black hair bounces around her shoulders--silver streaks shine through like shooting stars. The Lady turns. Her stage name is embroidered on the back of her panties in silver: "ANDROMEDA".

ALEX

Are you sure you want to see us like that?

PRIME

We look hot.

Alex puts his hand to the Window and flicks the other universes to the side. He holds one corner of the panel tight with one hand and stretches the opposite corner open with the other hand, keeping the Film between them intact.

They watch as Andromeda finishes the dance. Prime plays the interested voyeur. Alex is not amused.

Andromeda's PATRON, a strung-out soccer mom, slips a bill between her breasts.

Andromeda smiles with red, red lips. She pulls the bill out and snaps it between her pointy hip and the glittering string of her panties. She mouths "thank you" like she means it, all eye-contact and intent.

Andromeda saunters past Bell mixing drinks at the bar, blowing her a kiss. Bell winks back.

Andromeda pushes back heavy curtains and enters a back room.

INT. BACK ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Personalized vanities line the walls of the dim and clean back room of the strip club.

Andromeda pulls off her wig and places it on a plain plastic bust on her vanity.

She ruffles her real hair--matted, dark, thin, short--and slouches on the vanity stool.

Beside the bust is an *Astronomy* magazine. The cover of the magazine showcases a diagram of the Lagrange points between Earth and the moon, the places where the force of gravity is negligent, and a subtitle, "Accounting for Gravity?"

Andromeda slips her bills between the magazine's pages.

INT. SPACESHIP - CONTINUOUS

Alex raises an eyebrow at Prime.

Prime gently disrupts the Film and steps through the Window into Andromeda's universe. Alex follows suit.

INT. BACK ROOM - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Andromeda looks up. She sees Alex and Prime in the mirror of her vanity.

ANDROMEDA

Twins.

She pulls open the drawer in her vanity and shuffles around. She turns to the men.

She holds a small crystal vial in her hands.

ANDROMEDA

I'm sure you know the going rate.

She twists the vial between thumb and forefinger. The clear liquid inside glitters.

ANDROMEDA

Since you're both practically the same person, I'll only charge you one and a half instead of double. D.N.A. discount.

PRIME

(to Alex)

What do you say?

ALEX

(to Prime)

No.

PRIME

Come on, live a little.

ALEX

No.

Andromeda leans back, propping her elbows on the smooth surface of her vanity.

ANDROMEDA

What'll it be, boys?

Prime steps forward, clasping his hands in front of him.



PRIME

You grew up watching rockets launch off the coast of Florida.

ALEX

(hissing)

What are you doing?

PRIME

Your mother always favored you. The little one. Your parents divorced when you were in middle school. They were so focused on each other that you had the freedom to turn into--

He gestures around the room.

PRIME (CONT'D)

--this.

Andromeda sets the vial down with a sharp CLICK.

ANDROMEDA

Get out.

PRIME

Your name is probably Alex. Your best friend? Bell? You met her in high school.

Andromeda stands, moves to the door.

ANDROMEDA

I'm calling security. *Mike?*

PRIME

Wait.

Alex stands by Andromeda's vanity. His hand hovers over the vial, then reaches for the *Astronomy* magazine and tucks it under his arm. He places a hand on Prime's shoulder.

ALEX

We should just go.

Prime presses his lips together.

MIKE, a burly Jamaican dressed in the black of a bodyguard, enters. His voice tumbles sweetly.

MIKE  
What's wrong, sugar?

ALEX  
We were just leaving.

Alex pulls Prime backward.

ALEX (CONT'D)  
Thank you for your time, miss.

Alex and Prime stumble through a back door of the club.

EXT. ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Alex and Prime square off in the dusky alleyway behind the strip club.

PRIME  
I wasn't finished.

Alex holds up the *Astronomy* magazine. He points to the subtitle.

ALEX  
We need this.

PRIME  
Of all the things--

Prime pinches the bridge of his nose.

PRIME (CONT'D)  
--you take this? We don't need her tips.

Alex holds the magazine by its covers and flaps the pages toward the ground. Several bills float down to the pavement.

ALEX  
Then give them back to her. But I want to read this.

PRIME  
Whatever.

Prime grabs the scattering bills and walks around the corner to the front of the club.

Alex settles himself on a stoop near the back door of the club and cracks open the magazine. He pulls a tiny digital notebook out of his pocket and presses the device's face to the pages of the article.

The contents of the article transfer like osmosis to the notebook.

Alex reads the article on his notebook.

Fast-forward: the sky lightens to dawn. He closes the notebook and rests the back of his head on the brick behind him.

He pulls a silver trinket out of his pocket--a compass housed like a pocket watch. The needle spins and rests on the door at the back of the club.

The back door creaks open.

Alex stands and slips the compass back into his pocket.

ALEX

What took you so long?

Prime steps out the back door, smiling slyly. His lips are covered in glitter. Andromeda arches herself in the doorway. She wears a silken black robe embroidered with silver shooting stars.

ANDROMEDA

Sorry about earlier.

She leans out the doorway and extends a hand to Alex. Alex hands her the *Astronomy* magazine instead of a handshake.

ALEX

We'll call it even.

Andromeda grabs the magazine and flips through it.

ANDROMEDA

Where's the rest?

Prime scratches the back of his head.

PRIME

I already gave it to you.

INT. BACK ROOM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Andromeda sits on the surface of her vanity. Prime hands her a wad of cash.

She opens the crystal vial and spreads some of the glittery liquid on Prime's mouth. He licks his lips. His face flushes. His eyes dilate.

He kneels down in front Andromeda. She leans back and spreads her legs for him, smiling.

BACK TO SCENE.

Andromeda crinkles the magazine in her tightened fists. She slams the door shut.

ANDROMEDA

(muffled)

Mike!

PRIME

We should go.

ALEX

You think?

Alex pokes a hole into the Void with his forefinger, then pulls the Window open wide enough to step through. Prime follows him.

INT. SPACESHIP - CONTINUOUS

Alex and Prime stand in Alex's ship. The Film blocks off the Window behind them. Within the Window, the vast accordion mirrors stretch to infinity.

ALEX

What the fuck?

Prime wipes some of the glitter off his mouth with the back of his hand.

PRIME

It's no different from masturbating.

He adjusts the collar on his shirt.

PRIME (CONT'D)

And I must say, we're a rather good lay.

Alex presses a finger between his eyebrows.

ALEX

I... ugh. How did you even...?

PRIME

I paid her with her own tips. Turns out  
our freckles match.

Prime points to his forehead.

PRIME (CONT'D)

Orion's Belt, just like us. Plus--

He pulls a crystal vial out of his pocket.

PRIME (CONT'D)

--I got a memento.

Prime twists the vial around, watching the liquid glitter.

Alex grabs the vial out of Prime's hand.

ALEX

You can't be rewarded for fucking with  
yourself.

He shoves the vial in his pocket.

ALEX (CONT'D)

We need ground rules.

PRIME

You know what?

Prime points to Alex's pocket.

PRIME (CONT'D)

You can keep that. Consolation prize.

ALEX

We can't keep doing this.

Prime flips through the mirrors in the Window until he finds his own ship. He enlarges the Mirror.

PRIME

You know what we need?

ALEX

We need to map the multiverse.

Prime breaks the Film and steps through to his ship.

PRIME

We need to get you laid.

ALEX

We need you to take this seriously.

PRIME

When was the last time you got off?

ALEX

We need a systematic approach.

PRIME

I bet it wasn't recently.

ALEX

We need to minimize contact.

PRIME

You probably just used your hand.

ALEX

We need to catalog the shifts in physics.

PRIME

Even though that never really works for you.

ALEX

We need to account for Lorentz transformations.

PRIME

I can't believe you're still hung up on Bell.

ALEX

I can't believe you're *not*.

The ships hum in dissonance.

ALEX

Double Prime was right not to get involved.

Alex pulls the corners of the Window shut. He stands alone in his ship.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The summer breeze tangles the fronds of palm trees. Roses by headstones relinquish their white petals to grass pushed smooth by wind.

Alex wears polarized sunglasses. He keeps to the gravel walkway, his heels a soft RHYTHM in the docile cemetery.

SUPER: "Visitation: Parallel 350. Discrepancy: Diseased."

Alex pulls the trinket from his pocket, rubs the face of brushed steel with the pad of his thumb.

He stops at the granite headstone.

Bell approaches in her wide-brimmed hat holding her bouquet. Her hips sway. Her toes point: she walks toe-heel, toe-heel. Gravel CRUNCHES.

Alex turns the closed compass over and over in his palm.

They stand a polite distance apart. Strangers.

Shorebirds call overhead.

BELL

Family?

ALEX

Excuse me?

She smiles at him. Cheekbones. Lashes. Mocha.

BELL  
You look like him. Are you a family  
member?

Alex turns to her, takes his sunglasses off. Makes eye  
contact. Keeps it.

SUPER: "Plan C: Reluctant honesty."

Bell covers her glossed lips with her fingertips.

BELL  
I'd swear you are my Alexander.

Alex raises his hands in defeat.

ALEX  
You got me.

Gravity pulls the bouquet to Bell's feet.

Bell delicately steps over the bouquet. OS - SLAP!

One of Alex's cheeks flushes red.

Bell presses an angry finger against Alex's chest.

BELL  
No.

The petals from the bouquet scatter on the grave.

Bell turns away, breathes in sharply, lets her breath out  
slowly.

She pulls the wide brim of her hat low. Points her toes  
away.

Alex brings a hand to his face, presses it against the  
sting.

INT. SPACESHIP - DAY

Alex sits at his desk. Two Hobbes plushies sit next to each  
other on the corner. The desktop is cluttered with papers.



Alex flips a switch and a hologram of a computer desktop (with several folders) appears in front of him. Some of the folders are named "Tintinnabulation", "Touchstone", "Vanity", and "Grabbity".

The external harddrive is named "Security Blanket". (The computer's name is "Linus".)

Alex clicks on "Grabbity" and names a new document "Something Borrowed".

He opens his tiny notebook and holds it against the screen. The information uploads from the journal to the computer.

He types in a separate document.

The Earth arcs across the window of his spaceship.

A prick and a Window opens in Alex's cabin. Prime steps inside.

PRIME

Knock, knock.

Alex moves the manuscript from his desktop to a paper-thin digital slate.

PRIME

What's been occupying your time lately?

ALEX

While you've been screwing around--

Alex slides the slate across his desk to Prime.

ALEX (CONT'D)

--I got us a Nobel Prize.

INSERT - SLATE

The title of Alex's manuscript reads:

"Accounting for Gravity: An Alternate Approach to the Theory of Everything"

BACK TO SCENE.

ALEX

Time for peer review. Go on. What do you think?

Prime scrolls through the document.

PRIME

This is nothing like our research.

ALEX

Check the citations. I attribute an *anonymous* scientist.

Prime frowns at Alex over the manuscript.

ALEX

I'll give the real scientist credit  
After we tell the scientific community  
about what's in there.

He gestures to the Window behind Prime.

Prime sets the slate down.

PRIME

About that.

He steps back and opens the Window wide.

The accordion hallways have been divided up and organized in a chronological flowchart manner--one side for male, the other for female. Labels organize different strands by year; within each year are several forking paths.

PRIME

I started organizing. But it's too much.  
I need your help.

ALEX

Why don't you ask Double Prime?

PRIME

I did.

Prime points to the top of the flowchart, on the female side. DOUBLE PRIME, a curvy, girly version of Alex and Prime, leans out of her Window. She shifts mirrors around.

ALEX

Have you asked anyone else?

PRIME

No. Double Prime made me promise we'd keep it to just us three.

Alex presses his lips together.

PRIME

And that we'd adhere to the strict standards you set forth.

Alex stands.

ALEX

Show me what you've got.

The mirrors lay out like the root system of a tree. Two main divisions are male and female. Below, the paths break down and intersect, interweaving with each other in a series of conclusions based on choices.

PRIME

We've got the basic chronology down. Up where Double is, that's the early stuff. Decisions made in utero and early childhood. I called dibs on the more recent stuff. College. Careers. which leaves you with--

ALEX

Primary and secondary school.

Alex lays two fingers on his chin.

ALEX

It's really interesting how some of the paths intersect and intermingle, despite the discrepancies.

PRIME

Yeah. It's going to take forever to go through it all. We'll never finish. But at least we can follow some of the major trends.

ALEX  
Until we get sick of ourselves.

PRIME  
This is vanity at its best.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The summer breeze tangles the fronds. Roses relinquish their white petals. Alex in his sunglasses. He will not rush it. He keeps to the gravel walkway, his heels a soft hymn in the docile cemetery.

Alex keeps the trinket between his palms. The silver chain dangles. He walks slowly.

SUPER: "Visitation: Parallel 351. Discrepancy: Deceased."

Bell in her wide-brimmed hat bends down and places the bouquet by the granite headstone.  
Fingers to lips.

Fingers to stone.

A silver loop catches the afternoon sun.

Alex stands a polite distance apart. (Strangers.)

Bell glances at him from under her hat.

ALEX  
You must be Isabel.

BELL  
You must be family.

SUPER: "Plan D: Avoid direct answers."

ALEX  
Something like that.

Bell squints at him.

BELL  
I'd swear you are my Alexander. You look just like him.

ALEX

I'm sorry about that.

The breeze ruffles Bell's long, dark locks--then grows into a strong gust, lifting the wide-brimmed hat off her head.

She reaches for it too late. The hat lands beside the headstone.

Alex moves to retrieve the hat.

He brings it to his face, breathes deeply.

SERIES OF FLASHBACKS

--INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Late-Teen Alex sits in the desk directly behind Late-Teen Bell. She slips a note over her shoulder with a heart drawn on it and the word "Chamu" written in girly cursive.

--EXT. ATRIUM - DAY

Late-Teen Alex and Late-Teen Bell sit in a high school atrium surrounded by erector sets and controllers. Late-Teen Alex builds a robot. Late-Teen Bell programs on a computer beside him.

--EXT. BEACH - DAY

Late-Teen Bell and Late-Teen Alex cuddle on a picnic blanket on the beach. Their eyes face north, toward a billowing vertical cloud, watching a rocket reach to Heaven.

LATE-TEEN ALEX

That's what I want.

LATE-TEEN BELL

Okay.

BELL (V.O.)

Okay.

BACK TO SCENE.

Bell hold her hand out, palm upward, for her hat. Her eyebrows twitch together.

Alex flushes, hands the hat back to her.

She plucks it from his grip, tucks it under her arm, and points her toes away from him.

Alex grips tight the compass still in his palm.

The wind ruffles Bell's hair as she walks away.

INT. SPACESHIPS (SPLIT SCREEN) - NIGHT

Alex and Prime sit at their desks. Their respective hologram desktops are up with a flowchart document titled "n+1".

On Alex's side, the flowchart has many dead ends labeled "Suicide? y/n". Alex has bags under his eyes; he's slumped over typing.

On Prime's side, the flowchart features many branches under "Major?" Prime is upbeat--and has a collection of random objects cluttered on and around his desk, including keys, a tanto, a stack of sheet music, a meteorite, a wrench.

The Window is open between them.

Prime looks over to Alex.

PRIME  
You need a break.

ALEX  
(drowsily)  
And what shall I do on this break?

PRIME  
Visit one of the Parallels.

ALEX  
We agreed on no contact.

PRIME  
No, you said *minimize* contact.

Alex presses his lips together.

PRIME

You can't really get a feel for the Path  
Not Taken without walking some of it  
yourself.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The fronds tangle. The roses lose their white petals to the  
wind.

Alex sweats under his sunglasses. His heels are a soft hymn  
in the cemetery.

SUPER: "Visitation: Parallel 352. Discrepancy: Deceased."

The silver chain dangles in his closed fist.

Bell in her wide-brimmed hat lays the bouquet by the  
granite headstone. Fingers to lips, fingers to stone,  
silver loop in the sun.

When she straightens, Alex is just out of her view. He  
stays on the gravel path. Too far for politeness, too far  
for strangers.

BELL (O.S.)

Chamu.

Alex does not move.

Bell starts when she stands.

His hands are in his pockets. His sunglasses hide his eyes.  
His expression is blank. He barely breathes.

She circles around him, studying him.

BELL

That chin. That nose. Hands in pockets.  
Posture.

INSERT - The silver chain dangling from his pocket.

BELL (CONT'D)

Even a pocket watch. Just like I  
remember. If I didn't know any better,  
I'd swear you were my Alexander.

SUPER: "Plan E: Choose words carefully."

Alex smiles.

BELL  
You're real! Who are you?

ALEX  
There's not an easy answer to that.

Bell's eyebrows twitch.

BELL  
Tell me.

Alex pulls the trinket from his pocket. Holding it by its silver chain, he suspends it between them like a pendulum.

ALEX  
This is the last gift you gave me.

Bell holds out her hand.

Overhead, shorebirds call.

Alex gently lowers the closed compass to her palm, draping the brushed steel surface with the silver chain.

Bell presses the latch on its edge and both faces to the trinket open.

BELL  
A compass?

INSERT - POCKET COMPASS DOOR

Bell reads aloud the inscription on the mirrored face:

BELL  
"May you never lose your way."

BACK TO SCENE.

ALEX  
Check the back.

INSERT - POCKET COMPASS DOOR



On the other side of the scallop's tongue is a monogrammed photograph: Late-Teen Bell and Late-Teen Alex in graduation caps. Written in silver on the corner of the image "Alex & Bell".

The engraved inscription on the other mirrored face reads: "Yours, since 15 March 2007."

BACK TO SCENE.

BELL  
Alexander's been gone for--

ALEX  
I'm not your Alexander.

Alex lifts the sunglasses from his face.

ALEX (CONT'D)  
I'm Alex. Just Alex.

He reaches out with his right hand.

ALEX  
Nice to meet you.

Bell clicks both sides of the compass shut. She places the trinket in Alex's outstretched hand. She wraps his fingers around its brushed steel.

BELL  
I think I need to go.

Alex puts his hands in his pockets.

A gust of wind blows between them. Bell holds on to her hat.

ALEX  
I'll be here.

Bell steps from Alex cautiously. She looks back at him, even from a distance.

The palm fronds rustle.

Alex sits on the grave, resting his back against the headstone. Fast-forward: the day slips to dusk.

ALEX

Even when I'm dead, you keep leaving me.

Dusk slips to dark. The shorebirds have roosted. The wind is at rest.

A set of light footfalls CRUNCH the gravel.

Alex looks up.

Bell's feet stand beside him.

BELL (O.S.)

Walk with me.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Rays of morning light scatter across an ornate master bedroom.

Sheets and clothes scatter the floor.

A bird's nest of papers is strewn about the room.

Complex equations and flowcharts with exotic-sounding labels scrawl on the pages ("Lagrange", "Heisenberg", "Feynman", "Bohr", "Einstein") along with drawings of capsules, solar sails, and accorded mirrors.

On a nightstand are two framed photographs: a candid moment of Young-Teen Bell and Young-Teen Alex holding up a robot; a professional portrait of Bell, a cat, her HUSBAND, a mid-30s hipster, and a YOUNG CHILD, 3, distracted and grumpy.

At the center of the room: A king-sized bed. Its naked occupants: Alex stares at the ceiling. Bell, wrapped around him, sleeps.

SUPER: "Plan of action?"

Bell's eyebrows twitch in her sleep.

SPLIT SCREEN (BOTH SIDES CONCURRENT)

--LEFT SIDE

Alex kisses Bell's forehead, smoothing out the worry in her wrinkles.

He reaches over to the nightstand. He picks up the photo of Bell, her Husband, and her Young Child. He places it face-down on the nightstand.

SUPER: "Plan F: Stay."

Alex closes his eyes and snuggles with Bell.

--RIGHT SIDE

Alex kisses Bell's forehead, smoothing out the worry in her wrinkles.

He reaches over to the nightstand. He picks up the photo of Late-Teen Bell and Late-Teen Alex. He places it face-down on the nightstand.

SUPER: "Plan G: Leave."

Alex gently removes himself from Bell's grip.

BACK TO ONE SCREEN.

Alex gathers his belongings--his pants, his papers, his pride.

Before he slips out the door, he grabs one last thing--Bell's wide-brimmed hat.

SUPER: "...and keep a Memento."

FADE TO BLACK.

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