

# THE MOODY NEW YORKER

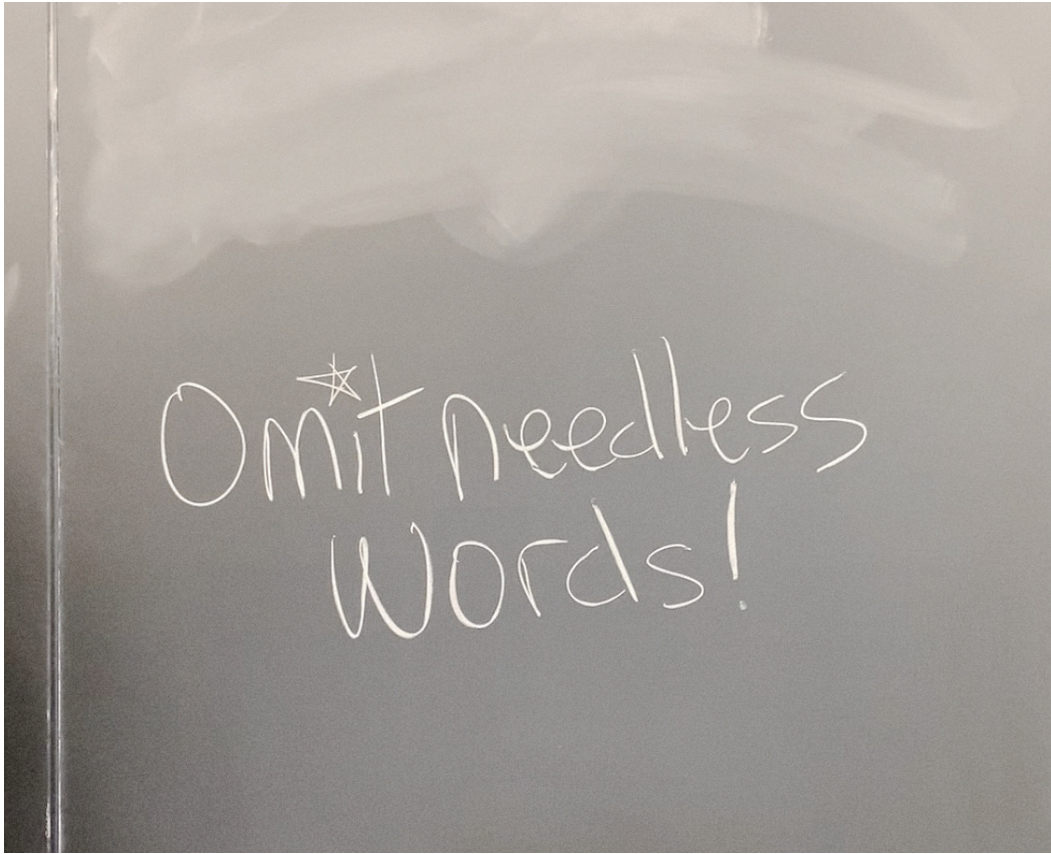
## VOLUME 5



*Milo Romero*

## PEN WRITERS IN THE SCHOOLS SUMMER WORKSHOP 2023

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VICTORIA BORG  
SILGA CHISIM  
MAGGIE CLANCY  
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

In Year Five of our program, we finally returned to the all-in-person format we had used before the pandemic. But now we suffered from growing pains: with a record sixteen students, and usually four or five tutors, we couldn't have fit around a big table if we had one--which we didn't. So every morning we herded all the desks into cozy units of four so we could work and talk in groups (and then every night the janitorial staff put the desks back into neat rows). The tutors hovered around the giant whiteboard in front. Alex handed out Hershey's Kisses to help students explore sense memory. Nell wrote down the snatches of dialogue she had assigned the students to eavesdrop on, including an intimate argument between a mother and a daughter in the kitchen. Hillary, who sat with her post-surgical foot stoically propped on a chair, taped portraits on the whiteboard and asked students to choose a portrait and write in that person's voice; then everyone tried to guess which portrait the voice belonged to.

Our friends at NYU had supplied us a classroom in the shiny new glass box known as the Paulson Center. We did much of our work—and all of our snacking—in a vast atrium that was typically empty. What a majestic setting for Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Crackers! We ventured out on a field trip to the New York Public Library, where we gazed at the great murals of the development of literacy and writing and studied the exotic treasures in the exhibition hall. New ideas took wing: one of the stories in this volume was directly inspired by the exhibition.

Everything the students learned—voice, setting and dialogue, journalism and history and polemic—sloshed around in their heads and interacted with their own lives to produce a chemical reaction. That's what you see in the ensuing pages. The only theme—the only one that matters—is inspiration.

—Jim Traub

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*Claire Weng*

# MAGNOLIA

ABIGAIL LUK

The house next to us used to belong to a quiet family who left as quickly as they came. The yellow paint was still bright, as if they had moved in yesterday. Their white picket fence seemed to tower over me. My mother would always catch me trying to climb over it and see what it was hiding. Imagine my disappointment when I set my eyes on a tiny sapling barely holding up against the summer breeze. It couldn't have been planted all that long ago. Still, there was something that kept drawing me back to that sapling. My mother, who had given up on keeping me from wandering there, spoke to me gently: "If you want it to stand against the wind and never avert its gaze from the glaring sun, care for it like I care for you." And so, I showered the little plant with my dreams and wishes, whispering sweet nothings to the loneliest looking leaves. It was only much later that I discovered my mother would tend to it when I wasn't looking.

I started to notice little toys littering the ground near my beloved plant. At the time, I thought it meant it heard my whispers. Through my eyes, the poor sapling looked drab and boring and so I appointed myself as the official decorator. Using stray twigs, I would artfully draw in the dirt, making sure they all looked pretty. My mother would sit cross-legged next to me and weave braids into my hair. Sometimes, she would accidentally tug too hard at a tangle and my twig would make an ugly squiggle. I would always get upset and ban her from ever touching my hair again.

There used to be a little patch of sand in a field behind the community park. We would lay on an old blanket and pretend we were by the ocean. The waves would roll in and wash away all of our sandcastles that we built together. It would just barely be night when the moon would show itself to all that dared to look. I would catch myself rambling, my words miraculously stringing together to make a somewhat coherent sentence. I would clamp my mouth shut and make a quick glance at my mother. No one ever liked me rambling. When the silence got too loud, she would look at me and say, "The sky holds all of our souls. It bares itself to us, always willing to listen. You, darling, you're the moon. And for you, I will always listen."

After many lilac skies, the tree no longer danced to the hum of the winds. My infatuation was short-lived. As I grew to be stuck between adolescence and childhood, my worries drifted away from the development of a small tree to my sick mother. There were days where I would stare out of my window, focusing on the color of faded yellow. I was conflicted about whether to hide in the uncertainty or confront the absolute. My mother's smile became a ghost of what it was. Every cough left a blood-stained mess and every breath left me scared it would be her last. Back when I was smaller, I would often wake up and wonder how I ended up in her arms. Now, I fought sleep to still feel the warmth of her hand. I got used to the soft lullaby that was the beeping, but sometimes it was deafening. It would ring in my ears, no matter how far I tried to run. It made no sense how it was she who coaxed me closer to her body. I was afraid to lean my head against her shoulder; she was so frail. I could tell she tried hard to at least keep her voice strong. My mother would tell me stories that I felt happened centuries ago. I was reminded of that pitiful sapling that I was so fond of. She would say, "I remember listening in on your little wish whispers. I loved seeing your eyes twinkle when you found toys miraculously appearing the next day. Though I never could make the skies rain like you wanted." It was something that she had never told me before. Now, all I wanted was for it to stop raining.

It took a lot of self-restraint to keep myself from tearing the leaves off that tree. None of my wishes came true anymore, no matter how many times I told them. I found them strewn across the overgrown grass like puffs of dandelion seeds. The days bled into each other as the months died. I tried picking myself up. I did. But my efforts would slip through my hands like sand. A gale would pick up, and I would waver. I'm constantly caught between the guilt of wanting to forget her and being afraid that I would. Then, I heard her voice in the wind. She said to me, "Should you let it whisk you away or stand so strong you can make even the oceans drown?"

Oftentimes, I would sit by my window, sorting through my thoughts. I must've let go of her a thousand times over. And in each moment, my heart would remember what it felt like. To exist and know that she existed there with me. This was one of those moments. I looked outside for the tree, snow softly powdering the ground. I blinked twice, not fully registering the girl that stood where I usually stood. She held flowers in her hand and paused before setting them gently against the tree. Suddenly, I understood. Two souls lay embedded into that tree's memory. I didn't know her, but it felt like I did. And just as quickly as she came, she left, leaving the flowers to be buried by the snow. I think I'd have buried something along with those flowers.

Now, there was a magnolia tree just beyond the white picket fence. It was a beautiful thing. It towered over me, standing strong against the howling wind and harsh rain. I could see the light yellow paint of the house peeking from between the flowers. The white petals swayed ever so slightly in the breeze, reminding me of where this all started. The tree's branches no longer reached towards me. Instead, they grasped the heavens, and I hoped they would relay my letters of love.

## BAREFACED

SILGA CHISIM

At the age of 10, I embarked on a desperate mission to defy the greatest enemy of all: aging. Equipped with creams and serums, I lathered my face, hoping to stave off the inevitable.

It began with a single ripe and plump pimple. Naively, I thought squeezing it would solve my problem, but all it did was invite more of its kin to the party. I was all too aware that pimples were just the beginning of a long journey of aging. They served as markers, stark reminders that I was growing older.

The constellation of blemishes on my forehead and clusters of blackheads around my nose seemed to be my defining trait. When people first saw me, this is what they usually noticed, often mistaking it for dirtiness. “Do you even wash your face?” my classmates would taunt. Little did they know, with the amount of times I cleansed my face each day, I was probably much cleaner than they were. Though I heard their words frequently, I tried my best to not take it to heart since they seemed to target anyone who didn’t meet their unrealistic standards of beauty.

Desperate to win the war with my skin, I sought new products and treatments, from silk pillowcases to frequent visits to the doctor’s office, yet nothing seemed to make a lasting difference. I quickly resorted to makeup, allowing it to become the armor that shields my insecurities from the world.

At first, it was just a touch of mascara and lip gloss. Then, I decided to try some blush. Before I knew it, I found myself waking up at dawn every school day to apply my full face of makeup. Living an hour away from school made it difficult for me to get ready each day. My teacher often scolded me for my lateness, but beauty was something I prioritized over punctuality. Working out with makeup was the worst. I could practically feel my sweat and makeup combine, clogging up my pores and causing more breakouts.

The more layers of makeup I applied, the more I scrutinized my features: thin eyebrows, dark circles, hooded eyes that resisted any eyeshadow’s charm, and the bumpy texture of my pimple-filled skin masked by cosmetics. Rarely did I dare to go outside in my natural face.

My mother tried to reassure me that my acne was just a phase, destined to fade with age. Yet her words felt empty, as she too tried various creams and treatments to battle her own signs of aging.

On a cold winter evening, my friend and I made our regular monthly visit to the local senior home. We usually spent our volunteering visits polishing and painting the nails of the elderly residents while listening to their tales of the past. We were assigned to work with Jane, and I quickly noticed her striking blue eyes. I thought they were beautiful, much more captivating than my mundane brown ones.

The moment we sat down with her, she welcomed us with a gentle smile. “You two girls are beautiful,” she said. I felt a little smile tug at my lips. The whole day I had been so worried that my off-the-shoulder top made my shoulders look too broad. As we painted her nails, she told us she had been a surfer when she was young. She first began surfing in beaches near her hometown in Queens. As she grew older, she explored more unknown territories throughout the world, such as the seas in India and the Philippines. Though she was a talented surfer, many, including most of her family members, disapproved, regarding it as an activity only suitable for men. Looking at her tiny frame and creased skin, it seemed almost impossible to imagine that she could have experienced so much adventure.

“Did you ever fall or hurt yourself while surfing?” My friend asked as I carefully applied the last coat of purple polish to Jane’s frail fingernails. She nodded, her eyes lighting up in amusement.

“All the time,” her eyes drifted to the lower half of her body, “I might still have a few scars.”

“Do the scars not bother you?”

“They used to,” her eyes met mine, “but, they don’t really matter now. Looking back, nothing should’ve mattered to me besides the things I wanted to do. Life moves much too fast to worry about tiny matters.”

She lent me a small smile, but I remained silent and applied the final layer of topcoat. I knew she was right. All the things that consumed my thoughts were malleable. Would they truly be relevant to me within a few years?

I was worn out from worrying that the harsh school lighting would draw attention to my acne, from avoiding eye contact to evade judgment, and from questioning whether my elaborate makeup routine was worth the lateness it often caused. Acne is simply a part of growing up, and it would be foolish to let it dictate my life. Like Jane, I wanted to live fearlessly without concerning myself with what others thought of me.

I started to take small steps towards simplifying my makeup routine. As I began to go out with less makeup, I slowly became accustomed to seeing my bare face in the mirror. Despite not yet feeling confident enough to present myself in public without makeup, I no longer view it as an absolute necessity. Instead, I now opt for a more subtle look with just a touch of mascara and lip gloss, which is both convenient and time efficient. Now that I’ve taken a step back from wearing makeup, I can see the toll it had on my life. The more I let go of makeup, the more I can feel myself breathe.



## DANCE DILEMMA?

ISABELLA ZAPATA

Are you a dancer or do you just dance? For teens, this can be a serious question. Do you just want to simply dance or jump around the room, or do you want it to be more than that, perhaps as a professional? Dance can be purely a compilation of moves, and often it starts off as that, just a move. Can you choreograph or can you just coordinate? What do you do with these moves? Progressing beyond the basics is fundamental for a dancer. How is the execution, the energy behind it, the sharpness or the fragility? Beyond learning the beats of a song or dancing along at a party, can you do an arabesque?

Over ten years of my life went into dance, day after day in the studio. After all that, I would say it's one of the best things I have ever done. As a child, dance acted as a safe haven, a home away from home. I've been dancing for almost as long as I've been walking. The studio had quickly become my second home and the people I met helped make me who I am. As a child I was pushed into it, but if I'd had to make the choice at the time, I wouldn't have done it any other way.

If you ever question whether or not to enroll in dance, I would say go for it. For every dancer needs a teacher, a mentor. Communication and criticism are necessary in the studio and prompt improvement. A teacher provides the steps, the beats, the counts. Dance is all about human connection and expression, communicating with your peers, your teachers, and then your audience. Leaning on the people around you can help you get so far. In dance, trusting that you can work as a team to capture the essence of the song is essential. Dance is so much more than just the steps, it's a story, a story with your body, the emotions shown on your face. You cannot capture the essence of dance until you are a dancer. Simply going to a dance class does not make you a dancer; taking the time to work through a piece, work with a teacher, and use the music, those make you a dancer. You must acknowledge that there is always room to grow, you can always learn something new or make something better, and it is just up to you to dedicate yourself to the art.

But with those stakes, are you sure you have what it takes? Within seconds choreography changes, roles evolve, formations switch. Dancing teaches you to think on your feet, not just metaphorically but also quite literally. Time in the studio is precious: the routines across the floor, the moments of silence and confusion are all part of the day. Piecing a dance together provides a huge rush but be prepared to be completely out of breath with the largest smile on your face.

In the studio, the mirror is your best friend, it's the focus of everything. After months the mirror becomes an audience filled with cheers and claps. It all comes down to the mirror. Each turn ends with your facing the mirror, each piece of choreography is learned through the mirror, and when in doubt, the mirror shows others and aids you.

What makes dance so beautiful is that it is open to interpretation. Yes, there is a song, and the mood is set. But you can make it what you want, your face conveys your feeling, and whether it is the fakest or the most genuine smile, that is the message you're sending to the crowd. The agility of a jump, the energy of a kick, the precision of a turn—knowing how to differentiate between them and make them work for you is the beauty of dance.

Dance is a whirlwind of emotions, turns, and steps that can't even be put into words. If you have the desire and dedication to become a dancer, go ahead. If not, you can still have fun dancing at parties.

## THE SAGE'S CALLING

SI RONG LIN

The sun shone through the light fog, making the air sparkle like fireflies in a remote, forgotten forest. Two beings were climbing the last few steps up a hill, marveling at how unusually quiet it was without the chatter of animals.

“How much longer?” The taller of the two beings took a gasp of air. “I feel like I’m half composted.”

This was Allium Coleus, former prince of Plante, who had been unexpectedly whisked away from his home by an unknown force that landed him on Earth. He had fallen deeper into despair as each desperate attempt to get back ended in failure.

“Sir, keep walking... I have a good feeling about this,” said Myce, Allium’s assistant of 127 years.

“Myce, you’ve been saying that for three months, and we’re still stuck here,” muttered Allium. He fiddled with a small brown sphere with two rings around it, rolling it between his thorned fingers like a worry stone.

“Hey, that’s my globe,” said Myce, giving Allium a please-don’t-play-with-that look.

“Well, Mr. Grumpy McGrumps, I need some fun since you are probably wrong about this place. No way the sage lives in that.” Allium pointed to a run-down, overgrown mess of a building before them. Vines had taken the liberty of snaking into the dozens of cracks in the stone. The windows had a distinct grayish film of dust, and the door was practically invisible under a thicket of weeds and thorns. It was a shocking sight. Back home on Plante, such neglect was punishable by border duty, which was practically a death sentence.

Allium spun the globe in his hands. “Put it back. Now,” said Myce.

“Fine.” As Allium reached to slip it into the sack on Myce’s shoulder, the globe fell to the ground with an echoing thump, knocking off one of the rings. Allium hurriedly picked it up, but by this time Myce’s fluff was writhing, a clear sign of agitation. “Only one ring came off,” Allium said consolingly.

“My vacation home was on that ring!” Myce yelled. His little round body seemed to grow as his tendrils raged.

“I’m sorry,” Allium said, running his hand through the leaves and blossoms on his head. He patted Myce. “Why don’t we get this over with?” Accompanied grudgingly by Myce, whose head barely topped the weeds, Allium trudged to the door and knocked.

The bedroom upstairs in the house on top of the hill was devoid of light. A well-preserved stuffed bear, shell, and leather-bound book sat on a wooden desk in the far corner of the room. On the floor around the bed, a seventeen-year-old boy sat hunched over a dusty, cracked carving he’d made of his mom, dad, brother, and himself.

*No no no. This doesn’t look right.* It’s nothing like the picture. In the photo Kelvin had worked from, he and his brother were laughing, their arms around each other, while their mother and father watched fondly. Their hair sparkled like the sea under the golden rays of light. In the carving, the four of them were lifeless, their eyes cold.

A knock resounded through the house. Kelvin was stunned by the unfamiliar sound. No one had knocked since his family disappeared seven years ago, leaving him alone. The townspeople had blamed Kelvin for the incident; never mind he was just ten years old.

He leapt from his bed, racing to the stairs, and stopped at the top, staring down at the darkness below. His breath quickened as he rubbed the birthmark on his right shoulder out of habit. Kelvin shifted from side to side and finally descended, the wooden railing smooth and cool under his sweaty hand, the stairs creaking with each step. As he reached the door, he made out two distinct voices. One sounded young, light, and sharp, while the other sounded old, husky, and deep.

“Are you sure a sage lives here? Why wouldn’t he be in the village?” said the younger voice.

“They exiled him. You would have heard their nasty comments if you weren’t so busy stuffing your face yesterday,” replied the older voice. “Plus, I have great intuition.”

“Right, like that time in the desert when you insisted on following a tumbleweed.”

“I was dying then,” the older voice said indignantly. “Go on, knock again.”

*Bang!* The knock rattled the support beams, threatening to rip the house off its foundation. Kelvin jerked the door open before they could knock the entire building over. The sun blinded him, and suffocating humid air filled his lungs, making him cough. The scent of flowers filled his nose. *Strange, I never planted flowers*, he thought, as he took in the bizarre sight on his doorstep.

A tall, purple creature with a long snout and leaves covering it from head to toe loomed over him. Its claw-like fingers seemed poised to attack. Kelvin froze, his heartbeat loud in his ears.

*What in the world is this creature? Am I dreaming? Seems too real to be a dream. Maybe I’m going insane.*

“Hello!” the husky voice boomed from the grass. Sunken, ghostly eyes peered at him over a stubby snout.

*Oh God, there are two of them.* “Please, don’t kill me,” Kelvin said. He closed his eyes, then flinched and opened them again as something brushed against his face. The purple creature was on its knees now, almost the same height as Kelvin, touching his head with soft gentle strokes.

“Sorry for scaring you,” the creature said. “We’re looking for a mighty sage.”

“The townspeople nickname him the Killer Storm,” the deep voice added.

Kelvin clenched his fists, and his eyes threatened to tear up. He saw no point in denying it.

“That’s me—at least, that’s what they call me,” stuttered Kelvin. “But I’m no sage.”

“See?” the tall one said, tugging on his companion’s arm. “I think we should look for the sage elsewhere.”

The short one refused to budge, planting himself firmly on the ground.

“I’m telling you, he’s the one. I can feel his power.” He pointed a tendril towards the exposed tear-shaped birthmark on Kelvin’s right arm. “Look.”

“That’s just a birthmark,” said the purple figure.

The short one ignored him, turning to Kelvin. “Please help us get home, mighty sage.”

Kelvin rubbed his shoulder, averting his eyes from the bizarre duo. “I think I left the stove on,” he said, slamming the door shut with one swift motion.

“Look at what you did,” said the husky voice.

Kelvin’s heart was racing; not out of fear, but out of an emotion so long buried he

couldn't identify it at first.

"Me?" said the young voice. "You're the one who—"

"Never mind. He's obviously not the one."

Kelvin's heart swelled. They would leave, and he would be alone all again. "We'll never get back to Plante," said Allium. Kelvin couldn't hear the other one's reply; their voices were fading along with their footsteps.

*Wait... Plante? Like the place in my father's story?*

Kelvin jerked the door open. He was no mighty sage, but maybe he could help them find the person who was. "Wait!" he called out. Ignoring the small, hopeful voice in his head that whispered, *What if they're right?*



*Si Rong Lin*



*Photo courtesy of Hamza Hussein*

## HIM

CLAIRE WENG

Hamza Hussain, a friend of mine, sees himself dead in ten years. It's hard to find that surprising, given his recklessness.

He always claims that he's far busier than I could ever be since he's a national fencer and a street biker. He started biking at the age of four, after being inspired by videos of hot wheels. Once, during an amateur biking competition, he crashed into a rock wall at 40 MPH and woke up to be presented with an award for the most impressive trick.

He often plays a game with himself where he rides a bicycle into a forest and tries to dodge as many trees as he can before he crashes into one. During one of these games, he encountered a bear and found himself suddenly able to avoid every single tree until he reached safety. Most recently, I saw on his Instagram that he biked all the way from New York City to D.C. in 23 hours and 50 minutes. He accomplished this while I was at home, reading, sleeping, and lazing around.

His fencing career started when his cousin mentioned swords and his attention was swiftly captured. He was fourteen and pretty talented for his age. Now, he competes often and wins most of his matches, or so he says.

The first time he reached out to me was on Instagram in May. He complimented my artwork and asked if I wanted to play Genshin Impact. I thought that was why he contacted me and happily accepted his request. Despite sharing two classes with him, I hadn't noticed him before. I usually kept to myself and had a small social circle, so when he barged into my quiet life so abruptly, I was thrust into a whirlwind of confusion.

I never expected our friendship to develop so rapidly and so easily. In less than a month, I was sharing the smallest details of my life with him daily.

Slowly, through our friendship, I've heard my own voice become louder and more confident, and my smile more frequent. One time during history, I was asked to repeat my answer, and I spoke so loudly everyone—including myself—was stunned. I expected to be yelled at for daring to be so rude. Instead, the teacher was proud of me for speaking up. Afterward, Hamza told me I should speak more like that from now on.

As good a friend as he is, there are sides of him that I find annoying. He often comments critically on how I dress, how I look, and how I should be more feminine and wear more colorful clothes. He uses the term NPC—non-playable character, meaning someone who leads a boring life and doesn't stand out—to describe me. I, in turn, have resisted the urge to shove any object nearby down his throat (or I would have, if most of these exchanges weren't taking place over text).

Yet as imperfect as our friendship is, it gives me a lot. One thing that he did has stuck with me. In the beginning of our friendship, I had warned him of my social anxiety and awkwardness, and my struggles to make friends. As he listened to my problems, he assured me that they aren't as terrible as I think. He repeatedly offered his aid, saying I could always consult him, and that I don't need to worry about what I say when I'm with him. Maybe that was just the bare minimum a friend should say, but it meant a lot to me.

Out of impulse, I bought him a metal flower because he said he wanted someone to give him flowers. After that, I kept showering him with gifts. Several times I swore I wouldn't spend money on him ever again, but I never kept my word—and he knew I wouldn't. Seeing him happy or thankful for the things that I give just made me want to give more. Finally, I put my foot down, but he still asks to “borrow” money sometimes, promising that he'll return it in senior year (which I and his other friends know won't ever happen).

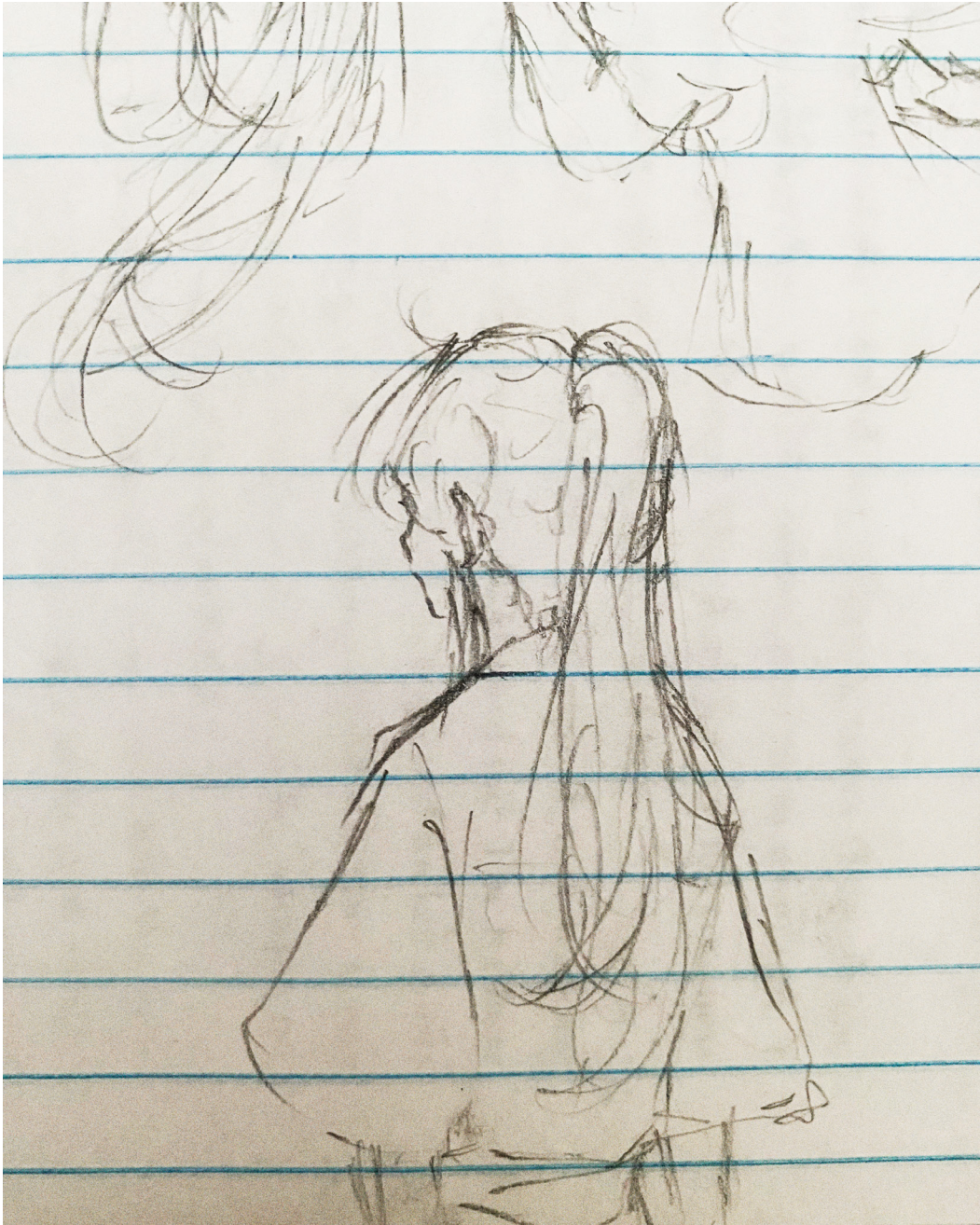
Curious as to why he was interested in me, I asked the friend who had given him my Instagram username. When she told me he just needed homework answers, it was like expecting a flower but presented with a cold, hard rock. My initial response was, “Of course, why else would someone like him want to be friends with someone like me?” But then I realized he never actually asked for those answers; at least, not till much later. And when he saw my indecipherable handwriting, he gave up.

Still, our friendship continues. And still, I ask myself why he would want me in his life. Maybe it's because he sees something in me that I'm not aware of? Perhaps he likes my company, or that I send him multiple messages without expecting a reply? Or that I'm a sincere person who shows him my vulnerability?

Whatever the reason, knowing that I can always go to him for anything is good enough for me. I don't think that being friends with him has made me develop new traits, but rather enhanced and drawn out what was already inside of me. He's someone I never thought I needed, but now, he feels indispensable.

Even if we end up parting at some point, and he won't be with me throughout the rest of my story, he'll still be one of my favorite chapters.





*Clarie Weng*



*Milo Romero*

## ADVERSITY WITH LIAM TRIMBLE

TAWFIQ AHMED

Liam Trimble's usual steady voice falters as he recounts the fateful day in 2004 in which the deafening blast tore through the air of the mess hall where his father, Roger Trimble, had been stationed. In the heart of Mosul, Iraq, the blast shattered not only the surrounding walls but also many of the lives standing within. As Liam delves into his father's haunting experience, it becomes evident that he is not merely a witness but a testament to the suffering and the enduring strength of the family. Liam stands as a living example of the resilience that emerged from the dark chapter within the family's lives.

Recalling his father's passion for service, Liam says, "My father wanted to apply to West Point Military Academy; however, he didn't have the grades and wasn't really the best student. Due to my grandfather's relationship with John McCain, he was able to get a nomination for Annapolis academy. He later got a nomination for West Point academy from John Shadegg, a U.S. representative for Arizona." Roger's determination to serve in the military was unwavering due to his studies of war as a teenager; despite the hardships faced at West Point, he persevered, emerging as a man molded by the rigorous military training.

When Liam describes that day in Mosul, Iraq, his voice trembles, every vivid detail etched in his memory as if Roger's harrowing experience had become inseparable from his own. "On December 21st, 2004, there was a bombing in the mess hall of the base my father was in....My dad was very close to the explosion, the person sitting next to him got shrapnel that entered into his brain." It was in this crucible of chaos that Roger stood, his very being shaken by the explosion which had taken the lives of 22 people, including 14 U.S. soldiers, and leaving 69 others wounded. The battle for Mosul, a city that had become the focal point in the struggle to stabilize Iraq, was not only a clash of arms. It had been a stark awakening, a brutal realization that the victory over the Iraqi military did not herald the end of the battles. As Roger served as a soldier, the harsh reality became increasingly evident—Iraq stood as a symbol of failure, and the presence of America was far from welcome.

Roger's return home from Iraq marked the beginning of a new battle, one fought not on foreign soil but within the recesses of his own mind. The demons he confronted were the shadows of memories that refused to fade. Liam somberly recounts, "I remember when Joe Biden withdrew troops from Afghanistan, one of my dad's friends from the army sent a letter from the perspective of someone from the Taliban. He read it to my mom and I but after a few words or so, he started sobbing and went to the other room." It was a painful reminder for not only Roger but the rest of the family that the scars of war are not merely physical but etched deep into the psyche. The letter, though written from the perspective of the enemy, served as a mirror reflecting the shared humanity that transcended even the boundaries of conflict. For Liam, this experience offered a "glimpse into the profound emotional landscape my dad had to navigate daily."

Roger's transition back to civilian life was marked by the harsh reality that his military service had rendered his college degree virtually worthless in the job market. But if there's one thing Roger had learned from the crucible of war, it was the unwavering belief that he could "dig himself out of any hole." He embarked on a journey of financial reinvention, acquiring a master's degree in financial engineering. He forged a new path as a financial risk manager for Morgan Stanley, embracing the challenges of a new battlefield.

Academic hurdles that once stood as insurmountable barriers have transformed into a resolve for Liam Trimble, reminiscent of Roger's unyielding commitment. "I have dealt with several academic disabilities and almost failed elementary school as a whole. But he has treated my disabilities as absolutely nothing more than a minor obstacle and has pushed me to improve myself as much as I can," Liam reflects on his own struggle.

Amidst the challenges he faced in language classes, Liam found a new world within the realm of math and sciences. These subjects, often perceived as formidable by many, became his sanctuary. When faced with a U.S. Physics Olympiad problem that no one his age could tackle, his dedication shone through as he recounted how he tackled the problem. "It took me hours of thinking. Since I'm on vacation, I went to a relaxing place to solve it, the pool. I thought about what was happening conceptually, and I started applying math as a tool to describe what's happening...I conceptualize what's going on in this scenario and I determine what is changing within the system," he elaborated.

For Liam, math and science aren't just collections of facts and formulas; they represent a form of artistry in understanding the world. He expressed, "Math and science aren't just facts and formulas, it's art. In my opinion, learning how to think is more valuable than learning a bunch of facts. What our school system fails to teach is exactly that." His perspective on education transcended the typical rote memorization, viewing education as the nurturing of the ability to think critically, draw connections, and to approach problems from different angles. "Physics, math, ELA—all the same, any field requires thinking, and I try to get better at thinking," Liam declared. Like father, like son, continuing on, shaping their own paths in an effort to rise above physical, mental, and academic challenges.

## MY MOTHER'S STORY

QUINCI TENZIN

“The worst thing that can happen in climbing is not making it to the top.” My father’s words followed me throughout my mountaineering years. Growing up, I believed it was a given that the worst consequence of climbing would be falling. Looking back now, I realize my father was right all along.

Darjeeling, a town in northern India, is known for its mountain scenery. My father enjoyed going on long hikes through the forest that ran up the sides of the mountains. He would sometimes take me along. I enjoyed every second. Each peak had its unique characteristics that called for specific equipment to be used. For rocky cliffs, you would need special rock-climbing shoes, while in snowy mountains, you had to wear snow shoes and carry crampons. Each mountain also had its own dangers. For rocky mountains, you were in control of your falling. However, in snowy mountains, the weather is unpredictable, and disasters such as avalanches could occur. Avalanches are a mountain climber’s worst nightmare whether climbers die from suffocation or physical pain. However, I made my decision at the age of 15 that this is what I wanted to do my whole life. I wanted to become a mountain climber.

In order to do that, though, I would have to find a challenge greater than the small mountains near my home. I would need to find professional training, among climbers with decades of experience. I found that at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institution, HMI, in Darjeeling. I decided to take classes.

Walking into the institution, I feel the difference between me and the professionals. Those professionals trained their bodies to survive the harsh weather conditions and exercised every day. No one is idling around; everyone looked like they had something to do. Some are wearing large backpacks, which I assumed held their equipment, and others are wearing sports attire and on their way to training. At first, I feel discouraged and intimidated. Could I one day be like them? Then my father’s words echo in my head. “The worst thing that can happen in climbing is not making it to the top.”

Soon the HMI instructor calls me to her office. The hallway was dim but when she opened her office door, a bright light shines. Every wall is covered with medals, trophies, and plaques. She catches me looking at the awards and says, “HMI is a place where champions are born.” I feel like I can trust her words. If I join this, I can become a champion. “I’m ready,” I say.

She explains the curriculum. There are three courses to complete: Adventure, Basic, and Advanced. Only then will I be in consideration to climb Mount Everest, the ultimate challenge—and reward.

In Adventure, you learn the basics of climbing, such as how to use your equipment. In Basic, you learn to move on to mountaineering climbing, where you learn to climb rocky and snowy mountains. In Advanced, you learn more difficult techniques, such as how to acclimate to high altitudes.

“This is a very rigorous course. Who’s the youngest person to participate in it?” I ask.

A girl named Pema, the instructor says. She is only a few months older than I am. She came here two years ago but was a prodigy whom everyone aspired to be. She was always first in training, both in and

out of climbing. If she is just a few months older than me and can complete the training, it must not be very hard, I think to myself.

I asked about the training and my jaw dropped. At 6 a.m. every day, you run 5 kilometers while carrying 20-pound bags, and then go on to complete weightlifting sets. She goes on to say I can start training as early as tomorrow morning. I put on a fake confident smile and tell the instructor that I'm ready. As I leave the office, I hear a voice.

"Let's see how long this one takes," says one of the girls in the training center. I gather that this was Pema. She is short but muscular. Some argue that being short in climbing is a disadvantage because you aren't able to reach or stretch your legs as far. That doesn't seem to affect Pema.

As I am about to get up for the morning training, my bed sheets strangle me, forcing me to stay in my bed. I try to fight it, but I'm too weak. I start to lose circulation in my body. But then my father rushes into my room saying it's time to wake up. "But I'm already awake, can't you see I'm trapped?" I say.

He takes a deep breath and comes closer to me. "I know you're nervous, but remember this is for your own good," he says. "This will benefit you greatly, Now come on and be the strong girl I know you are."

I make my way to the meeting spot and make eye contact with Pema. "Look, the newbie actually woke up this morning," she says. I ignore her words, trying not to cause trouble. But she won't drop it. "Oh look, the newbie thinks she's too good to answer, let's see how you do in practice." There was a crowd of people, yet not one stepped in to defend me. Instead, some snicker.

But my only concern was making it out of this practice alive. We were on a hill I used to go hiking on with my father. It's a long trail that includes high elevations and steep downhills. I remember being out of breath just walking through it, and now I had to run. The coach started explaining the set. All I could think about was giving up. There was no way I could run this trail. My heart starts beating faster as I loudly inhale and exhale. "Scared already, newbie?" Pema says. That was all I needed to get out of that trance. It was time for the 5-kilometer run.

At first, I manage to keep up with the group without putting too much effort. But by the time I hit the second kilometer, I feel the lactic acid building up in my calves. I push through and make it to the third kilometer. I'm gasping for air and going no faster than a walking pace. "Just two more kilometers," I tell myself. Sweat floods my head as my face droops to the floor. These two kilometers could be the death of me before I even pursue mountain climbing. "I'm already last, so what's the point of even finishing," I think to myself. But then I see my father's face on the ground. His disappointment when I tell him I couldn't complete the running and gave up.

By the time I snap back, I've already completed one and a half kilometers. I just had to push this last half-kilometer. I start to pick up the pace. My whole body is numb. Once I stop, I will feel all the ache and pain. My only option was to keep running. I see the finish line and give it my all. I crossed the finish line. I did it. I made it. But before I could celebrate, I fall to the floor. I am not embarrassed. I am too happy to be ashamed.

This is going to be my life for the many years that follow. Days pass by, then months, then years. Finally, after four years, I am ready. I remember the first day of training when I was gasping for air doing the 5-kilometer run. Now, I wake up two hours before practice, at 4 a.m., to run my own course. It was a 16-kilometer run through my neighborhood, and then I used the public gym in the park. I did pull ups, pushups, squats, and sit-ups. Now that my body is physically ready, my climbing experience is easier. In those four years, I climbed all the mountains in Darjeeling. These efforts didn't go unnoticed. The instructor had told me she was proud of my achievements. Finally, I got the chance to climb Mount Everest.

Climbing Mount Everest is one of the greatest achievements you can accomplish as a mountain climber. Only 10 percent of climbers at the center are given this chance. I rushed home to tell my family. I've never seen my dad smile so brightly. His smile was enough for me to know how proud he was of me. My father held a huge family gathering where he boasted to all his friends that his one and only daughter would be climbing the tallest point on Earth. He danced the night away while also continuously reminding everyone of my achievement. Seeing my father's happiness was all I needed to push me through the rigorous expedition.



*Photo courtesy of Qunci Tenzin*

Training became even harder. Not only did we train our bodies, but we also trained mentally. I've always been a nervous person. One of the toughest things I had to struggle with is using the oxygen mask which we used to acclimate to higher altitudes. The first few times I put it on, I panicked. My heart rate would rapidly increase and often I would get very light-headed.

Finally, it is D-Day, May 10, 1993. If I make it to the top, I will officially be the youngest person from Darjeeling to climb Mount Everest. History would be made today, and I would be in control of that. It was time. I say goodbye to my parents as they try to hide their tears. Our group leader calls us. I hug my parents one last time. As I take my final steps toward the mountain, I hear shouting in the background: "The worst thing that can happen in climbing is not making it to the top."

The first week is easy. We went through everything we trained for. Luckily, there were no avalanches. As we went up the mountain, we held our gear bag, which weighed 30kg. Our gear bag consisted of crampons, an ice ax, a harness set, dried food, and extra clothing. However, as we got higher, I started losing track of the number of days that went by. I felt lost and alone. Through the icy wind, I miss the warmth of my own house. Instead of my mom's fresh lentils with rice, I'm left with dried meat and hydration tablets. Instead of playing games with my brother, I'm stuck holding an ice ax I use to travel through the ice. One wrong move and my life could end.

In these weak moments, Pema was there to comfort me—well, in her own way. "Newbie, you went through all that training and suffering just to feel homesick," she said. "We trained our body and mind to the extremes, yet feeling homesick is your problem. Grow up and think about your family. Don't be selfish." I was speechless, not only because I was surprised, but because I knew she was right. It was me being selfish. My family gave me their whole support and I trained rigorously just to want to give up because of this silly emotion. I knew what had to be done. That night, my dad's last words to me put me to sleep.

Our team leader warns us that we are reaching a higher altitude and need to start wearing our oxygen masks. This sends a chill down my spine as I remember the traumatizing early moments during practice. Only this time, it was the real deal—and one mishap could cost me my life. It was time. I put on the mask and my heart starts to race and I start using up more oxygen than I need. I see the amount of oxygen left decreasing as I start to feel lightheaded. My eyes start feeling drowsy and my hands are about to let go of the crampon. All of a sudden, I feel a hit to my back. It was Pema. Once again, she saved me. That hit was enough to bring me to reality. This is twice she saved me now. I hate to admit it, but I see why she was called the prodigy.

With my oxygen mask and an ice ax, I make my way up the mountain. I don't dare to look down and only focus on where I would place my ax and foot. Step by step, I make my way up. I start to feel dizzy and lightheaded as I have been wearing the oxygen mask for a while now. I know I don't have much time before I pass out. With my last remaining strength, I push my ax to the ice and realize that it's flat and not vertical. I did it. I made it to the top. In these moments, I was just imagining what it would look like. I'm unsure what to expect, but I know the view will be breathtaking.





*Photo courtesy of Qunci Tenzin*

It is dead silent. Almost as if the winds that had been aggressively attacking us have calmed down. I can't hear anything besides my own breathing. I am at peace. It felt as if it was just me and the view. I was on top of the world. The other mountains looked like small hills compared to where I was. I lay on my back and look at the sky. I feel sleepy so I shut my eyes. Suddenly, I am home. I feel warmth as my dad and mom tackle me with hugs and kisses.

Before, I can tell my parents how much I love them and miss them, my eyes open. My parents disappear and get replaced by the cold, windy, snowy air, but my heart feels warm. It was time to venture back down the mountain. I could just feel their hugs surrounding me and their proud tears just like in my dream. I venture down the mountain with Pema by my side. It is ironic how my bully became my strongest support throughout this challenging experience. I can't wait to introduce Pema to my parents as a friend, and savior.

I take my final steps off the mountain, and I see my parents. Tiny little humans waving and screaming at me from a distance. With all my remaining strength, I sprint ahead and jump into their arms.

## AI ASSESSMENT

RYAN SUKHEDO

Students, workers, and governments have used artificial intelligence to do many things for them, whether to help them in the workplace or in their school studies. Multiple kinds of AI have been created and put to use—in online job applications, or the FAQ section of a website, even in social media. But AI has also raised concerns: From its earliest creation in 1955 to today, AI sparks controversy about whether it's getting too powerful or whether society should keep expanding on its technological advances. Inevitably, people—ordinary citizens and politicians—ask if AI needs to be regulated, and if so, how much? Regulating AI is the smartest approach society can take before the technology gets out of hand.

It helps to accept that AI is used to solve complex problems at a faster rate than humans can. In 2017, researchers at the Okinawa Institute for Science and Technology collaborated with experts at the university of Munich to test how a computer might solve 250,000 different kinds of spin configurations. The computer was given no other information and was able to classify all the different types of liquid and each of the mathematical equations representing them. The researchers admitted that AI did this in a fraction of the time it would have taken them.

But there's also the dark side of AI. AI is being misused to revamp images or faces of people to create deep fake pornography. In August of 2021, the Department of Homeland Security published a PDF document regarding the use of AI technology in pornographic material. "Face swap technology was used to put actors Kristen Bell and Scarlett Johansson in several pornographic videos. One of the fake videos that was labeled as 'leaked' footage generated over 1.5 million views."

Given its impacts—both negative and positive—our challenge is to manage or limit AI to the most productive use possible. For starters, the government would need to pass legislation that permits large firms to use it to its full, pro-social potential. This would include research that addresses solving complex problems, organizing data, and testing simulations for the purpose of investing in new systems that the government may want to get behind.

Another reason to regulate AI is the threat it poses to our national security. AI getting into the wrong hands can potentially lead to terrorist attacks. The Guardian quotes the British lawyer in charge of reviewing the adequacy of terrorism legislation describing the violence AI can be used for. "They can literally throw a drone into the air and drive away. No one knows what artificial intelligence is going to decide. It might just dive-bomb a crowd for example." If the U.S. Congress limited access to AI, it could dodge a potential terrorist attack.

Additionally, AI is able to do jobs in ways that are cheaper, less time-consuming, and more efficient than humans can. According to Forbes, "56% of banks claim they've implemented the technology into their business domains like management, and 52% claim they've used it for revenue generation." Jobs that were once filled by people are now performed by AI, impacting the unemployment rate.

Certain fields—literature, banking, journalism, education—might be inclined to prohibit or limit the use of AI to protect the jobs of those who have worked hard for their professional credentials and to prevent overreliance. AI threatens the careers that people in these fields and others have built. With large companies incorporating AI, people are likely to lose their jobs because of this technology. But given the possibility that AI can malfunction or be hacked —70-80% according to Cognilytica —becoming too reliant on AI creates room for error that companies and institutions might not notice and as a result can have potential high risk consequences to the economy and to the lives of everyday people.

AI such as ChatGPT that is able to write to complex prompts would have to be controlled to further reduce over-reliance. Students ranging from middle school to college are using ChatGPT to write essays, reports, and more. When students use ChatGPT, they are losing not only their writing skills, but also their learning skills. Writing and conducting research is all about being able to analyze, which helps our brains develop critical thinking without being able to do so, our brains numb out this skill.

A legislative limitation on AI may be our best option as we weigh the yin and yang of an increasingly rampant technological force. A world similar to Fahrenheit 451 is not ideal— a future in which we're consumed and programmed by technology. Consequently, legal limitations would provide reassurance for the majority of people. AI in the 21st century marks the start of the third industrial revolution, in which AI paves the way to a new generation of advanced technology. The public's challenge will be to develop its promise while paying close attention to its dangers.

## WINNIE THE POOH: TEARS AND LOSS

LORINELL PENA

Today we're going to the apple orchard. The humidity causes great discomfort for everybody, sweat trickling along their arms and faces. There is hardly any breeze to cool them down. Everybody but me and my best buddies, of course, since, well, we're stuffed animals. I'm not sure why Christopher brought us here, but who am I to complain? Enjoying a nice field day, looking for sweet, juicy apples that make your taste buds dance, but instead accidentally biting into a rotten one. When we arrive at the orchard, Christopher plops Eeyore, Piglet, Kanga, Tigger, Roo, and me on the scorching hot dirt, adding grime to our gray, dirty coats that haven't been washed in a while. As soon as Christopher isn't looking, I spark up a conversation.

"How's everybody's day today?"

"Winnie, please. It's too hot for this," Eeyore grumbles.

Nobody else responds except for mumbles, and a short snicker from Roo.

After what seemed like forever, Christopher and his parents are packing up their picnic to leave. The sun has set, and a slight breeze is cooling everybody down. Christopher picks up Eeyore, followed by Tigger, Piglet, then me. He pauses, putting Roo into Kanga's pouch, leaving his head dangling out.

"Christopher, come on, honey!" his mom yells. "It's getting late. We have to go." My stomach growled at the trigger word.

"Coming, Mother!" Christopher shouts.

Quickly, he shoves Kanga and the rest of us into his backpack, not bothering to close it. As he runs to his parents, Roo slips out. Kanga gasps, left unnoticed by Christopher, and frightened expressions paint everybody's faces. We watch as Roo, alone in the orchard, recedes in the distance.



Chris took us along when he went to the apple orchard. He enjoyed it a lot, save for the blazing hot sun burning everybody's cheeks into a bright, rosy red. When we get home, Mother unpacks the sweet apples they picked and the apple cider donuts they bought at the farm stand. Chris runs to his room, immediately taking all his stuffed animals out and putting them on his bed. They must've had a long day too, he figures. Right away he notices that something looks wrong. He scans everybody a couple of times before it hits. Roo. He's not here. He could've sworn he put him in Kanga's pouch.

"Mother! Roo's gone. We have to go back now. Quick!" He looks at her, clutching Winnie a little too tight.

"The orchard's closing soon. Can't we look tomorrow?"

"No. Can we go now? Please?"

Mother sighs, looking at my Father, then at me. After placing Winnie back into the room, we all head out to the car.

"We'll find him, Christopher," Mother notices my knee bouncing and places her hand on it. He gives her a small smile, her reassurance working just a little. When they arrive at the orchard,

Chris jumps out of the car, running to where we were a few hours ago. Roo's not there. He runs behind the trees, scanning everywhere for the small, plush kangaroo. Roo's brown coat blends in with the dirt. The dark sky and dim moon aren't much help.

"Christopher, I think it's time to go," Father calls out after ten minutes of waiting. "The orchard's going to close in two minutes."

Chris slowly strolls down the small hill, stepping back into the car, giving one last sweeping, searching look for his friend. On the way home, he stares out the window, only seeing blurs of blue and forest green, and flashes every few seconds. He counts how many blue houses he sees. There aren't many.

"Oh, honey, don't be too sad about it," Mother smiles. "It's just a stuffed toy. There are plenty like it! We can go to the store tomorrow and get you one."

Chris does not respond. Mother doesn't understand. He's not just a stuffed toy. Roo is his family. He wipes the stray tear that escaped, staining his sleeve a darker shade of gray. How will the others feel about this?



"Do you think Christopher found him?" Kanga asks in between sobs. I look at her worryingly. "Probably not," Eeyore responds, yawning. "It's dark, and Roo's practically the same shade as the ground."

"Oh, come on, Eeyore," Tigger says. "Don't be like that. I'm sure he's found Roo by now. Right, Winnie?" He looks my way, a fake smile plastered on his face.

"Y-yeah! Hopefully..."

The front door opens, and everybody scatters to their original spots. The doorknob slowly turns. Then the door opens. Chris, and only Chris. No Roo in sight.

Christopher kicks off his shoes and brings Kanga to his bed.

"I'm sorry, Kanga. I wasn't able to find him. It was too dark." Christopher pouts his lip.

I look at him worryingly. His whole demeanor has changed. He isn't the happy, always-smiling Christopher we all know. Is there any way we can cheer him up?

## THE RUNAWAY Part I

VICTORIA BORG

He is dead. Maddie knows that. She has known ever since running away from the sound of the explosion five years ago. Yet she keeps thinking about him, even now, while in a car with his brother. Just because she knows doesn't mean she accepts it.

"Maddie, you ok?"

That snaps her out of her thoughts. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking." Parker always buys that excuse. Either way, it's surface-level conversation with him. He can be oblivious to the most obvious things.

"You can nap for a bit. There's still some time before we get there." By "there," Parker reminds her of the place they're headed. Yet another safe haven, a place where, in theory, they can evade The Monsters which have overtaken the east coast.

A lab experiment gone wrong led to the creation of indestructible, fast-multiplying mutants that the U.S. government failed to contain. Given the amount of safe havens Maddie and Parker have been to, and consequently escaped from, Maddie has realized that no place is safe.



She can't say no to a nap. But her dreams only bring back more memories of Joshua, his warm, hazel eyes and curly, brown hair. As she wakes up, she looks over at Parker in the driver's seat, who reminds her a lot of Joshua. But his gray eyes bring her back to grim reality. Maddie trusts Parker, but ever since Joshua died, she's always felt like a part of her is missing. She looks past Parker and out the window to a never-ending line of trees. They are in the thick of the forest.

Looking ahead, at the huge, tall walls which are the same height and color of the foliage, Maddie realizes they are the cement walls of the safe haven. In the narrow space between trees, a long line of cars waits to be admitted. Everyone is desperate to get into the fortress. Guards with long guns look inside every car and slowly admit families. She wonders how everyone can fit inside this walled community. The cars move silently. Whenever one stops, the car is turned off to avoid noise. There is a general, unspoken understanding: no one wants to draw the attention of The Monsters.

After hours of waiting, it's finally their turn. There are two guards, one on either side of the car. Parker lowers his window and the guard peeks inside. He looks at Parker then Maddie. The color drains from his face.

He immediately and very quietly speaks into his walkie talkie, "They're here. She's here." Maddie hears every word. (Joshua had given her the nickname, "bat ears.") The guard looks back at her, and surprisingly, he smiles before opening the entrance with a single push of a button.

"Welcome to the Safe Haven," he says.

Parker drives the car in slowly. Inside, it's another world and one much larger than Maddie anticipated. Guards were stationed all over, each of them carrying the same long gun as the ones at the gate. People are walking and talking normally, something Maddie had not seen

in so long. Everyone is usually preoccupied with running away from The Monsters.



Their car crunches along the gravel path. Maddie spots a large, grassy field, filled with people. To the right and left side of this green oasis, paths lead to something beyond her line of sight. The guards continue to guide the cars, giving each driver keys while typing something on an iPad. Though the Monsters destroyed the power grid, those who work in safe havens have access to the remaining forms of technology through a generator.

At the next post, a second guard goes pale looking at Maddie. He asks for her name, but it seems as if he already knows. Will she mind sharing a room as space is limited? It has just been Maddie and Parker for the past five years, so this is not a problem. When she tells him there's no issue with it, the guard's eyes bug out.

Maddie doesn't understand this or why all the guards are acting weird around them. The guard opens his mouth to ask another question, but then quickly shuts it. He gives them keys, pointing to one of the paths Maddie noticed earlier.

"The room number is on the key. Follow the path and you'll see a garage where you can park."

The guard gives them one last look, and Maddie sees her necklace catch his eye. It's the one thing she has left of Joshua. Her, Joshua, and Parker had gotten matching pendants as kids, before their lives changed. The guard closes his eyes, then sends them on their way.

"Why are the guards acting so strange?" Maddie asks Parker.

"Give me a second, I'm trying to find the garage."

It's always like this with Parker. But he looks at Maddie in the passenger seat as if he regrets his harsh tone.

After passing five-story apartment buildings on both their right and left sides, Maddie sees the garage.

All the apartment buildings are five stories, tall enough to fit large amounts of people, but short enough to stay within the height of the cement walls. As they park and take out their few belongings from the car (just clothing and food), they check their key for the room number. 524.

Elevators aren't an option. After climbing five flights of stairs, they finally enter a small room with one bed, a tiny kitchen, and an even smaller bathroom. There is no living room, no sofa, no TV, nothing that is unnecessary for people on the run. But it's more than enough for Maddie and Parker. These are the nicest accommodations they've had in a while.



They keep their clothing in their bag, because you never know when you have to drop everything and leave. Unpacking consists of putting their food cans in the mini fridge.

"I'm going to take a walk around and get to know the place," Maddie says.



Parker, who is exhausted after driving the whole way, yawns, sprawling on the bed.

“No, we should plan an escape route.”

Maddie rolls her eyes. “Parker, the way we came in is the only way out. We’ve been through this. If anything happens, we just run.”

She goes over to the bed and gives him a kiss on the cheek. Unlike Joshua, Parker was never more than a brother to her.

Parker smiles and dozes off. Maddie walks out onto the gravel path until she reaches the large area where they had been admitted. People are still walking around. Many look at her and give her a sad smile. They are all there for the same reason.

Eventually, she makes her way back to the little apartment. Parker is awake, in the kitchen.

“Did you meet anyone? Maybe spot another exit?” he asks.

“No Parker,” Maddie snaps. She isn’t in the mood to have a conversation. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

She walks to the bathroom and closes the door before he can say anything. Their relationship has been hanging on a string, because nothing has been the same without Joshua. Including Parker.

Maddie gets into the shower and lets the water fall on her back. She wishes all of this was a nightmare, one she just has to wake up from. She washes her hair then touches her necklace. She has a pendant of a star, Parker has the sun, and Joshua, the moon. Parker took his off the day Joshua died. Maddie always wanted to know why, but he never gave her a reason. It’s a cheap pendant on a small, flimsy chain, but she refuses to take it off because it reminds her of Joshua.

As she puts her hair in one of their two towels, she decides to tell Parker what’s been nagging at her all day. Tomorrow is the anniversary of Joshua’s death. Exactly five years. She opens the bathroom door to find him eating tuna from a can.

“Parker, you know what day it is tomorrow right?”

“Yeah, it’s Monday right? Or no, Wednesday? No, I don’t know.”

“Parker this isn’t funny,” Maddie reprimands. “Do you know what day it is tomorrow, yes or no?”

“Look Maddie, I don’t want to—”

“I want to do something to remember him!”

What comes next is a surprise to her. “No Maddie,” Parker yells. “We’re not doing anything!” He never did want to talk about it, but this reaction was extreme.

“What is wrong with you?” Maddie said, exasperated. “He’s your brother!”

The one time she ever saw Parker this upset was the day before Joshua died. He and Parker were arguing, and Maddie heard them yelling at each other. But she couldn’t make out what they were saying.

“Was my brother, Maddie. He’s dead,” Parker hisses. He walks out and slams the door behind him.

Maddie is left there, standing in shock. What is wrong with him? Why is he acting like

that? She lays down on the bed and tries to drown out everything, to imagine a life without The Monsters.



Maddie had lost her parents in a monster attack when she was a kid. After that, she stuck with Parker and Joshua who lost their parents, too. They were always on the move throughout their early teenage years, but for some time they lived in a safe haven with no threats. It was a place they were able to call home. Still, nothing was that perfect. Maddie was 18 years old when the most recent attack happened. Once they heard the roar of The Monsters, they started running, as the ground shook beneath their feet. In the chaos of the moment, and among the crowds of people trying to escape, Maddie tripped and was left behind. She remembers getting up from the ground, the blood dripping down from the wound at her knee, the dust of people's feet kicking up into her face. She saw Joshua coming back for her right when she heard the roar. Parker came to help but Maddie begged them to run without her, because it would just make it harder for them to have a chance to escape. But they wouldn't listen to her.

Being carried between the two brothers, she thought they may be in the clear, until she saw the bomb. Everyone carried a hand bomb – one they could throw at a monster in case one came too close. It was the necessary weapon for times like these. In the chaos, someone must have thrown it back at The Monster. Maddie knew it was over. The bomb would be what kills them, not the beast. But Joshua did the unthinkable. He picked up the bomb and started to run the opposite way, giving Maddie and Parker time to escape. Maddie remembers a shrill sound coming out of her mouth as she tried to stop him, but Joshua vanished into the trees. Maddie and Parker had no choice but to flee. They couldn't let Joshua's sacrifice be for nothing. She heard the bomb go off in the distance.



The memories flood back. The next day, Maddie gets up, already dressed, wearing the same clothes from the day before, and opens the door. No one is awake. Parker snores. She still doesn't know what is the matter with him.

With the sun barely up, there aren't any cars coming into the safe haven. No one wants to attract The nocturnal Monsters. Once the location is compromised, it's over.

She walks around, ending up in the same place that had been bustling with people just the day before. She sits down on a bench, thinking about the person who built this refuge. They did it so people like her wouldn't have to keep running, so people like her could be safe. Taking in everything around her—the walls, the quiet, the momentary peace—her mind wanders, thinking about Joshua. “He would have loved it here,” she whispers to herself.

It reminds her so much of the place Joshua used to tell her about when they would sit and watch the sunset together, Maddie wrapped in his arms. The place he promised her he would build one day so that they could be happy and not worry about anything. It was moments like those that made Maddie believe that everything was going to get better, that they would go back to their lives before The Monsters.

She closes her eyes, embracing the silence. The little bit of sun that peers through the

open roof of the safe haven hits her face, the light beaming onto her eyelids.

Soon a shadow blocks the light. She opens her eyes. Blinking, she sees two familiar hazel eyes looking at her.

“Joshua?...”

## EPILOGUE

Joshua didn't know what he was thinking five years ago. All he knew was that he needed to protect Maddie. And his brother. He grabbed the bomb and ran. He kept running until his legs gave out. That's when reality set in. He looked at the bomb in his hand and saw the timer. 60 seconds left before it blew. He looked around and saw a small ditch. 30 seconds left. He threw the bomb and jumped into the ditch as the explosion went off.

He had spent the last five years looking for any trace of Maddie and Parker. Something that could assure him that they were alive. He also spent those years building a safe haven, one he hoped Maddie and Parker would one day find. He asked the guards to keep an eye out for two people who have sun and star necklaces. Since he had no photos of them to show, the pendants were the one thing he could use to describe them. After years, Joshua thought they would never come. He had lost hope. Until one day when one of the guards barged into his office and said, “They're here. I saw your star.”

Joshua couldn't believe it. He had to see it for himself. He went to the safe haven security cameras and one immediately caught his eye. He saw Maddie walking around among the people. But 20 feet behind her, there was his brother, oddly tailing her. The five-year wait would end the next day, Parker permitting.



*Milo Romero*

# BANANA PUDDING

MILO ROMERO

Passing by the same corner every day is my finest idea yet. It's the small bakery there; it has the best banana pudding. Smelling the fresh brewed coffee waiting to be sipped, the donuts waiting to be munched, I buy my pudding and sit on the red bench outside. People chatter. Dogs bark. Cars swerve left and right. I take the first large spoonful and think: When will it be my turn to fall in love?

But today the bakery is closed. Sadness fills me. Turning to cross the street, I bump into the stop sign pole, head first. Embarrassment waves over me. Then I hear a small giggle from behind.

My eyes fixate on her. Short hair to the length of her shoulders. Cherry lips that draw me in. Her body seems confident, but I can see it holds some type of shyness. Her hands fidget around her flustered face. I'm quiet, staring. She giggled at me for bumping into that pole but now she's asking if I'm okay.

"No," I say, laughing awkwardly. I try to focus on her through my pounding head. She smells like vanilla.

"I should check your head for bruising or bleeding," she tells me in a voice like an echo.

I agree and she touches me. It's obvious, I've started to bruise. Grabbing my hand, she leads me away from the bakery towards a store "for an ice pack." Why would a stranger care for another like this? I don't know.

After all this, we exchange phone numbers. Soon we're on our first date to that same bakery on that same street corner. She orders us a mocha to share. I try to speak up to tell her that's not what I get but the words are caught up in my throat. I want my banana pudding but even more, I want to make her happy.

"Just try it, it's fantastic," she says as she sees my hands hesitate on the cup. I feel myself closing up. But I'm determined to do this, to try something new. I raise the cup towards my lips and take a sip. The mocha has a sweet and flavory taste to it.

"It's pretty good," I say. My face turns toward her to see her eyes are already glued on mine. We both blush. When we stand to leave, I can't help but glance towards the banana pudding.

Outside, wet drops fall on the top of our heads. We look up to see clouds forming and darkening. The drops are becoming rain.

"I don't have an umbrella, do you?"

I shake my head, no.

Then her face lights up and again, she's leading me away from the bakery. We're laughing as the downpour soaks our clothes. Our bodies sway together, dancing. Our lips meet and I take in this first kiss, not knowing how long it'll last and also not caring about anything. Not caring about the eyes that are upon us. Not caring how wet we're getting. Not caring about the world.

Every day, my feelings grow. I feel loved, cared for. But when we're out together, she treats me like a friend only. I try to shrug it off. I go back to that street that brought me so much luck. How could I be so foolish? The last time I will ever speak to her is just around the corner.

“I’m breaking with you, I’m sorry,” she says. The words slip through her cherry mouth. My vision blurs.

“Please don’t leave,” I want to scream. Once more the words are caught in my throat but it’s worse now, like tangled vines. Did she ever love me? I wonder, watching her walk away. Who knows?

Passing by the same corner every day is still my finest idea yet. It’s the small bakery there; it has the best banana pudding. Smelling the fresh brewed coffee waiting to be sipped, the donuts waiting to be munched, I buy a cup and sit on the red bench outside. People chatter. Dogs bark. I take the first small spoonful and think of all the memories that were created in the bakery, but those thoughts vanish as I smell vanilla. And there she is, with a man now, sharing a mocha. The cars aren’t swerving. They honk, barely moving down the lucky street.



*Milo Romero*



*EGiamatti*



## WITH THE SKY AS HER ROOF

MAGGIE CLANCY

The young woman pressed two fingers against a throbbing vein in her neck. A pulse, she felt. Steady and alive. Then she felt her swollen belly—with wide broad hands—for another sign of life. Next to her belly button, there it was. She could feel the movement of the baby's soft limbs, pressing against her palms. The squirm, the sign of life, warmed her heart.

"I promise I won't fail you," she whispered almost inaudibly. "I know what it's like to be failed."

The baby responded with a gentle nudge and then rested.

She needed some rest too. For the past two hours, she had rummaged through overfilled garbage cans on sidewalk corners. Her calloused hands pawed through heaping stacks of plastic bottles, coffee cups, and wet plastic straws. Any food she found, she'd decided, was good enough. Eventually, her searching fingers grasped a half-eaten chicken wing. She took a deep breath and scraped the leftover meat off the bone with the teeth that didn't hurt.

The young woman descended the stairs of a train station entrance—which smelled strongly of urine and cannabis—and laid her head to rest on the brown tiled floor. Almost instantly, she drifted to sleep, seeing patterns under her eyelids.

Morning commotion awoke her, but she kept her eyes closed. Maybe, for a minute, she could be blind to the harsh light and humiliation.

Nearby, she heard the shrill voice of a little boy.

"Mommy! A lady is sleeping on the floor! With all the germs!"

"Shh. Don't stare. Come on, keep walking," said a cautious mother's voice.

She decided to keep her eyes closed for a moment longer.

Often, she spent her idle moments sitting on the train, lost in a beautiful reverie. She'd daydream of walking her baby in a stroller on a warm sunny day, cradling her sweet sleeping baby in fresh blankets, collecting her milk in glass baby bottles, and especially—a baby crib. She fantasized about making the crib a safe haven for the baby—with a heated mattress, plush blankets, and a slow rocking motion. Even if she was not in the room, the baby would always feel comforted and protected.

Almost every time, she'd been shaken out of this fantasy by the harsh deep voice of a police officer. Men's voices always startled her when they were aggressive like that.

"Ma'am you must exit the train now. This is the last stop."

He had said it while stepping back slowly but trying to maintain an assertive, authoritative stance. She curled her upper lip in passive contempt and reluctantly exited the train. At that moment, she realized her cheeks were wet with streaks of tears, and her heart ached to be back in that dream.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered silently, soothingly rubbing her belly. "I'm sorry that I'm your mother."

She stood on an empty subway platform, her toes poking through the holes of her old ragged shoes. It would only be a matter of time before she was roaming the streets barefoot and alone, a newborn—dead or alive—in her arms. She crumpled to the filthy ground, her body trembling with silent sobs.

A distinct herbal odor filled the stale air. She jerked up and detected a haze of smoke lingering in the air. Over at the bumpy yellow edge of the platform, a seated man solemnly

turned his head over to look at her, his eyebrows wrinkled in concern.

“You good?” He took a slow drag of his joint, its tip glowing bright orange. As he exhaled he made a point to blow the smoke away from her. He waved his hand in the air, breaking the concentrated cloud of gray smoke into a translucent haze.

Laura’s arms froze at her sides, her eyes wide, as she slowly and timidly stepped backward in the manner of the police officer. Don’t touch me, she wanted to say, but the words gathered in her mouth and tangled into a knot.

The man nodded in secret understanding and stopped paying attention to her. He wore an odd choice of clothing for a hot summer month: a long gray trench coat with five homemade pockets on each side, made of scrap fabric and sloppily stitched onto the coat. Underneath the coat were ripped jeans, worn with age. The strange outfit seemed to conceal a mystery.

“What’re those pockets on your coat for?” The words came out in one breath, her southern accent suddenly strong.

He cast her a warning look. But that calmed quickly; he must have noticed the innocence of her question.

“Just weed.” He sighed as if releasing a burden. “I’m sorry that you were crying. I get sad a lot too. So I just sit and smoke ‘til my thoughts sound like a stream of white noise.”

“You’re surprisingly articulate for a pothead,” she blurted, unthinking. It had been a while since she’d talked to anyone.

“And you’re beyond pregnant. That baby should be enrolled in daycare by now,” he said in an ironic tone, eyebrows lifted, and leaning back.

Her mouth opened with surprise and she let out a laugh for the first time in a long time.

“Wow, really!”

“Sorry, I’ve got no filter. I got to get used to talking to people. It gets lonely out here.” He cast a glance around the empty station. “And even worse when you got no one to talk to.”

His joint had burned down to the tip, so he chucked it onto the train tracks and dug into one of his pockets for a new one. She stood against a white tiled wall behind the exit stairs and slid her back down to sit on the floor.

“I’ve got no filter either.”

He looked at her, observing. She worried that he would come to sit next to her, but he respectfully stayed in his place on the yellow edge of the tracks. He held a new joint, slightly crumpled but full, and lit it to life with a black match that had a skull and crossbones print.

“What got you here?” she asked bluntly.

He sighed again, staying quiet. She thought she’d hurt his feelings, and when she opened her mouth to apologize, he spoke.

“The past seven years have blended together. After being kicked out from my last foster home, at eighteen, I’ve just been going about the motions of life. It felt right to me, as I did it.” He looked ahead wistfully. “A lot of the time, I was wrong.”

The young woman let her eyes unfocus so everything doubled in her vision. The man ahead of her, sitting on the yellow platform, seemed to split into two. A translucent clone of himself appeared behind him in her vision, sitting on his own yellow platform. His identity was split; one image represented who he was before, naive and hopeful. The other represented his current self—wiser and refined.

She could see this because she saw it in herself. She saw it in everybody.

“I was wrong,” she sighed, “when I thought life at home with my mother was the worst kind of hell I could endure. I didn’t know what evils awaited me out in the world.” Her baby kicked inside her again, as if to say, I am a product of those evils. She rubbed her belly, feeling heavier than usual. “Like you, I was young when I left. But I left by choice. I could have stayed with her, facing her merciless wrath every day, seeing her eyes get all wild and red from the coke. And I could have saved money by staying with her throughout college. But I chose to go away...” She trailed off. “I went away to stay on campus, searching for purpose. My dream was to become a social worker, mending the broken hearts of children like myself. But I never got to finish college—not after the kidnapping.”

“I’m sorry.” His eyelids dropped and his eyes were slightly red as he puffed the last bit of his joint. It burned to a nub of gray ash and delicately fell onto the tracks. He flicked away the filter. “What happened to you after you were kidnapped?” He said slowly, with great caution.

“I think,” she breathed. “Some things are better left unsaid.” Her baby kicked inside her again. *You know what happened*, she thought.

A flicker of emotion flashed across his eyes. Perhaps he recalled an unpleasant memory. He shook his head as if to erase it from his mind. “You’re right. We can’t think about our past anymore. Not when we have to keep bolting forward, staying alert and ready. That’s street life, man. It’s merciless.”

The young woman nodded reflectively.

Comfortable silence emerged between them. The old wave of conversation had passed and now they were starting fresh. The man sat calmly, his posture now relaxed. He released a sigh.

At this time, a wave of tightness spread throughout the woman’s belly. A dull squeeze. It came in a wave and went.

Her blood chilled. She felt her blood drain from her face. Her vision was clearer, new alertness. Again, she pictured herself barefoot on a filthy asphalt road, holding a crying naked newborn. Alone.

“It’s...”

“What?” the man jerked his head over in her direction, his eyes wide.

“It’s happening.” Instinctively, she knew.

“Oh, my god.”

“I need to go somewhere.” Her breathing grew heavier, her soft voice became a shout. “Somewhere indoors, somewhere safe!”

The man’s dark skin lost its redness. “Y-yes. You wait here. I’m going to....” He patted his trench coat pockets, filled with weed. “I’m going to, um, start selling these joints. Right now.”

And then, hurriedly, he bolted up the exit stairs, his loose clothing hanging on his thin body. The young woman was left in the station alone, nearly hyperventilating, grasping her belly as the waves of contractions rippled through her. The man returned an hour or two later, holding a coffee cup that contained a roll of bills.

“There’s this hotel nearby.” He was nearly hunched over, breathless from overexertion. “They charge hourly. We can stay there until the baby comes.”

He led her through the crowded streets, both of them shielding their aching eyes from the unyielding sun. The young woman crouched in pain from the oncoming labor, drawing the attention of passersby, but no one reached out to help. No one except for the man she walked with.

They stood before a decrepit hotel, worn and weather-beaten. A few of the windows were boarded and faded graffiti tags marred the walls. The double-doored entrance was dilapidated, with missing handles and silver duct tape poorly concealing the cracks in the blue glass. The flickering neon sign barely illuminated the hotel’s name: Hotel Hennessy. It was named after a brand of liquor, of all things. And yet, the place seemed to welcome them. It had stood up and stayed in business all those years, though the elements, time, and people had worn it down. The young woman and man had never felt more at home.

Upstairs, in room 44b, the young woman lay on a creaky, cigarette-burned bed, taking deep breaths and waiting. The contractions grew more intense. The man sat on a chair next to the bed, on edge and waiting with a bucket of hot water and towels from the bathroom.

“When the baby arrives, I’ll write the date and time of birth on paper. And a name, if you—I mean, we—come up with one. It’ll be the baby’s birth certificate.” He said, grabbing an empty notepad and pen from the nightstand with bony, shaking hands.

“We?” she said between staggered breaths.

“Yes.”

He held out a thin hand, and as she began to push, she grabbed it hard, white-knuckled. Through waves of pain, and throat-tearing screams, she counted down the moments until she would meet her baby.

She could barely contain herself when she finally met her, instantly coming to her baby’s care as if she wasn’t in pain. She soaked one of the towels in the warm water and wiped the blood and amniotic fluid from the newborn’s eyes and mouth.

Sobbing, she cradled the screaming newborn in her arms, rocking back and forth and holding her tightly against her chest. The newborn slowly calmed, and she took a moment to gaze into the tiny new eyes, brown and watery like her own.



*EGiamatti*

## DIALOGUE

"I WAS KIND OF EXCITED ABOUT GOING TO JAIL THE FIRST TIME AND I LEARNED SOME GREAT DIALOGUE."

-QUENTIN TARANTINO

"IT'S GOT TO ADVANCE THE STORY. AND/OR, IT'S GOT TO ILLUMINATE THE CHARACTERS. IT CAN'T JUST BE THERE FOR NO REASON BECAUSE IT'S FUN. AND I HAVE TO SAY THAT TO MYSELF ALL THE TIME, BECAUSE DIALOGUE IS FUN."

-JUDY BLUME

## BAD DIALOGUE:

- TELLING NOT SHOWING
- CONVEY INFORMATION
- COMPLETE SENTENCES
- CLICHES
- "SNAPPY DIALOGUE"

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## GUEST SPEAKER

BRUCE HANDY

The PEN Summer Writing program is open to students from across the city on a first-come, first-served, free of charge basis. This summer, participants came from the following schools, to which we are deeply grateful:

Manhattan Center for Science and Math  
Townsend Harris  
Brooklyn Collaborative School  
Brooklyn Emerging Leaders Academy  
Lab School for Finance and Technology  
Academy of American Studies  
Brooklyn Tech

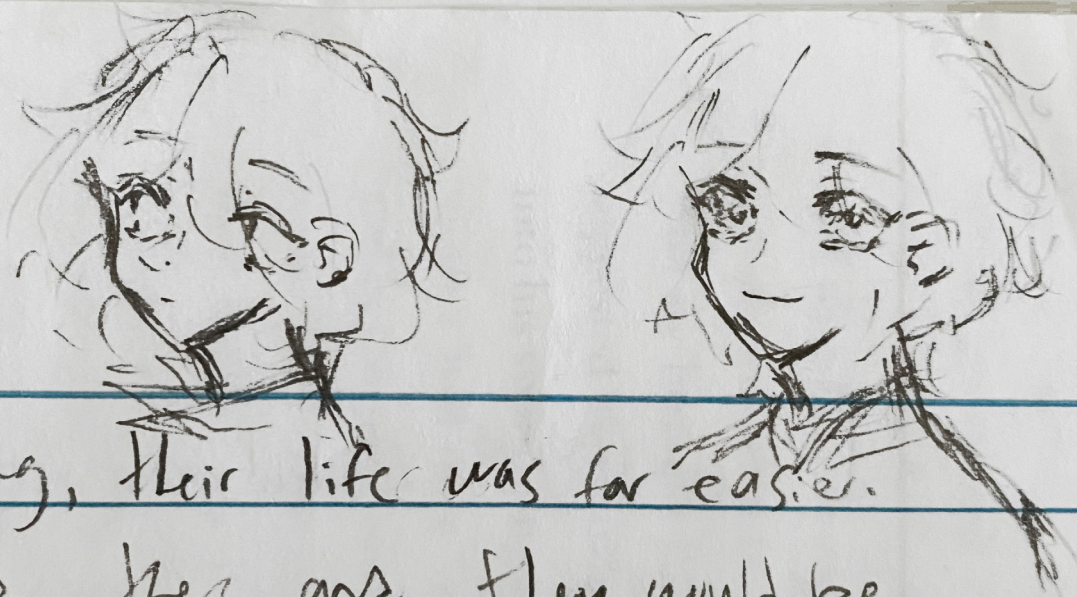
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Elizabeth Giamatti

...the same and we are trying  
time but we will use different methods based on  
**Make no assumptions, only draw conclusions.**



living, their life was far easier.  
Stars like her and they would be  
me. Why? Because they're perfect.  
E. Even though ~~they're~~ <sup>they're</sup> made  
so beautiful beings living ~~in~~  
from their clothing, houses, to their  
the lives of many people's dreams.

Claire Weng

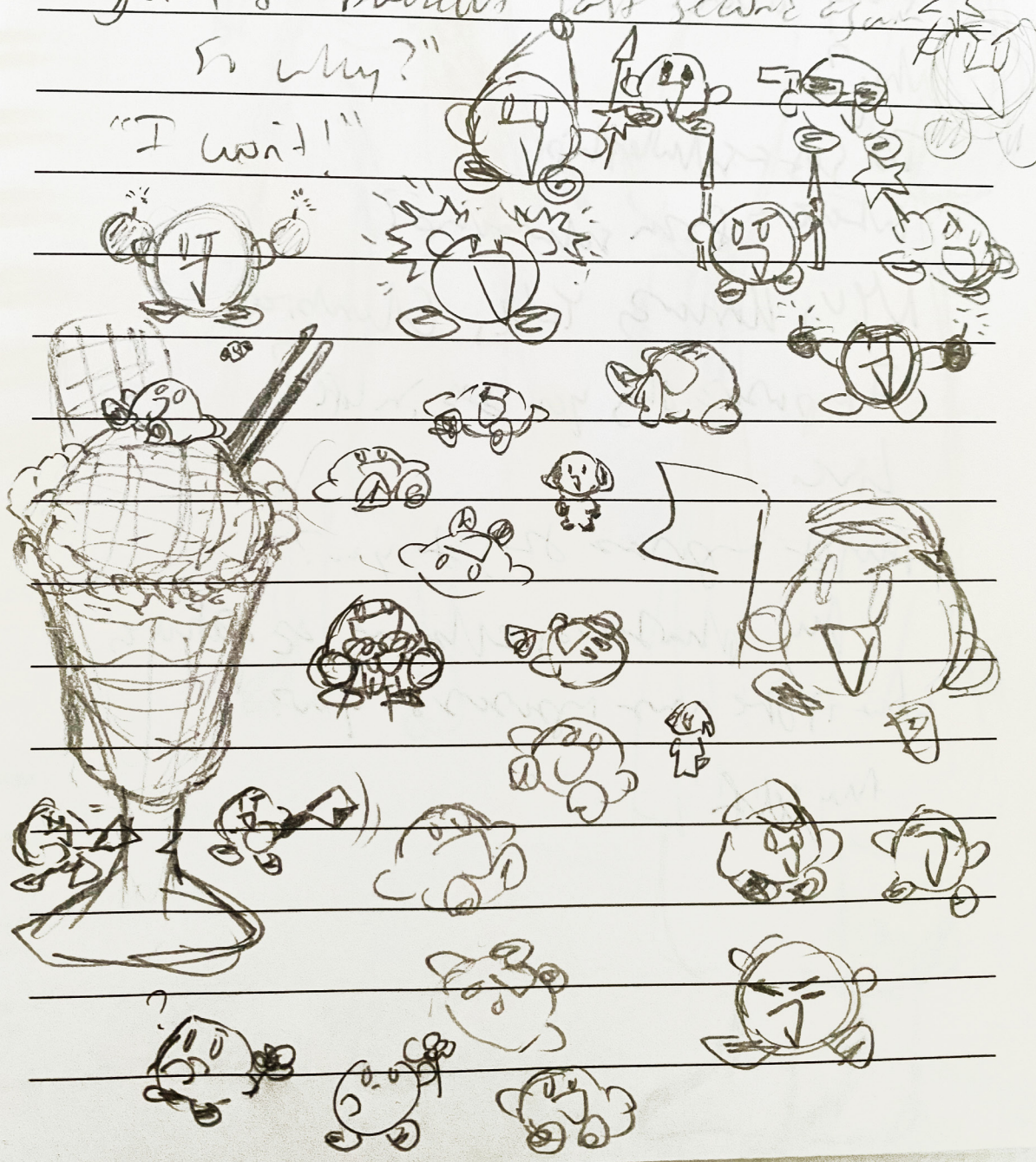


... money wants, no?  
"So you actually want to shoplift?"

~~Yes~~ "... Yes!" 

"Well, no. I don't want to. You're not  
guim & bankrupt last second again  
So why?"

"I want!"



Claire Weng

