



St. Trinneer's
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INSPIRING STORIES

ST. TRINNEAN'S 2020

In a year of lockdown and uncertainty, writing has allowed us to delve inside ourselves and bring out our potential.

Stories of love, loss, fear, death, identity, struggle and covid-19: Written amidst home office and distant learning, this collection weaves memorable characters and gripping plots.

My deep admiration for these committed students and gifted writers who dared to "ignite the light and let it shine."¹ Let this be a reminder of obstacles overcome and great achievements reached in spite of hard times.



Alejandra Simari

Written Language IV, 2020

St. Trinnean's Teacher Training College



¹ Katy Perry "Fireworks"

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"A Piece of Bread"

Eugenia Beckwith



It's 1982. Miguel was an 18-year-old conscript who hardly knew how to shoot with an antique FAL gun he was given, but against all odds, he was sent to fight on the Islands. Little did he presume what would come next for him and his comrades.

He was about to finish his military service, just two more weeks and he would leave behind all the mortifications, the memories of psychological torments and physical tortures to his mates and himself. Military service was not easy for a young man who did not choose a career in the Army, but this situation had been worsened by the Dictatorship. Some people had been disappearing since the mid 70's. Some whispered in terror that they most probably were tortured and killed because they were opponents to the military Juntas; some others just shrugged their shoulders and commented intently: "They must have done something wrong..."

One day, a letter was sent home from the Army and with no delay, he was transferred in a Hercules C-130. The plane landed in Stanley, near the villagers. The bunch of improvised soldiers marched under the islanders' astonished eyes. None of them muttered a word. They were intrigued by these young boys with the look of a cornered hare pretending to be men at war.

Miguel and his team walked for 18 km and made a hole on the ground. They spent days into these trenches with frosted limbs and being poorly fed. They had to struggle with constant and violent tempests. They had never experienced such low temperatures and lacked the appropriate equipment for that matter.

During the conflict, Miguel met another boy who had just finished high school like him and had applied to college to study Agronomy. These boys didn't want to kill anyone

and were scared to death. They had no military training, no provisions, no equipment, no proper guns...

Meanwhile, in the continent, a great number of soldiers and officers who had been training for years in the military career were waiting to be summoned. The conscripts could not understand why they were first in line commanded by a couple of sergeants and not those soldiers. One day, Miguel and Emer, his new friend in the squishy trench, were starving and killed a sheep and ate it almost raw. They were caught and punished: Miguel was made to punch Emer several times in front of everyone. Emer spat blood and moaned helplessly. Then, tightening his teeth and trying not to look at his friend, Miguel was forced to pull up Emer's uniform and stake him out to the ground. Miguel had never seen such sadistic experience, not even in a movie. Here he was, being the main character of Emer's nightmare. He heard the burst of laughter of his chiefs before falling to the ground feeling a blow with a rifle butt on the back of his neck.

Miguel woke up at dawn. Emer was grizzling in pain next to him, still tied with spread arms and legs. Their clothes were soaked. Inside of him a blaze of anger burst. Using his campaign knife he cut the ropes and lifted his mate. Carrying Emer was like holding a dead body but he managed to walk painfully to a near barn. He kicked the door and entered. There was a woman feeding sheep.

"Oh, no," she startled and gasped

"Don't worry! We don't want to hurt you!" whispered Miguel Wild, as a grandson of a British citizen, he understood and spoke perfectly in English. "We haven't eaten for two days, please, give us something," he almost cried in despair.

The woman left the place without a word. Miguel didn't know what to expect: to be killed by his superiors or by the islanders, but he had reached the end of his tether so he put his thoughts aside and comforted Emer, who lay on the floor, breathing with difficulty. A moment later a hand touched his shoulder and he jumped on his feet. There she was, with a piece of bread in her hands. Miguel stumbled on a "thank you", "who are you?" but she just shushed him putting a finger on her mouth and left. But at the door she turned her head and whispered, "I'm Mary Goodwin."

Emer passed away hours later. His friend, trench mate, the boy he was forced to punish for killing a sheep, had died next to him without a word of resentment. He couldn't munch even a crumb of bread.

Miguel washed out his anguish with tears over the muddy mortal rests of his comrade. He prayed for his soul and asked God for forgiveness. He took him outside and trudged back to the trenches. With great effort he reached Murrell River. He sat for a moment out of breath. He was famished, with a drenching uniform and a mushrooming desperation. Then a vibration in the air, distant yet getting closer. He stared at the corpse on the ground. Suddenly, a strange force pulled him out of there. He heard Emer in his head shouting "RUN!!!!!!!" He fled as he could, struggling with the weight of his uniform, blisters and open sores inside his heavy old boots.

An air attack. The house and the barn in which he had received a touch of mercy had been blown up. He thought of the woman and her loaf of bread, the sheep, maybe a cat or a dog, and God knows who else, all crashed into pieces by a bomb. Hours later and with the last drop of energy, he got to the rest of the regiment. There, his absence had been unnoticed or the rest of the troops simply didn't care about seeing him again, so he sneaked into his so-called "fox hole" and took off those ragged boots to dry his feet. His toes were blue and hurt as if he had one knife stuck under his nails. His stomach claimed for food and he had no rations saved. "Where are all the supplies? Why are a few of us eating right now and I'm deprived of the basics to survive? I want to go home, please, dear God, no more gunfire that leaves you deaf and stops your heartbeat, land mines that explode under your body leaving you limbless, night sirens that don't let you sleep and transform you into a zombie...no more wind wuthering like creeping souls in pain inside your head..."

Behind the canvas he distinguished three silhouettes. Carefully, he raised the cloth and he saw under the moonlight, in front of him, three ghostly women, or at least, they resembled that. Was it the hunger that made him crazy? One of them was Mary. What was she doing here? Were THEY crazy? He could not understand...They should be dead, or at least Mary should. He had seen the bombs fall over her cottage...

The women kneeled down and produced a piece of bread out of the blue. "It's ok, poor boy, it's ok," said one of them with tears in her eyes and a trembling voice, as if coming from a far away place, "it's ok now, we'll pray for you, now, eat your bread, son." Miguel didn't think twice and gobbled down his bread without breathing. Finally, a cozy warmth invaded him and numbed his senses while the three shadows next to him lulled him to sleep eternally with their prayers from the other side....

Between the night of 11th and 12th June, Susan Whitley, Doreen Bonner and Mary Goodwin all died when their house was accidentally struck by a missile from British ship HMS Avenger.

Two bodies were found on the bank of Murrell River. They were just two boys dressed in wretched uniforms, scarcely skin and bones.

"A Trail Home"

Cecilia Begher



It was a sunny and warm day outside. "Nothing can go wrong on a day like this," Dottie thought. The sun sparked up her ginger hair in all shades of red and orange. She could feel a mild breeze blowing gently on her face as she approached the hospital door. She stood in front of the sliding doors, which swiftly opened to let her in. She stepped inside, and heard the doors quickly shut behind her with a snap that sounded much like a key turning to lock a padlock.

The admissions hall she stepped into was white all over, except for the worn- out grey (or were they a very washed out yellow?) brick tiles on the floor, which seemed to indicate direction. There was just one plant, a Ficus, in a farout corner. It stood out, like the promise of a greener future . The room was bright, although not a single ray of sun could seep inside. The air was still and she felt her nostrils invaded by the impersonal smell of sterilised surfaces.

Dottie breathed deeply, and walked towards the counter. A young girl wearing a face mask looked up at her with tired, aged blue eyes.

"How can I help you?" she asked, in a muffled, and professional toned voice.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Copperman."

"I will let her know. Have a seat and we will call you."

Dottie sat down on a white, uncomfortable plastic chair. She started tapping the heels of her shoes in a childish, nervous manner.

Dottie was a doctor, so hospitals were not exactly alien to her; but being frequently tested and having to sit in agony waiting for the results over and over again was definitely new. It should have felt normal by now, but it didn't.

When Dottie was at work, she felt herself a lonely figure in a vast field, scaring the dark fears away from her patients, fighting an army of winged flying enemies commanded by some evil power. But who would fight for her now?

The anxiety weighed heavily on her shoulders. She closed her big brown eyes for a minute and reached inside her purse. She touched her keyring. A small replica of a Cairn Terrier hung from it. She clasped the little doggy in her hand, and somehow felt comforted, and not so alone.

The virus had changed everything. Faces were now made up of eyes and cloth. Life happened in secluded places and conversations, even the most intimate ones, took place through an app hooked to a global net. Kisses and embraces had become rarer than precious stones, and freedom had acquired a whole new meaning. "We are not in 2019 anymore," Dottie thought as she sighed.

The work she did had always placed her in the vicinity of death, but always on the opposite corner. Now, she felt, her work forced her to look at her own mortality more often than she cared to look. The minutes in the waiting room felt to her like pins stretching her skin in every direction, in a slow and painful way. Funny how time, which was always scarce in every other area of her life, seemed limitless and eternal in that white waiting room.

As she considered the possibility of getting a positive result, she felt the blood in her veins turn cold. The seed of panic stemmed roots at her heart and wove its way through her, right down to her soul. The storm of emotions got her feeling dizzy, as if thrashed right at the centre of a tornado. She squeezed the doggy from her keyring harder. "Breathe," she thought, "breathe."

As she held the small Cairn Terrier tight in her hand, she realised it was time to face it. Death was not written down in a paper in Dr Copperman's office, waiting to come out and greet her. Death was not in the army of invisible creatures that invaded air and surface. Death was not even in the eyes of her patients, or in the gloves and equipment that she every day put on and took off. No. Death was inside of her. Regardless of the result, and the virus, and her work: Death had always been in her DNA, and as the mortal being that she was, she now acknowledged that.

A strange sense of calm wrapped around her. The sort of peace that comes with the discovery of faith in something bigger, with the idea that there was a home waiting for her on the other side, just like there was a home waiting for her behind the sliding doors, or just like there was another kind of home in her work. She looked down at her red

shoes, and was thankful for the life she had, for the things she had accomplished, and now felt ready to face the results.

Dr Copperman's door opened. A woman with silver hair and warm eyes came out and called her name. "Courage," thought Dottie as she tapped her red slippers one time before getting up, and shook her red hair behind her shoulders, like an elegant lion shaking its mane.

"Good Enough"

Isabella Buzzelli



The grass was damp but Alice did not mind. It was the first day when the cold weather did not keep her from lying down on the grass of her green garden. Autumn had arrived but, even though it was not as cold as winter, Alice never welcomed that season. Not even once in her twenty-one years of life. According to her, the piercing, blue breeze sneaked inside her nostrils and made her suffer from an allergy that would leave her face dry and her nose irritated for days.

There was a small spot on the lawn where the sun slanted perfectly and Alice had taken advantage of it. Her mother walked towards her, but she grabbed a small wooden chair to sit on. She loved nature too, but not as much as Alice. Alice did not really care about dampening her pants. After all, those were the same trousers she had been wearing ever since quarantine started. A little bit of water would not harm them for they were already ragged.

As Alice closed her eyes and felt how her pores absorbed the burning rays of sunshine, she realized that what her heart was feeling wasn't anguish, for it was more a desire to finally vomit everything that was inside of it. She had woken up to an unexpected state of dismay, but not as strong as distress. It was definitely one of those days when the roads that lead to the heart and to the brain suffer a collision. It was similar to that moment when you are swimming and water gets inside your lungs. Thoughts began to rumble inside her heart and beatings began to echo in the permeable walls of her mind after the third week of lockdown and they hadn't stopped ever since.

But she couldn't vomit it all out. Most specifically, she didn't dare to.

Maybe it was the passing of lonely and monotonous days that made her realize that everything she thought she knew and wanted would be turned upside down. She was no longer ashamed of it. It didn't ache as it did in Senior Two. She did not punish herself like when she was sixteen. Not anymore. But still, the fact that it wasn't a problem for her did not mean that judgement would be absent in her mother's eyes as well. The weight of Alice's thoughts led her to place her head on her mother's lap just like she did when she was upset. Her warmly soft hands caressed Alice's smooth hair as its colour burnt bright like blood below the sun.

"Do you remember when I looked for lice in your hair?" said her mother calmly, not only referring to Alice, but also to her older siblings.

"It feels as if it had been yesterday," she responded. She could still feel a tinge of the sizzling anxiety she used to experience whenever her mother touched her hair as a child and spent agonizingly long hours trying to get rid of all of the intruders.

"Everytime I opened locks of hair and saw hundreds of nits, it would drive me crazy."

"That's why I let you touch my hair now, 'cause I know that there isn't any." Alice had dyed her hair red at the age of fifteen, and continued to do so until that day. She would probably be buried with the same colour. The quantity of chemicals coming from the dye and formaldehyde would make it impossible for any living creature to survive in her mane.

"Do you think they have fleas?" Alice said, referring to Asian men, which had been the topic of conversation before they sat down together on the grass.

"Why wouldn't they?" asked her mother with a small giggle.

"Well, they don't stink when they sweat and they have no chest hair. Maybe they don't have lice either."

"I haven't got the slightest idea." Alice's mother continued to pat her daughter's hair as she slowly intertwined her fingers in it. For approximately one minute, neither of them talked. Only the sound of the chirping birds could be heard. The fresh breeze struck their faces as they enjoyed the sound of sudden silence.

"Go and ask John," said Alice's mother.

The peace was broken and Alice's pupils had dilated. John was the American version of Jungkook. Jungkook Kim was his full name.

"Don't mention him," snapped Alice with a slight hint of remorse.

"You never really told me why it didn't work out between the two of you."

"We simply didn't click," Alice lied. The inside world of the red-haired girl had been growing at the speed of light ever since quarantine started. She had realized how painful it was to hear Jungkook's name without anticipation, and even more when it came from her mother, the woman who did not know anything about November's incident. Alice's sister said to her that it was useless to tell their mom, for she would only let her down. It happened in between her end-of-year exams, about seven months before that day. She had come home late, and almost fell asleep while John was driving her to her house after spending the night together. The very next day, she was reading her history notes when she began to slowly doze off. Once her head was low and the clouds of the unconscious began to slowly appear, she saw the silhouette of a fetus surrounded by darkness. That is when she opened her eyes, got up from her chair and, nearly crying, set off on her own to the nearest pharmacy to comply with what this older man had commanded her to do in an insensitive text message that she did not know how to respond to.

Her thoughts began to suddenly drift away to past mistakes and secrets that her beloved mother would never know about. Just like the time she stole a chocolate candy from a Blockbuster store when she was five, or the time she attempted to commit

suicide in the shower at the age of fourteen. Still, she could not really understand how finally confessing her deepest secret to her mother would be much more terrible than telling her that she almost got herself pregnant by a man eleven years older than her, or admitting that she used to be suicidal during her high school years. Maybe it was because her past mistakes had already been buried six feet under the dry earth of time, and even if she wanted to change them, there was nothing she could do about it. She moved on, and they were no longer relevant. Instead, the beating of her heart could not be modified, for it was what it was. In no way could she hide who she was. The way it pumped, it would pump forever. Even if you bury a heart, it will not warranty you that it will stop beating at its own pace. It will grow roots and start pounding faster until it deafens you.

The chiming sound of a notification broke her stream of consciousness, but she was thankful for that interruption. Ignoring the text message she had received, she logged into one of her social media applications and started to scroll without a fixed purpose. Out of the blue, a video in black and white popped up in her feed. Alice looked at her screen with splendor and, without even blinking, she listened to a girl's angelical voice.

"Who is she?" her mother asked just as if she could hear her daughter's thoughts. Alice's eyes opened widely and she could feel a sudden fluttering of butterflies inside her stomach. Not the ones that tickle you, but the ones that burn your guts.

"It's Karin," said Alice slightly astonished at her mother's question. "Who else could it be?" This girl had a very unique look, and she was the type of person that would catch your eye from miles away.

"Oh, right. I did not recognize her in black and white," she said as she stopped focusing on the video and returned to the petting. "I don't think that song suits her very well."

"Why?" Alice asked.

"I like her voice, but I don't like the way she sang that song." Alice stayed quiet, but an utter feeling of disappointment took over her chest.

"Sometimes I feel like you don't like her at all," said Alice, and even though she broke the cold with a small, ironic giggle, she meant every word.

"I don't know her, Alice, I can't say whether I like her or not. I think she's a very talented girl and she seems very sweet, but that's all I can say about her." Silence reigned over the garden, but this time, it was sharply tense. Comfortable silence is so overrated, she thought.

"Is it wrong?" her mother snapped slightly annoyed at her daughter's remark.

"No, it's not wrong. Everybody has their own opinion," Alice answered back. Her eyes looked upset, but she had the will to continue the conversation until she reached a place that would grant her freedom.

"I think she is amazing just the way she is," said Lice in a warm voice as soft as butter.

"But what is it that you like so much about her?" her mother asked. Her heart began to pound restlessly and she felt as if her blood had started to flow at a faster pace. How could she possibly answer that question without turning into a waterfall of words?

"Her voice, her clothes, the way in which she perceives the world." Alice pretended to hesitate before responding, but the truth was that she knew exactly what to say.

"I like her eyes too," she thought to herself while looking up at the marshmallow clouds. Karin's eyes were big and dark, just like Alice liked. Her orbs had the power of hypnotizing you with just a brief stare, and all the kindness that her soul was made of could be perfectly reflected in them. Some say that the eyes are the windows of the soul, and Karin was the perfect example for that phrase. A couple of weeks before, Alice had written down a letter for her, but kept it hidden inside the drawer of her night

table. In it, she let the page absorb the burgundy stains that her bleeding heart allowed to let drip. She wrote how she craved to kiss her pink lips because she knew for sure that there wasn't a single person out there with lips as soft as hers. Lips that looked as if they constantly tasted like cherry, even though Karin would never dare to wear that kind of makeup on her face. She would just limit herself to wear her signature black eye shadow that perfectly matched her masculine, black clothing. Everything about her was mesmerizing, starting from the burning colour of her hair, which was the shade of red that Alice had always desired to have, to the way her fingers danced on the fretboard of her beloved guitar. She also wrote how much she wanted to simply lie down on the floor while Karin talked about Lennon and Alice talked about McCartney. She wanted to make love to her and wake up every morning to the strong smell of coffee that came from the kitchen that they had decorated together. Alice didn't like coffee, but Karin did. Karin loved coffee.

"I like her as a whole really," finally admitted Alice. The burning sensation in her stomach made her feel dizzy, and she felt completely exposed, completely naked to her mother's eyes. However, she knew that it was time to present herself to the person who knew her best, that loved her more than anyone else in the world. Her mother was the only one who could see right through her, so, how could she possibly not tell her what was in her heart?

"Is it wrong?" she asked innocently just like a sinner exposing her sin in the eyes of the skies, asking for mercy.

"No, it's not wrong." Her mother's voice was now tender and compassionate, just like when Alice had told her she was no longer a virgin. She had taken five months to tell her, for she was ashamed her mother would get angry for not waiting to be in love to do it. But she didn't get angry. In fact, she even said she was relieved, but Alice never understood why.

"Alice, you can love whoever you want to love. The people you love don't make you who you are. It's the people that love you and the reason why they do that paints the picture of who you truly are."

Alice nodded and smiled tenderly while she listened to her mother's words. She did not feel like crying happy tears, yet her soul was at peace. The voices had faded and her muscles had stopped aching. She could hear her heart beating out of her chest, and it was at that moment when she finally realized she was alive.

"It's not about who you love. It's about loving and being loved. And that's good enough for me."

"I know," Alice said beaming. She closed her eyes and hugged her mother's legs with both of her arms.

"Do you want some tea, Alice?" her mother asked softly.

Nodding along, she realised that her mother and a cup of tea was all she really needed to finally feel in Wonderland.

"Foes"

Camila Calzado



It was a hot summer day in Veil, the small little town where nothing ever really seemed to happen.

The curious boy was always looking for adventure and he often let his imagination wander. He had always thought there was something really suspicious about Mr B, his next door neighbor. Maybe it was because he appeared to have an absolute irrational disdain towards the boy, when the boy was playing outside and he looked annoyed, or when he was inspecting ants with a magnifying glass Mr B would roll his eyes in a disapproving gesture irritated by his childish presence. Naturally, the boy was absolutely terrified of Mr B, he was quiet and had these piercing blue eyes that concealed the pain of his wretched life. There was a clear animosity between Mr B and the boy.

The boy never understood how a woman so delightful as Mrs B could be married to such a horrid man. Mr. and Mrs. B were an odd couple, she was a joyful plump little woman who had a perky voice, she dressed with bold , bright colours and she always had an infectious smile. But Mr B was quite the opposite of his wife, he was a tall grumpy man, whose clothes were as regretful as he was.

Nothing in this town was left randomly, everything had a space. And routine was common currency. Everyday Mrs. B embarked on the same path, she went to the grocery store, then she went to the butcher's to buy Mr. B's favorite pork chops. Later she would pick up the clothes from the dry cleaner's and she would come back home and cook for her husband.

Mr. B was no stranger to routine either, the first thing he did in the morning was get the newspaper with his coffee in hand and he did so wearing his velvet slippers and the ugliest socks you have ever seen, these gray rhombus socks. made of polyester. Everything about Mr. B seemed gray and dull. Even the way his sad weary wrinkly eyes set on the newspaper headline.

And yet as there was nothing happening in that boring little town, the boy began to feel intrigued by Mr and Mrs B's relationship. He was determined to investigate. Perhaps it was the spying kit his grandpa had given him for his birthday or the lack of children in his neighbourhood due to the fact that he lived with his grandparents. Therefore he was always watching Mr B like a hawk in the company of his sidekick, his cat. Then he began taking notes, "he grabbed his newspaper at 6.03am, went back inside."

One day on his regular watch, he saw Mr. B grab the paper and quickly rush back inside. Half an hour later Mrs B would go to run her errands as she always did, stopping at every corner to greet her neighbours. While the boy was doing his regular watch, his cat went through Mr and Mrs B's window. So, the boy went after him trying to catch him. He was frightened at what might happen if the nasty Mr B found him, he would harm the poor creature. The boy dashed into the back door and rushed upstairs to find his cat but before he could find him, he heard the pounding wooden steps. Someone was near, he plunged under the bed. Lying there he tried to be as silent as he could, he was absolutely terrified.

He first saw some red high heels dancing to the rhythm of a strange music. He figured that this was Mrs B and being the sweet woman that she was, she wouldn't be mad at him if he explained the situation. But then he heard Mr B's voice singing, which made him feel absolutely petrified. Suddenly the heels disappeared and all he could see were those boring gray socks Mr B always wore. While he was trying to stay still in order not to make a sound, he heard a woman's scream and with one of his eyes open (he was scared) as he was startled by the situation he saw what appeared to be a woman's head on the floor. He immediately closed his eyes and curled up like a dormouse waiting for all to end.

When he knew no one was around he wasted no minute and hastened back home. When he got back there, the first thing he did was to tell his grandfather what he had seen. His grandpa seemed baffled by the whole narrative but the boy was certain that Mr B had killed his wife. There was no doubt in his mind.

His grandfather was obviously reluctant to believe the story but as days went by Mrs B never came home. No one had seen her and she had not made her daily route. The boy's grandfather began to feel suspicious so, after a week he called the police.

The police took his statement and went straight to Mr B's house and after a few minutes the police officer came back, he had an aggravated expression on his face. The police started talking to the grandfather at the porch. The boy tried to listen to what they were saying, he gathered some of the words as he pressed his ear to the wall and heard that Mrs B was not missing, she was actually staying at her sister's house. When he heard this, the boy waltzed in and demanded an explanation. "How do you know?" he said, "he could be lying." The police said that he had spoken with her on the phone. They got rid of the boy and continued talking. The police began saying cautiously, "you wouldn't believe the reason she left.... she found out he had a secret room with wigs and dresses." "Understandably, she couldn't face the shame," the grandfather added. The boy could not follow why that boring little man would need dresses and wigs if everything he wore were gray and dull.

This was definitely not the town where nothing ever really seemed to happen. It was just a town waiting to have its secrets unveiled.

"Once upon a Time"

Agostina Cantoli



Once upon a time...we all know what follows these words. Happy endings, people in love, dreams coming true. But not for her, not this time.

She had fainted and remained unconscious for a couple of minutes when she woke up feeling in a turmoil, her eyes not quite focusing, the bursting lights making her eyelids impossible to open. Her senses numbed due to the rampage surrounding her. Nothing was clear. Where to start?

"Move" her languid voice tried to find the sounds to say, but with no luck. Her throat was blocked, her voice lost.

The noise was unbearable, deafening sirens all around her were shouting alarmingly . The smell of burned flesh and death was everywhere. She had to move, she had to force her body to react.

With no strength left she crawled near the wall, in a desperate need to recover some energy while laying herself against it . Every move she made was unbelievably difficult, her beaten body was immobilized. Her chest constricted at the thought of what lay ahead. Facing that unreal reality was the most difficult thing she had ever needed to do. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, while memories assaulted her.

They had been there, together. Where was he now?

She moved her arm, she touched her bleeding head, she started to tie loose ends.

Opal had been standing in the corner, waiting. Everything was planned, they were about to change their lives. Facing fate. A new beginning.

How much time passed, she was not sure, she had fainted after the first crash. But she was certain, he had arrived. She could feel the warmth in her chest while his image invaded her memory. It had been true. Was this a dream then?

The last wonderful minutes they had seen each other standing across the street before this disaster were now gone. Things seemed to be in slow motion. She had a look

around, her body was being heated by the nearby flames. She managed to stand up and move. Her eyes fixed on the pile of rubble in front of her. Was he there?

Cody had told her to wait for him, no matter what, he was going to arrive.

Opal waited until she looked up and saw the plane. The deafening sound and then the unthinkable. The plane crashed against the tower. Debris falling from the sky, panic, the war-like images flourishing everywhere she looked. Desperation in people's eyes. She saw Cody standing across the street. He had arrived. He was there standing frozen, sharing the same puzzled expression. They stared for a moment, not understanding the events that they were immersed in.

A sudden explosion awakened her. She was about to cross the street to comfort in his arms as she always did, when the second plane crashed the remaining tower. That was the end. She looked at the empty spot where he had been standing to find no one but a pile of bricks.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a man seized her and took her away while shouting that the building was about to collapse. The man grabbed her easily and removed her from the death sentence she was facing.

Find Cody- tell the man he is missing- shout- her head was full of voices, her mouth produced no sound though.

“Where are you taking me?” She managed to whisper.

He heard her. “There was an air attack, the tower is about to fall, we'd better hurry!” he yelled.

The intoxicating smoke filled her lungs. It was nearly impossible to breathe or see. He had a mask, he was her exit ticket. Opal moved her head as she was dragged from next to the building where she was sheltering. As she found herself being brought apart from the place where Cody was buried, she shouted “I need to find him! He was standing across the street right in front of me, please go back and find him.”

The man paid no attention as he ran trying to save them both. Opal looked back and saw Cody's grave fading away. The terrible thought invaded her soul, Cody was dead. She closed her eyes trying to block out the reality she was living in. The man took her to the nearest emergency post. She was saved, she was safe.

When watching the news in her comfortable bedroom she would recall that instant of total despair as she realised her loved one was dead. Bursting tears invaded her eyes

as she felt such an oppressing uncertainty. Time had stopped the minute before the attack. No more future for them. Such unimaginable hatred ruined her happily- ever- after ending.

No happy endings for Opal. Not without Cody.

"Foes"
Agustina Carrillo



Find your parking spot, analyse your car position – 1.5 metres from other cars, turn on the light signal, turn the steering wheel, slowly drive your car until it reaches the final line in the spot, adjust the wheel. Anne had been driving the same car for years and had never even scratched it, but her clockwork mind would systematically go over these steps every time she parked. It even happened when she was in the passenger's seat and it was her husband driving, but she had never admitted that to him. She turned the key, plucked it out of the ignition, stared at the keys on her palm for a few seconds, ran her index and middle fingers through the ignition to verify it was indeed key-free, and opened the door. She pressed the automatic car lock button, then once more just in case, jiggled the car handle to be certain, and then walked away. Before entering the building, which would be a time-consuming act too, she turned and glanced at the vehicle once more.

Michael heard the click of the elevator reaching their floor and hurried to open the door for her, as he always did. He kissed his wife on the cheek and immediately bombarded her with questions about her day and stories about his, craftily distracting her from the fact that he was locking the apartment door just once. When she was absorbed in conversation, a good movie or novel, he knew her mind would give her a break from the otherwise ever-present obsessive thoughts. Anne knew what he was doing but it still worked, at least for a little while, and she loved him for it. They had got married two years before, promising love in sickness and in health, and they often joked about her quirks being the sickness they had to endure.

But now that she was pregnant her compulsion wasn't a joke any more, not for her anyway. She couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of passing on her obsessive thoughts to her child. Although she didn't know if that was even possible, she couldn't

help but worry. And when this idea came to her mind, when her brain acknowledged that her obsessive thoughts were there, they were heightened. She would begin brooding over the safety measures they should take to baby-proof their home. They had already bought plug covers, cabinet locks, window nets and bumpers for furniture edges, which Michael had assured her wouldn't be necessary until the baby started crawling, about a year from now. But she still thought one couldn't be too careful.

Michael told Anne about a ridiculously funny discussion his students had had that day, and Anne recounted how the cutest little toddler had walked up to her on the street, looked at her belly and asked her how much ice-cream she had had. They laughed until their child kicked too hard, discussed what to have for dinner and whether they should watch a movie that night. When all that was settled, Anne's bath ritual began. Her idea of a relaxing bath included not only warm water and bubbles, but also a gripping read, an unputdownable novel that she wouldn't close until the water became uncomfortably cool. She often wished she could just lie in the foamy water with her eyes closed, like she knew Michael did when he needed to unwind, but that would never work for her.

Absorbed in thought about the chapter she had just read, Anne shuffled towards the kitchen. Although the main character had a sworn enemy that was making his life an uphill struggle, Anne couldn't help but think how easy it would be to have an enemy that one could simply sever ties with. The chapter analysis stopped as soon as she turned the stove on. She stood next to the oven and cooked some pasta, never taking her eyes off the dancing fire. When the noodles were done, she turned the stove and stopcock off. She then slid her hand over the stove to double-check that it was actually off.

Anne and Michael had a lovely evening, only interrupted a couple of times by her sneaking into the kitchen to check, just one more time, if the gas was safely off. She stared at the stove, held her hand above it, sniffed the air for gas smell. Maybe one of her senses could trick her, but surely not all of them. Michael had tried to reason with her so many times about her compulsion to check and recheck switches, locks and valves. He had explained to her that even if she had actually forgotten to lock the car or their apartment door, they lived in a really safe neighbourhood where nothing ever

happened. But far from calming her, these conversations had often backfired and led to her hurrying towards the car, or the kitchen, or the bathroom, or the front door again. Michael had often also assured his wife that he had already checked locks and plugs himself, but if she was second-guessing her own memory and senses, how could she trust somebody else's?

Anne had read a dozen books about pregnancy and birth and had followed every single piece of advice she had heard of to help induce labour. She had done everything in her power to avoid a cesarean delivery. Just the thought of losing power over her own body and having to watch doctors operate on her behind a curtain had made her heart pound and her pulse shake. But when the time finally came, she didn't really have a say in how her child would make it into the world. When her body betrayed her and she failed to dilate enough, the doctors began the procedure in no time, as they decided it would be risky to wait any more.

Relieved and exhausted, Anne held her perfectly healthy baby against her chest. Michael kissed her forehead gently and stroked her hair, while a lonely tear rolled down his cheek. He leaned forward and whispered, "I promise I'll always keep you safe, little one." Overwhelmed with joy, Anne looked up at her husband and smiled. She felt at peace, not a thought in her mind other than the three of them right there and then.

"Foes"

Martina De Caro



It was a foggy and temperate morning in Madrid, the Coronavirus peak seemed as if it would never have an end. As every Monday, Dr. Herz scurried off to work. As he got closer to the Hospital his heart beat faster and faster. He wondered how many infected people there would be that day. He stepped into the hospital and scanned the area, as if he wanted to find an answer to his everyday question.

That April morning was going to be completely unusual. He felt it somewhere in his nauseous stomach. He reached the elevator that took him to the eighth floor. Intensive Care to the right, Intermediate Therapy to the left. Automatically he turned to his right. The endless white corridors were deserted, the only thing he could see were Covid-19 warning signs. Dr. Herz was the director of the area. He was a fifty-year old handsome man, a very recognized professional not only in Spain but also around the world. He had been in numerous countries delivering very important conferences about new technologies in his area. He greeted his colleagues and nurses; he could perceive tension all around. The number of cases that day had increased unexpectedly. He knew there were not enough beds or ventilators to treat this new pandemic. Dr. Herz felt desperate, he knew it, the instant when he would have to decide who to assist first was going to come at any moment.

An ambulance siren could be heard louder and louder. Doctors in the area rushed downstairs to receive the new patient. When the doors opened, they could see a very old lady lying on the stretcher. She stared at Doctor Herz. She wanted to tell him something, as if she knew he was the boss, he was the one who would decide over her health and life. Doctor Herz perceived Martha's concerned eyes, he could realize what a sweet and loving grandmother she was. Martha had five sons and fifteen grandchildren, in two months she would become a great grandmother of twins, her eldest granddaughter was expecting two baby boys. For the last seven months Martha had knitted lots of sweaters, blankets and booties. She was eagerly looking forward to finally

meeting her little boys. This had been her only topic of conversation in the last twenty-eight bridge games. Her friends were very glad to see loving Martha so happy for their arrival. The last years had been really sad and difficult for her since she became widowed.

While Dr. Herz was asking the routine questions to the doctor in the ambulance, a deafening siren could be heard. The doors of the second ambulance opened abruptly. Frightened faces inside the vehicle could be clearly identified. Doctor Herz knew something terrible was happening. His years of experience had taught him to rapidly understand how fast he should react in those cases.

George was lying on the stretcher, he looked cyanotic and he could hardly breathe. He had a mask on his face which gave him some oxygen and kept him alive. George was a fifty-year-old clay artist and his wife was expecting their first baby girl for June. George's parents were amazed that their son was finally going to form his family, something he had yearned for the last twenty years. Covid-19 had rapidly affected his lungs, he could hardly open his eyes but despite his weakness he peeked at Doctor Herz's blue-flecked eyes as if he wanted to beg him to save his life. Dr. Herz had perfectly recognized George's appeal.

They all rushed up to the eighth floor, no decision had to be taken. They all turned right to find out that there was only one ventilator available. Dr. Herz felt bleak, it was the first time in his thirty-five years working in the Intensive Care Sector that he would have to decide who to save. Martha and George were fighting not only for their lives but also for the last ventilator in the whole Central Hospital of Madrid, the biggest in the area. His decision was the one anyone around would have never wanted to take. George was expeditiously taken onto the last bed, and after five minutes his oxygen levels started to rise as the ventilator moved. Martha was getting cyanotic too, but unfortunately they could do nothing in that area. Her stretcher was taken to the left side of the building. Once there, Dr. Herz gave all the directions he could think of. Medicines, injections, even chest massages to help poor Martha breathe and get her lungs to work properly. Dr. Herz shuffled along the corridors feeling completely devastated. It was the first time in his professional career as a doctor that he burst out into tears inside the first toilette he could find.

The summer's sun was peeking on that Monday morning in June, it was a warm and clear day in Madrid. Dr. Herz scurried off to work like every morning. The Coronavirus was then controlled in Spain. The hospital looked calm, as if the virus had never existed. He took the elevator and by mistake he turned to the right on the seventh floor. He meandered around without noticing he was in the wrong area. His mind was somewhere else, most probably on that fatidic Monday in April. As he moved along he could hear baby sounds coming out of the doors. When he looked to his right he could see the nursery's window. His heart beat faster and faster. All of a sudden he shivered, he sensed a relief he had never felt before. In one corner of that room, standing next to each other, he could identify a brand new great grandmother smiling at her newborn twins and a proud first-time father gazing at his beautiful baby girl.

"Foes"

Celeste Delgado



The rain had been pouring down outside Mrs Josephine's garden. Her lilies and tulips were liquidated due to the thick drops of water that so violently tore everything apart.

Gripping Josephine's hand was Andrew in fear of the rumbling thunder. Even though Andrew was no longer a toddler but a young child, with every storm he revived memories of those nights crying his eyes out without anyone to resort to. He recalled the days he would spend at a farmhouse, where being far away from his beloved parents, he was bullied by his peers for being afraid of thunder.

That awful night wasn't an exception. He could hear the trembling sound of the windows. He thought of how sorely he missed his father. Not after two hours seizing his panic due to his fear could Andrew finally fall asleep.

Josephine helped herself to a cup of coffee, sat down and stared at the rainy window. She prayed silently and wished her husband, Mr Lloyd, reached the door and held her tightly. Regretting not having kissed him and held him enough that morning, she kept thinking how things would have been different if her husband was there. However, she understood the importance of fighting for their country, this country that had given them the best years of their lives and a wonderful house where she and her son were safe. War was almost over and she didn't lose hope, clinging to the belief that Lloyd was alive.

It was the morning of September 5th. Mrs Josephine couldn't feel more ecstatic. Ever since the war was over, she waited eagerly for her husband to arrive home. "Won't you come outside with me, Andrew?" said Josephine, "Let's wait for your father, I feel that he is coming home today." Josephine's certainty was unbelievable.

Next morning an atrocious amount of rainfall poured down over England. Since the deafening sound of thunder would prevent Mrs Josephine from hearing someone knock on the door. Josephine was staring at the window when she beheld a man approaching her household. "Could it be him?", she whispered. The rain was covering the land and it

was impossible to have a clear view through the window. The man came walking from the faraway entrance. It wasn't until he was at the front door that Mrs Josephine realized it wasn't her dear Mr Lloyd.

The stranger was a military man. His eyes glinted with pain. Mrs Josephine knew what this meant but she didn't want to accept it. The man was holding something that seemed to be a green gabardine coat and an engraved necklace on top of the jacket. Josephine thought that it couldn't belong to Lloyd since the jacket was too small.

"Good morning, Sir, how can I help you?" said Mrs Josephine holding her tears and trying to keep it together. "Good Morning, Mrs Josephine." At that moment she knew it wasn't a mistake, her Lloyd was dead. Tears sadly rolled down her cheeks while the man uttered the words she would have never wanted to hear. "I'm so sorry to be here. I would have liked to meet you under entirely different circumstances. However, my intention here today is to put an end to your wait, at least this is what Lloyd would have wanted me to do," said the soldier. "Who are you?" asked Josephine sobbing. "I'm Mathew Davies, who served beside your husband during the war. Certainly, I would like to give you better news but your husband died serving our country. I can't express how deeply sorry I am for your loss. Lloyd was an extraordinary man and we became great friends during our time together. He made me promise that if something happened to him I would break the news to you in person, tell you that he loved both Andrew and you deeply and tenderly until the last minute of his life," he expressed himself calmly .

Josephine sat down as the man entered the hall of her household. She was full of thoughts yet empty inside. She was at a loss. Lloyd or what was left of him arrived home; however, she never felt so sorrowful and heavyhearted. "I know I should be thankful for your intentions of coming here and bringing the news. I know many women wait for their husbands and they never come back home," Josephine said, while crying convulsively. The man left, not until he had given her Mr Lloyd's belongings and a kiss on the forehead on behalf of her husband.

Thirty summers passed and Josephine couldn't get over her husband's death. Since that day life was colourless for her. In the beginning, she thought she was going to start again, maybe marry another man. But every night she thought of her dear Will and wept over his death.

Andrew was leaving home to study abroad. When he arrived at the airport, he received the news of her mother's death. It was the housekeeper who found her, first thing in the morning, lying on the floor next to her bed. She suffered from heart disease and that night that malevolent illness decided to take her away. When Andrew received the news, he was happy in some way. He knew that she was going to be where she had wanted a long time ago, next to her husband, enjoying eternity.

It was not after five years' time that Andrew got engaged to Madeline, the daughter of a well-known military, Erich Frand. He had served during the Second World War and was ascended to a higher rank due to his bravery and nobility. Erich was to Andrew the father that he never had. In some way, Erich and Andrew's father were very much alike. They fought during the Second World War and Erich seemed to be a cheerful man as Andrew remembered his father to be. Both were really tall and vigorous. However, even though Erich and his father had this physical complexity they were both really sensitive and were always ready to help others. Andrew loved Erich as much as he had loved his father. They enjoyed spending time talking about the same topics. They were both passionate about war. Also, Erich was always delighted to describe to him every military movement and all the physical training he had gone through and how this was different from what he had experienced during wartime. Erich always told Andrew the story of that first day in the trenches. He told him how he was guarding the front and when he relaxed someone came from backwards to attack him. One of his friends yelled at him and he was able to turn around and defend himself. That was his first kill. After that, he couldn't sleep for weeks. "It doesn't matter how much you've trained and prepared yourself for war, son. You'll never be ready to kill a man the first time," he would always say.

After the wedding ceremony was held, Andrew and Erich had an interesting talk. Erich was eager to know the initials and numbers engraved in Andrew's father's necklace. Andrew kept it at his mother's household just to have something that belonged to his beloved father. Erich was willing to help him find out who had killed his father. He knew how much Andrew had suffered and the depression he had gone through due to his father's death and his mother's mental state. So, he wanted to assist him because he had this particular sensation that he could be helpful to Andrew.

They set out on their journey to Josephine's house. No one had been there since Andrew's mother died. After three days, they reached the place. Josephine's house was fully covered in blankets and dust.

"My father's necklace must be upstairs at my mother's room," said Andrew, "Come, follow me, let's go for it so we can leave this nasty place." Erich glanced at the room before he went upstairs and thought of all the terrible memories Andrew must have had in that place. "Here it is", said Andrew, showing Erich the necklace. "It's a bit rusty, but you can read the initials and numbers anyways." Erich looked at the necklace and felt paralyzed.

"A Great Day for Freedom"

Thelma Ducatenzeiler



"Trip and Kristen, like Romeo and Juliet, were destined to be together." Destiny was unknown for Trip and Kristen because they were living in different places, and they did not know that they were going to meet each other in a school, because they belonged to different neighborhoods like the northern side of Riverbanks and the southern side. Destiny had to decide which boy was going to fall in love with Kristen. Kristen followed her heart, and when she met Trip, she decided that she wanted to be with him until the end.

Riverbanks city was in a lockdown. In the north there was much more control and police officers supervised every corner from the north. There was a wall that separated the north side from the south side, so nobody could cross to the other side. There were rumours that families with their children crossed to the southern side, but they were caught and sent to prison because the government published a law that established that if any citizen crossed or escaped to the south, they had to be sent to prison for breaking the law. This was Riverbanks, a city that was separated by the wall.

When they met, he was inside the school. He realized that he was not in the audition place because there were no musical instruments like guitars or a piano. He saw that everything was closed and that there was nobody at school. 'Hello,' he said, 'is anyone here? I come to the auditions.' Then he heard somebody that closed a door and went downstairs. He heard a woman's voice that was singing outside and he went to the football field. She was singing 'Dear Prudence' when he suddenly appeared and told her, 'hey are you here for the auditions? Why is school closed and why are you here alone?' Kristen looked at him and she realized that he was a man because of his voice and she started laughing. She chuckled because she realized that Trip was wearing a woman's cop uniform and that he pretended to be a woman.

He could not believe the moment when he saw a beautiful woman that was singing Dear Prudence, even though he was not a Beatles fan. He looked at her

beautiful green eyes and he could not listen to what she told him, ' hey weird boy, why are you here, you are not supposed to be here! Schools are closed,my friend, in which world do you live?' She was the most attractive and gorgeous woman that he had ever seen. They spent time at school that night, and he took out his wig. Kristen laughed and then she told him, ' why do you have that guitar, and why are you dressed as a cop? Are you a spy?' 'No,' said Trip. 'I am from the south. I crossed the wall and came here because I saw an advertisement in my school that there was an audition for Julliard, and I wish to go to that academy because I want to become a professional musician. That is why I have my guitar here, but I could not afford to pay for the permission to come to the north, so I dressed as a cop and pretended to be a policewoman, and when the cops finished their midnight turn, I rushed and jumped into the other side and I came here. 'What about you?' They spoke the whole night until dawn.

He fell in love with Kristen, who was 15 years old , and she lived in the north side of the city. They kissed that night and they sang many songs together, but men and women were not allowed to see each other in the north of Riverbanks city because of the quarantine, and as Trip lived in the south he did not know anything about the quarantine.

Trip Jones was a very handsome young student from Riverbanks secondary south school. He lived in the south of Riverbanks with his father, who was a mechanic .Trip loved cars and he was also in love with music. He played the guitar and sang very well. His favorite bands were the Rolling Stones, The Clash, The Stranglers, Joy Division, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. He was not a good student at school, but he was the best basketball player from the south. Riverbanks south school was a mixed school where women and men studied together, so all the girls were in love with Trip Jones because he had long hair and blue eyes. He took his guitar to school and sang outside his car, and the girls from the school followed him and wished to go out on a date with Trip because he was very handsome.

Trip's basketball mates were jealous because he was very attractive to women and also because he was different from southern students. Most southern students were gangsters, that is why the police patrolled the streets and they controlled that gangsters did not cross to the north, because northerners knew that there were a lot of

southern gangsters that had weapons and they were arm dealers. They wore leather jackets and leather boots. Southern gangsters were violent and when they gathered together they made riots and they burnt cars. Gangsters and police did not get along because cops stopped them in the streets and they humiliated gangsters. They were a bad example for the city because they were always causing disturbance.

One day Trip was at school and he was attending math classes with Mr Johnson. He was bored and tired, so he escaped from Mr Johnson's lesson and entered the music classroom, because he was more interested in music than in math lessons and resolving math problems. He gathered a guitar and practiced some of his favourite songs from Led Zeppelin. He wished to become a famous guitarist, so he picked up a magazine from the music library and noticed there was an audition for a scholarship at Juilliard Academy. He hoped he could send a letter to the audition place and then, if he practiced some Led Zeppelin and Roger Water's covers as much as he could, he could obtain his opportunity to win a scholarship in Julliard. Soon, however, he realized that this was impossible for him, because the auditions were at Northern High School and he needed a special permission to enter the north side and he did not have enough money to pay for that permission. But then he had a better idea. He studied the cop's turns. He knew that the first turn started at 5 AM and then the second turn continued until 12 AM, and finally the last turn started at 19:PM and it continued until 5 AM, so he realized that the best hour to cross the wall was in the last turn. The problem was that there was a lockdown in North of Riverbanks city because there was a resurgence of an unknown virus. Men and women were separated and they could not see each other because of the virus that attacked humans, and many Riverbanks citizens were affected by this virus. This unknown virus had an impact in teenagers and children and it attacked their bodies. The north was more affected by the virus because there were more children and teenagers than in the south. Southern Riverbanks citizens heard about the rumours that the virus was affecting many citizens in the north. Some radios announced the number of citizens that passed away in the north.

Many teenagers died at hospitals and there was not even a vaccine that stopped the virus on the north side. The Government did not let friends and families see each other because it was dangerous for them to get infected. Only children were allowed to live with their mothers. They were separated from their fathers.

Supermarkets were opened from 7AM until 15:00 PM. Libraries were closed and books were burnt because the government feared that a revolution may happen. There were rumours that literary clubs were getting together to organize revolutions.

People were not allowed to buy books and not even to study famous authors like Jack London, William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Ray Bradbury, William Golding and Aldous Huxley. Philosophers and all genres of music were forbidden because the government identified the literary clubs that were organizing clandestine meetings and they planned revolutions against the government. Cinemas, theaters and concerts were suspended and disallowed because many people together were at risk to catch the virus. Trains and undergrounds were suspended. There was no freedom at all because the Riverbanks Government controlled the people and they supervised the North and South city citizens. Not even cars were used because the government did not want people to move from one place to the other, that is why there were no car sounds or vehicles that moved around. People who worked at night like barmen, chefs at restaurants, and all night activities were banned, because the Riverbanks government did not want people to go out at night because they did not want people to get together with other people.

The wall was built before the outbreak of the virus and it was built because the government did not want northern citizens to pass over to the south side. There were many families that lived in the North who jumped up the wall and crossed to the south side because they realized that in the South there was much more freedom than in the north. The problem was that many families that jumped over the wall and passed over to the south side did not know that in the south children, men and women were not separated because southern citizens did not know about the virus.

Police officers stood in front of the wall with their guns and they stopped Riverbanks citizens from passing the North side to the south side. Police officers had the order to arrest them because there was a curfew that started at 15:00 PM. Police were everywhere controlling houses and flats. They had women's house keys and they could enter their houses whenever they wanted to control them if they followed the Riverbanks government's lockdown rules, because there were many citizens who did not follow security and health measures.

Men were not allowed to continue with their old jobs. Most of the northern citizens were powerful businessmen and they owned many clothes companies, but the Government forbade business owners and their employees to work in the companies, because the Government wanted the citizens to work for the government. The citizens could work in different areas for example they could be police officers or work in a supermarket. They could work in gardening and keeping the parks. They had to clean the streets and they had to cut parks' grasses, so they received a public salary, but that was not enough for many men who years before had their own business and they earned a lot of money. Due to the lockdown, many company owners were forced to close down their business because they could not pay the government taxes, and employee's salaries.

Riverbanks was an immense city full of enormous houses and high flats. Many movies like Back to the Future and Jaws took place in Riverbanks and that is why the city was very famous and well known by tourists. Tourists enjoyed the magnificent landscapes that Riverbanks had, and the spectacular beaches that were located in the Northern side. There was a contrast between the north and the south side because most of the northern citizens were professionals and they had Riverbanks University. Most of the courses that Riverbanks University offered were delivered by the best professors that had studied at the top Universities in England, Australia, Finland and New Zealand. Northern citizens had great job opportunities, and they lived in the best neighborhoods. The south of Riverbanks was different from the north because there were no universities. There was one primary School and it was the only place where families could send their children to study. Southern Riverbanks secondary School was the only school available in the south and it was very badly criticized by northerners because it was a mixed school. This was not well seen by northerners because the north had separated schools for men and women. Students that started primary School had to attend Riverbanks school for men, and women had to study at Riverbanks school for women.

In the north men and women were not allowed to study together and this was the consequence of a revolutionary accident that had happened at Riverbanks in 1969. There was only one secondary School in 1969 and it was located to the north, so most southern students travelled to the north to study because there was no secondary

school in the South. Two young lovers from Riverbanks secondary school and their friends were against the Vietnam war, so they started to protest at night outside the school. Those were turbulent years of anti-war protest, the struggle for free speech and civil rights. When those two young lovers from Riverbanks secondary school and their friends protested against the war and made riots outside the streets, the cops started shooting, and one student was shot and died at that moment. There was one student that was blamed for being primarily responsible for the protest and vandalism by the local Government. He was not a good student and school heads did not want him because he belonged to the south side of Riverbanks. The Riverbanks Government passed a law that described that schools in the North were going to be separated and women and men had to study in separate places. So, in 1970 the Government built schools for women and schools for men. Riverbanks north secondary school for women was a high school who all were excellent students. Among them, Kristen was the most popular of all the students and she was 15 years old. She was blonde with long hair and she always dressed in short dresses with leather boots and denim jackets. Trip Jones was 18 years old and he was a rebellious young boy from the south. He destroyed the wall that separated the north side and the south side with his girlfriend Kristen.

Trip hit the female cop who patrolled the midnight hour on her head with his guitar and left her lying on the floor. Trip stole the police uniform and jumped to the north side. He dressed up as a female police officer and entered Riverbanks secondary high school for women. The government had decided to close down schools. So students were not allowed to study because if they went all together, they could catch the virus. Kristen was very sad and angry and she desired to go back to school. She could not see her friends and she could not even go out to drink a coke or watch a movie. The radio stations did not play music because the government obliged radio journalists to inform them about the virus and not to play music, so music was forbidden. Kristen wanted to become a professional singer, and she desired to study at Julliard. She loved to sing, but she missed listening to her favourite radio station at night about The Beatles. The radio journalist that played The Beatles' greatest hits had to quit because he was not allowed to play music, and that was the only thing he did. She decided to escape from her house and run to the school. She knew that the school was the only place where there was no control, and that cops did not patrol that part,

because they were all around the wall. She looked at her window in her bedroom, and decided to escape from her window. She jumped and ran outside to the street. When she saw the school, she realized that the doors were locked and that it was impossible to enter the school, so she gathered a rock and broke her classroom window. She entered her classroom and she started to cry because she missed school. Then, all of a sudden she heard somebody that was shouting. She thought that maybe it was a ghost that was looking for her or that was inside the school, but then she heard a man's voice. She closed the classroom door and went downstairs to the football field and had started singing 'Dear Prudence' when she saw a man dressed as a female cop. She started to laugh because she realized that he was a boy that was wearing a wig. The boy took out his wig and then he looked at her. They sang and talked until dawn. Then they kissed. When Kristen heard a police siren she said, 'I must return to my house. We are not allowed to see each other. Men and women are prohibited to see each other. I'm sorry to tell you about this, Trip. I would like to see you again.' Trip could not believe it when Kristen told him that men and women were forbidden to see each other. He was so in love with her and he had never kissed a woman like her before. Kristen told him, 'Let's meet here at school at 12:45 AM, bring your guitar.' Trip was not intelligent enough to realize that there was a strict control in the north side. The only thing that was important for him was music, Juilliard and Kristen. He spent the night with Kristen at school.

They met again the following day outside the school in the same place where he had said goodbye to her. She missed his perfume and his voice. He missed her beautiful smile and her attractive green eyes that were bright when there was a full moon. That night was different because they talked about their future and what they were going to do when the wall disappeared. They wondered if they could destroy everything that was around them. They wished to live in a world where there were no police or governments that controlled the people. If the wall had never been built, maybe they could have met before, but not in this way. Why did they have to hide or escape or jump to the other side in order to see each other? Trip could not believe it when Kristen told him that men and women were not allowed to see each other, and that radio stations were forbidden to play music. Trip had an idea because he did not know if he would see Kristen again. The police sirens sounded everywhere and he wanted to take Kristen to the south side. Trip told Kristen, 'Hey don't cry, why don't we

grab the fire extinguishers from downstairs, and the golf clubs and destroy that wall that is the main problem here, let's throw and burn our documents and show the people that we do not need to be controlled by the government. Let's finish with this government and let's destroy that wall.' They ran to the front doors, and they entered the school. They grabbed a fire extinguisher and some chains and golf clubs. They went outside the football field and then, they ran to the wall. They saw that there were a lot of cops, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Trip looked at Kristen, he kissed her on her right cheek and then hugged her. 'Are you ready?' He asked her. 'Yes, I'm ready, let's destroy this wall and let's put an end to this right now!'

One day the wall that separated the northern side of Riverbanks from the southern side was destroyed by two young lovers. Kristen and Trip received help from citizens that wanted to destroy the wall. There were no police officers because they did not know what to do when they saw a multitude of people that had hammers to destroy the wall. Nobody stopped Kristen and Trip because more and more people joined to demolish the long and high wall. Kristen and Trip smiled at each other and then they kissed in front of all the people. They cried and kissed because they realized that freedom had arrived, and that it was a great day for freedom.

"Breathing"

Lucila Martínez



Stepped in loneliness, weighed down by motherhood and excessive employment, times were not easy for her heart in those times. Although she thought that love would come again... she knew that the first person she had to love was herself to make it happen. Her parents, the impulse of each day, her daughter of almost two, her motor, her horizon, her light. She knew perfectly well that it was necessary to continue and that the previous issue was no longer worth it. However, she had to work hard upon her sad thoughts, laden with images which she could not, at least at that moment, remove from her mind.

It was Sunday morning by the end of May, when his decision made her go through a moment she never thought she would live. She took their baby wrapped in blankets protecting her from the cold autumn morning, her clothes, some toys and left without direction. He watched the scene without moving, not even offering any help. Her parents in their sixties, with absolute shock, welcomed them both and provided their home without hesitation. The space was small, the day was not the right one, it is never the right moment, since some relatives were coming for a visit. It seemed that Sundays made things even worse. Dejected, confused, sad, she took a warm bath, put her daughter to bed and accompanied by a cup of linden tea that her mother prepared, she sat down to breathe. Her life would continue differently, in a way that she did not even know. Among diapers, milk bottles, laughter, crying, work, nostalgia and memories to forget, the cold winter passed. The baby girl would be two soon, so it had to be celebrated. If anything, she had learnt from her parents was to love, to respect and to appreciate life. Those three elements would be present in that celebration.

Some months went by and a place for her and her daughter emerged. The house was small but enough for the two of them, mainly full of love. It had one warm bedroom

and a window through which a warm sun entered every morning and she woke up the little girl with a nice aroma of freshly made breakfast. There was also one comfortable sofa in which she would sit down for reading fairytales and a tiny patio with beautiful plants. She changed job, returned to her social life surrounded by family and friends, she could breathe calmness this time.

Her “baby” was almost five, when she ran into somebody she did not know the importance he would have in her life. They had been classmates from kindergarten to the last year of primary school and from then on, they had never seen each other again, even living in the same neighbourhood. A social event brought them together, they instantly recognized each other and started talking as if they had seen each other the day before.

“So I guess that being a kindergarten teacher, you must be very sensitive... your daughter is very lucky, “ he said, trying to learn about her personality.

“What you say is interesting,” she said without answering, “And you must be a little structured, as you are an architect...” she added.

“Good combination!” he replied.

Their personal stories made them feel comfortable and captivated by each other throughout the duration of the event. They talked about their children, they could not avoid that topic, their time in college, parents, siblings were also part of the conversation. Anyway, the main themes that night were the values and the learning they both had achieved after staying alone with their children. That winter night was really cold but the warm tone of his words, smiling and saying that he just wanted to be listened to and to listen to somebody, was enough heat for her. For the very first time in years, she felt accompanied and observed.

They started a new story together, determined to be happy, prioritizing listening and speaking and above all, the family. She understood that the concept of happiness was made up of joy and sad moments, anxiety and calmness and even when fear invaded her she could be happy. Both continued together writing their own story. They found out that in pairs the load was simpler and lighter. They discovered that love was

also respect, learning, sincerity. She felt happy and calm thinking that this love could last over time or not, but knowing that she would not lose the possibility of feeling it, of living it. They were neither twin souls, nor did they live happily ever after. Simply love; mature, responsible, dreamy, honest. Love that expresses everything. Her decision was to follow her dreams, those that had been kept but not discarded and new horizons to follow had arisen. This time, she had someone to share her wishes with. Not only was she strengthened to face life, but she also managed to find a feeling of fulfillment that she believed she had lost. Stepped in loneliness, weighed down by motherhood and excessive employment, times were easier for her heart in those times. Love had come. She breathed.

"Me, Again"

Florencia Miño



“Overcome with joy, the Prince led Rapunzel out of the barren, hot desert. Together they travelled to his father’s castle where they lived happily ever after.” Letitia finished reading the story. After pronouncing these last words, her facial features changed completely; she went from jubilant to downhearted in some seconds. She went to her bedroom, put on comfy clothes and slippers. She was ready to prepare some tea and watch the news on the T.V.

Being a storyteller was her passion, but having to tell happily-ever-after stories became stressful for her, since her life was the opposite of it and she couldn’t bear feeling that way. She used to be bright and enthusiastic, always dressed in pink and ready to be in a fairy tale. Her entire life was a fairytale, or that was what her friends always said about her, since her life, her style, her personality were typical portrayals of fairy tale characters. However, everything seemed different this time, she was no longer the optimistic person she used to be, her life was dyed black.

It was one of the coolest days in winter. She was alone and locked down in her house, she thought the books were going to help her go through this difficult time, but instead they made her feel as if she was Rapunzel locked up in the tower, trapped in it without even the slightest chance to leave.

She had always loved telling stories. Reading, and being a storyteller allowed her to read stories to children, to act them out, to make kids feel as if they were inside those stories. She was not a fan of terror stories, in fact fairy tales were her favourite ones since they all have happy endings, and that was what she had always needed: happy endings. She couldn’t bear having to be in the real world, where endings are not to be always happy.

She was dressed in dark colours, her hair looked darker (she dyed it as she felt her appearance had to reflect how she felt on the inside: dark, gloomy, depressed), she started to watch drama movies and cried all day on the sofa. She couldn’t believe it.

She could not recognize herself. Why was she behaving as a person she had always loathed? Was the quarantine making her feel that way? Would she ever recover and go back to tell magical stories? She felt in a deep dark hole with no getaway.

Days went by and she always did the same things: those boring chores, which were entertaining before the lockdown and became really tedious to do. She woke up every morning, turned the alarm clock off, got dressed in whatever looked like pyjamas and started cleaning her house. During the quarantine, cleaning went hand in hand with silence. Letitia lived in a house with a large, green and flowery garden, where animals like birds or crickets could be heard even in the silence, but that day an empty noise was the only thing to be heard. She felt depressed and really chores were the only thing she did in order to have something to do, no more happy stories, no more singing, no more contentment.

The following day, she woke up to the sound of a text message. She opened her eyes, started yawning, took the phone and read the message. While reading the message (that took between 2 and 8 seconds) the light in her eyes became brighter, her cheeks turned pink, her eyebrows were relaxed, the wrinkle that had been created in her face started wearing off. Her lungs were filled with air, her heart started beating really fast, she felt as if she had been punctured by a joy vaccine. The running blood around her body was full of bliss and jubilation. Her body felt different, she couldn't help smiling, and it was one of the best days she'd ever believed she could have since March 19th. Followed by that, she got up, played some music and started cleaning the house. She couldn't believe how horribly cleaned it was. She started with the bathroom, continued with the living room, then the dining room, the kitchen and finally the garden. It took her a good time, but singing and listening to the chirping of birds and crickets, the buzzing bees and the croaking frogs made her chores much more interesting to do. When she finished, she went to the kitchen, prepared some blueberry muffins, an apple pie and some croissants. The smell coming from the oven was exquisite.

Everything was ready, she set the table, placed the appetizing baked food she'd prepared. She went to have a shower. What a great one it was! She even sang in it. She was ready. She went to her wardrobe and this time she chose her flowery long dress, she put it on and went back to the table. Letitia felt as if she had been fueled with love and excitement and it was then when she went to the front door at 4:30p.m, she

waited for some minutes, but nobody appeared. Disappointed, she went back into her house and checked her phone, she had received a text at 4:30 sharp:it was her granny again. The text said:

Don't ever let this quarantine take away who you really are. I'm sure you did everything differently today with that spirit we all know you have. I'm sorry I've lied to you. Soon we'll be able to see each other again and hug hard. Take care, sweetie, remember how much I love you.

With love, Gran.

While reading the text message, a tear ran down her face. She breathed deeply, went back to the table, grabbed a muffin, drank some tea and started reading "Rapunzel".

"Foes?"
Luz Moreno



I had always been the apple of my father's eye. My mother had died after giving birth to me so I was an only child, spoiled and pampered and loved and pampered again by everyone at home: nannies, gardeners and neighbours played with me, gave me bars of chocolates or just allowed me to eat cookies behind my Papa`s back before dinner was served.

I was new in the area, a lovely petit honey-haired foreign girl eager to get all the attention I could. And the two males who had won my heart were my dad and Addie, a boy I was introduced to by Joseph, the gardener. Like all Polish girls, I was used to eating sweet rolls for dessert, which the plump, rosy-cheeked Maritza prepared for me several times a week. I still remember the smell of spices and the sensation of candied fruits melting in my mouth. How delicious! And Addie, whose mother was busy raising his other five siblings, was thankful to be able to escape from that crowded tiny house, which smelt of leftovers and dirty laundry. Poor Addie! He felt so unhappy in his own home, mostly because of his dad`s temper and abusive behaviour towards his mum and the rest of his kin. He used to unleash his anger on Addie, especially when he kept talking about being an artist when he grew up. I remember my best friend`s watercolour paintings as if it were today. Landscapes depicted with fine strokes of greens, light-blues and yellows, picturesque little Alpine villages which transported the observer into the tranquility of each corner. He had a keen eye for detail; he could see things nobody else could. Ah! Those eyes! Addie had remarkable, clear pale blue eyes, with a distinctly hypnotic quality. In contrast, my eyes were as green as olives but ordinary, dull and small. Or at least that was how I saw myself in those days. But his eyes dazzled me; they could bend his mother`s and any woman`s will.

Years later, historians would write endless lines about his large and slightly bulging blue eyes, and how he used his penetrating gaze to have a dramatic effect on his followers. Thankfully, that was part of his other life, one I would not be a witness of.

I still remember our endless walks in the mountains and forests near our hometown, and how he taught me about colours, shapes and shades. He had a special interest in drawing buildings and he marvelled at architecture. I guess he felt at awe every time he saw them because he had been raised on a farm near the border with Salzburg, where big buildings were a rare sight.

Being an artist had always been his ultimate goal, and I guess he would have been a great painter had things turned out differently in history. He was definitely a natural; I could see that and so could his mum Klara, who was immensely proud of her son's interest in fine arts. But his father Alois was a different sort of person, too strict, domineering and feared. He demanded of Addie to become a civil servant like himself, something my dear Addie did not agree with. But not only was he a gifted artist but had also inherited an angelic voice. While he used to take part in the boys` choir in the Catholic church near our home, I used to attend the synagogue in the centre of town following all the rites expected of me. We were so different yet so close...

How he suffered when one of his siblings got ill and died in a matter of hours! To make matters even worse, the infant was buried in the cemetery next to his house, so Addie would spend hours staring through his bedroom`s window at the graveyard. I believe his loss turned him into an aloof and self-absorbed boy. Although he still devoted part of the day to going to school and watercolouring, he spent the rest of his time devouring American cowboy books, where white men hated and killed Indians. He had a lot of fun playing outside with other tough boys from the neighborhood, so by now he came home less frequently. Maritza kept on baking delicious sweet pastries filled with cream and nuts, but he just stopped by to grab a bite and preferred to be left on his own. This hurt me deeply, and one afternoon I told him so, but his answer was a mere "I am just growing up, Esther." As soon as he left my dining-room, I stormed upstairs and burst into a sea of tears which even my adored Papa could not contain. I felt abandoned, left aside, rejected by Addie. Addie, my first and best friend in Linz. What would become of me now that Addie was interested in other games, in playing with Fritz and his gang and not with me?

I became obsessed with him and dropped plenty of letters in his mailbox. But he seldom replied. Sometimes I would see him running in the cemetery, reenacting battles between

Redskins and cowboys in Western America, using thick branches of spruce as rifles and shouting in Austrian. All this made me smile because he looked so ridiculous, yet so dominant and powerful. I would hide behind my bedroom window and watch him fight with the boys for hours on end. What a sight! Although he was not very tall, he had an air of grandeur and self-assuredness that I envied. And as years went by, those magnetic mystical eyes would make people bend their knees and follow him unquestioningly.

Some years later, when his father died, he moved to Vienna with his beloved mother and siblings. We kept on writing to each other once a month because I did not want to lose touch with him. I still had a crush on Addie, so I was sincerely interested in knowing about his new life in the city and how he was coping with high school. At the beginning, he was very polite and friendly, but after being rejected from The Academy of Fine Arts twice, I started to perceive a change in him. The tone of the letters, the words he used, even his clear and tidy handwriting became full of angles and spiky shapes. I knew him very well, so I could easily sense his resentment, discontent and rather extreme ideas that were emerging from his hurt soul. He spoke of hatred towards Marxists and how the Habsburg monarchy was responsible for all the conflicts his comrades were undergoing.

With time, his letters were shorter until one day he stopped replying. That was the day I knew I had lost him forever. My dear childhood friend and love, my sweet Addie was slowly turning into Adolph, the Fuhrer who would later persecute my people all over Europe. My best friend would one day become my foe.

"Awakening"

Agustina Quintero



Anna's eyes snapped open. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her breathing was irregular and fast and she could feel her clothes damp with her sweat. She tried to calm down but couldn't, until she remembered the conscious breathing exercises her psychologist had given her to move past her anxiety episodes. Anna took a deep breath, and then two more. She shook her body to get rid of the awful sensations that still lingered within her.

Anna reached for her phone, which was lying on her bedside table, and confirmed that the alarm wouldn't ring for another hour. She would usually postpone the alarm so many times that she would often be late to work, as there was nothing she loved more than sleeping. Not this time. She couldn't sleep anymore.

There are certain nightmares that are so vivid that you cannot tell whether they happened or not. You cannot tell the oneiric from reality, they mingle so perfectly well that you just cannot tell.

Anna could still feel its uncanny and disturbing effect, so she decided to wash it off in the shower. The drops of hot water massaged the contracted muscles of her neck and shoulders as they hit her body, and the vapour made her feel at ease again. As she soaped her body, she mentally went over the list of pendings she had for the week, seeking for some normality after such an unsettling experience.

"The road trip!" she screamed. Lately, she had been so busy with her job that it wasn't a surprise she forgot about it. Anna usually organized everything on her own, with little or no help from others, whilst juggling work, study and family. So, to be honest, sooner or later almost all trips became a burden to her no matter how much she needed them.

"Annie, relax! Don't stress so much!" her friends would say. Which she considered unfair given that she was the busiest one in her group and also the only one to organize things. But we all know the saying: if you want something done, ask a busy person. She thought about her day. She had some minutes before lunch so as to book the hotels

she had already chosen. But she would finish organising it during the weekend, Monday routines couldn't bear any more tasks.

Anna turned off the water and got out of the bathtub. She stood before the mirror absentmindedly and combed her long, red, wavy hair. The telephone rang, waking her from the lethargy, stealing the recently-acquired peace from her.

"Annie! Are you ok?", said a tremorous voice. It was her boyfriend.

"Hey! Yes! Why do you ask?"

"Well I may sound crazy...but I had a terrible dream and I guess I am still uncertain that it was just a dream..."

Anna was speechless. She wanted to answer but couldn't, her voice would not come out.

"Hey! Are you there?" said James.

She finally answered, but said nothing about her nightmare. She wasn't sure that she wanted to talk about it. At least not now, that she had managed to calm down. They had a brief exchange of words as she got ready to go to work, and agreed on talking again later.

Purse, keys, cellphone, a book, a coffee and an avocado toast to go. Yes, she was all set. Commuting to work was easier with a coffee and a good book, she thought. She got to the surprisingly deserted and lonely train station and felt ecstatic at the thought of having a seat where to rest for an hour-long trip. It was so early that the sun hadn't been able to warm this winter morning yet. There were no people around, so no human warmth could keep her comfortable while waiting either. The surrounding silence was deafening, she could only listen to her now restless heartbeat and short, anxious intake of air.

"Wait a minute...a deserted train station?," she said to herself. She must have left home too early, or maybe her telephone had the wrong time. Maybe it was Sunday morning, or labour day. Something was definitely wrong. Where was everyone? Now that she gave it a thought, Anna became suddenly aware of the fact that she hadn't seen a soul on her way to the station either. In fact, everything looked too much like her nightmare: a contagious virus had spread throughout the world killing people

and they were all forced to stay home for months. Streets were deserted and frontiers were closed. Her boyfriend, who had been working abroad for months, couldn't come back home. Her family was close, and yet, she was unable to see them.

She felt odd. She turned around looking for someone to talk to, but there was nobody around. Too often, reality resembles our worst nightmares. Too often, certain nightmares are so vivid that you cannot tell whether they happened or not.

She started to remember everything, it felt as if the awakening happened all over again. Oh, how she wished she could wake up from this, how she wished it had all been really a nightmare. It was chilling cold and the freezing air coloured her cheeks and nose red, which was surprisingly soothing. She took a seat at the station, and closed her eyes for a few minutes.

Anna shook her body to get rid of the awful sensations. She took a deep breath, and then two more, as she remembered the conscious breathing exercises her psychologist had given her to move past her anxiety episodes. She tried to calm down but couldn't. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her breathing was irregular and fast and she could feel her clothes damp with her sweat. Anna's eyes snapped open.

"Foes"

Brenda Sartori



Andrew Bravy knew how to make people find the house of their dreams. He had been working as a real estate broker since his father passed away and he inherited his business; however, it had never been his dream. In fact, his father never gave him the opportunity to choose what he wanted to be, it was mandatory that he carried out the family business as all his ancestors had done in the past. Yet, Andrew never complained about this for everything he had, everything he could achieve in his life was a positive consequence of his father's heritage.

It was a nippy and blowy morning in June when the tumultuous and nettling sound of his mobile phone started doing its job. He received an early call from an unknown number when he was sleeping peacefully covered by his grey feather bedspread and resting his head on a soft microfiber pillow, which was suitable to avoid contractures. His father would say "never hesitate to answer the phone. You never know when a sale can save you." After stretching his arms and legs as a sea star, he reached for the phone.

"Andrew Bravy," he said in a monotonous voice.

"Good morning, Mr. Bravy. This is Mr. Bryce White. I'm calling you because I have been interested in putting my residence up for sale and I would like you to come and have a look at it," said the mysterious man in a toneless voice. "May you come this afternoon?"

Andrew vacillated for a moment. It was Sunday morning and the last thing that had room on his mind was working but again, the memory of his father teaching him the importance and value of work bombarded his mind as if he was in the middle of a war between two potential enemies. He accepted the stranger's offer and got out of his comfy bed.

Sunday is the quietest day of the week, or so Andrew believed, when the traffic jam that delayed his trip was about to make him be late. Grouchy, he saw that he had enough space to get out behind the car that was in front of him and took an unknown shortcut indicated by his GPS. It was raining, the streets were slippery and his car was dirty and covered by water. He could not see very well since the windshield wiper did not cope with the amount of water that fell on his glass. To increase his moodiness on a day that could have been magnificent, his GPS ran out of battery and without knowing where he was, he followed his instincts and drove on. At one point, the wheels of his car bogged down in a mud puddle and even though he tried all the possible manoeuvres, there was no way forward. His phone had no signal and his GPS was dead, so Andrew, induced by impulsiveness and impatience, decided to get out of his car and start looking for someone who could help him. On a day like this, there are usually not many people on the street so it was very difficult for him to find someone to help him solve his problem. He kept walking in the rain and to his right, he could see an old warehouse that was apparently open. Without hesitation, he ran towards it and entered. The place was old and the rain made it worse. The walls were stained with moisture and there were leaks everywhere that formed puddles in which any child who had just been bathed and changed to go out with his mother would throw a party.

“Is there anybody here?” he asked in a vibrant and audible voice tone.

Nobody seemed to answer and he could not waste any more time so he decided to go past a door behind the counter. A man in his mid-seventies was sitting on an old chair and eating something that looked like raw meat.

“Excuse me, Sir. My name is Andrew Bravy and I need to make a phone call because my car stopped and I need to call a mechanic. Sorry for crossing the door but I called and nobody answered,” Andrew apologized, but the old man did not reply. All of a sudden, an explosion was heard and the power went out.

“Sir, are you there? Do you have a candle to light up this place and a phone to lend me? It is important, please,” the hopeless man begged, but he still did not get any sound from the strange man.

After minutes that seemed like hours, the power returned but Andrew was all by himself in the gloomy room: the enigmatic man was gone. Still, on the table where the man had been eating there was a note written in red ink that said 'Welcome. You can use the phone.' Astonished, Andrew began to breathe massively since he had a bad feeling which increased when he saw drops of what looked like red ink on the carpet and the spooky man's apparent dinner: a finger. Darkness took over the room again.

These are the statements that Andrew Bravy gave to the police as he does not remember anything else after seeing the finger on the floor surrounded by blood. Or maybe yes, a heavy blow to his head.

Sometimes your impatience can be your worst foe.

"True Love"

Macarena Sayanes



There I was. Stuck on the sofa. Heartbroken because my boyfriend had broken up with me and, even worse, I was all alone in my apartment as we were in lockdown because of Coronavirus, so there was not a worse scenario for me at that moment.

Every day was the same thing, I woke up around midday, joined a meeting as I drank my daily coffee, moved from the desk to the sofa, turned on Netflix and watched the most romantic movie that I hadn't seen at that point, which was a hard choice, while eating junk food and why not drinking a couple of glasses of wine. Maybe you would say, "what a cliché!" But trust me, this is the only way of moving on after a break-up.

Days passed, my friends were like my guardian angels, there was not a day that they didn't catch up on me, asking me how I was and if I needed something. Of course, every time they called they told me to download all these dating apps: tinder, hoop, bumble and more, however I wasn't ready to meet a new guy again. Until one day, I was. I was tired of being depressed all the time, thinking over and over again in slow motion about the moment that Thomas broke my heart. So I grabbed my cell phone, a bag of Sour Patch and began to create my profile in every dating app that could possibly exist, even PenPal, because... why not? I asked myself.

Heart, cross, cross cross... I spent all my free hours doing that, I felt like a teenager again. Best of all, I was feeling desired again. Boys talked to me as if I were a goddess. Exactly what I needed. We talked two or three times and I got bored of them. So one day, I opened Pen Pal because I was intrigued about how that page worked because it's not a dating app, it's to get to know people from around the world with whom you share the same interest. The thing is that you have only three messages per day, so I needed to be more picky than I usually am. I sent one message to a profile, a second

message to another profile and I only had one left...a message that was about to change the whole panorama.

Message sent.

His name was Timothy, 25 years old. Blond hair, blue eyes. Engineer. He liked sports and travelling, what else could I ask for? I asked myself. He was kind of the guy of my dreams. The only pretty little detail was that he lived in Finland and I lived in Argentina. But what the heck, I couldn't even see my neighbor, so it was just the same thing. I just wanted to have fun, and distract myself from reality and everything that was going on in my life at that moment, or at least that's what I thought.

Next day, I woke up with the beautifully annoying sound of my alarm. With my eyes barely open I grabbed my iPhone, stopped the alarm and read "Username TimothyX has sent you a new message on PenPal World." "Oh my Dior!" I said with my sleepy voice. I didn't know why I was so nervous if he was just another boy, who probably I would never meet. But I couldn't stop thinking negatively. What if he just answered because he was polite? What if he wrote that he didn't like me? I could feel my heart beating out my chest, so I took a deep breath, opened the mail and as I read each word of that sentence my body released the tension in the bed to the point that I felt as if I was floating on a calm sea. Timothy wanted to get to know me better.

I jumped out of bed. Made myself a coffee and some toasts, I put everything on the table, sat on a chair, took out my phone from my pocket, opened Instagram, typed his name, clicked where it said "message" and got paralyzed. I didn't know what to write so I started typing "Hey! Hyd?" But I erased that: it was too detached so I typed again, as I thought "this is harder than writing an essay." I had forgotten how to flirt with a guy, however the best option was to follow my guts, and that's what I did. After two failed attempts, I wrote "Hey, Timothy! It's Maca from PenPal, how are you?" And that was the beginning of the best love story of my life.

Since that day, we talked every hour of every day. Everytime my phone buzzed and I saw it was him, a smile popped up in my face, my eyes shined like two crystals, and with every buzz my broken heart put its broken pieces back in place. I was feeling alive, and I had something to smile for again.

We were two open books, we talked about everything, from our family backgrounds to our favorite animals. We had so many things in common but at the same time we were so different that it made the conversations even richer. I felt as if I was talking to my future husband, though I didn't love him yet, but I had a feeling deep in my heart that there was a reason why he had appeared in my life. Until one day after one month of talking and getting closer to each other in every aspect of life, both romantically and sexually, things changed. He stopped talking to me in the mornings, his answers became shorter, he stopped answering fast to the point that one day he didn't answer back anymore.

This was a story I had already lived and not too long before. I was devastated again. I questioned myself every moment of the day. "What did I do wrong?" I asked myself. I read all our texts, tried to remember what I said during our never-ending phone calls. I needed to know how I had screwed things up. I even blamed myself for being dumped by Thomas. Wasn't I sexy enough? Wasn't I girlfriend material? Was that the reason both of them had left me? All of these questions I asked myself over and over again. Romantic movies and junk food on the couch were back.

Two weeks had passed from that miserable day, that although I didn't want to remember, in one way or another it helped me grow stronger and more confident. When suddenly, out of the blue, a message from Timothy popped up in my phone, which said that he missed me. In that instant my knees came loose, the expression of my face was like if I had seen a ghost, so I shouted "WHY AGAIN!?!?" I didn't open the text for at least ten minutes after it arrived, so I could think properly about what to answer back. I was not the same girl he had known: I was stronger and more confident about myself so I couldn't let him hurt me again. I didn't believe in "happily-ever-afters" anymore, or in "meant-to-be's", that's why I asked him "why did you disappear and now you say that

you miss me?" And he answered me back immediately as he used to do: "because I didn't like things about you, but I realised that I still want to talk to you because I like you." His message turned on an alarm in my head, I was not as excited as before, but anyway, I still liked him and wanted to give him a second chance.

We talked mostly all days of the week, he seemed very interested in me and looked as if he wanted to fix things up, so I trusted him, however I wasn't going to let my imagination of a happy ending fly high. Conversations kept on going, though we had some arguing, which was always about the same topic: he not liking some aspects of me. But that time, I didn't let his words get into my head again, I was not going to let him make me doubt who I was. After a couple of times, I got tired of it. So it was my time to let this conversation fade away.

After two months from my breakup with Thomas there I was again, sitting on my couch, but this time, I was not feeling stuck. On the contrary, it felt as if I were sitting on the throne of a queen, feeling empowered. I was even wearing jeans and a nice blouse because I realized that I didn't need a boy to feel complete, I could be happy without one. I didn't need a guy to tell me how beautiful or how smart I was because the only voice that mattered was mine and the only person who I needed to love me was myself. So just as one day I downloaded all those dating apps, I found myself deleting them and cheering for that with myself, the only person I truly loved and loved me back for what I was, as I sang out loud: "*'cause girl you're amazing just the way you are.*"

"In the Blink of an Eye"

Betina Senra



The Police Officer dressed in a blue crumpled uniform and a faded white shirt types each letter with only two fingers on the typewriter. We are sitting in front of him in an obscure gloomy place with rusty walls. Some people are shifting in the waiting room while officers discuss behind the glass. The sirens sounding from outside make me feel petrified.

"What am I doing here? I am not supposed to be here!" I thought.

I feel confused and stunned. A deep pain crosses my heart and I breathe with difficulty as the oxygen can't flow through my lungs. My husband, Bob, is sitting beside me holding my cold hands, and I see how a stream of tears runs down his face.

I can feel the lack of empathy and indifference of the Officer. He doesn't even look at me, and his hollow questioning rumbles on my mind.

"Your name please?" he asks.

"Emma Smith," I said.

"Marital status?"

"Married two years ago," I answer

"Your age?"

"Thirty" I reply.

"When did it happen?"

“Yesterday.”

“What are you going to report, Madam?”

Bob and me were trying to fall asleep when I went into labor two weeks before the due date. It was midnight. We felt extremely exhausted that day after caring for my father at British Hospital as he was suffering from terminal lung cancer.

Suddenly, I felt a warm liquid between my legs and immediately got out of bed without hesitation. A chill ran down my back when I saw blood and a bit of amniotic liquid on my panties. My whole body was trembling when I phoned Dr. Keller, my obstetrician, to explain the circumstances but he kindly suggested that I go to the hospital for the birth of our first son.

“The long-awaited moment of holding my son in my arms finally arrived!” I said to Bob.

Therefore, I had a quick shower, dressed me up in a minute, and gathered the bag with the baby clothing, including a light blue body with a white embroidered collar, two pairs of white soft booties, one diaper bag, one Avent bottle just in case I couldn't breastfeed my baby and a white warm blanket.

Once in Mater Dei Hospital, a doctor on duty accompanied us to the pre-labor room and connected the monitoring equipment to my prominent and fluted belly. We could listen to his heart beating as a wild horse in a field, powerful and invincible. I talked to my father to let him know how much I loved him, and I perceived his emotion and his broken voice on the phone as he was aware of his serious illness and his short little time left to live.

After many hours of labor-work, I walked through the hall towards the delivery room. The anesthetist was waiting for me in a light blue scrub and mask. I didn't feel any pain at that moment so I relaxed for the epidural.

I will never forget the big round clock on that cold pale wall and its dark hand moving slowly, second to second. I was re-connected to control the baby cardiac frequency but I noticed that the medical monitorist seemed to be embarrassed.

“Is there any problem?” I inquired of him.

“Apparently, something is wrong with the monitor!” he said.

“Maybe it is not working properly! Why don’t you replace it?” I told him.

He went for another one and fastened it once again, but we could only hear a profound and ominous silence...

“What’s happened?” I asked. “How is this possible? You listened to him!”

“Don’t worry. Your baby is perfect! He said.

Immediately afterwards, I felt the time became endless. It was 4:00 p.m; and I had the sense that all around me was revolving in a foggy light-blue color. I glimpsed how doctors came in and out as blue ghosts floating in the air while I was lying on the delivery bed.

A few minutes later, Dr. Keller, burst into the room abruptly ...

“What did you do? My Goodness!” he said in a deafening scream and covering his face with his hands.

“What’s happening with my baby?” I yelled. “Why don’t you tell me?” I implored.

“The heart stopped beating,” Dr. Keller murmured.

“That’s impossible! Why are you telling me this? This cannot be true! You are lying to me!” I said in a desperate voice while torrents of grief coursed down my face.

Bob was still waiting anxiously outside the room. He was dressed in a light green scrub to be part of such an important moment in his life, when he heard my inconsolable weeping. He opened the door violently and staggered towards me. I was so shocked that I couldn’t recognize him at first sight. He took my hands into his hands and looking at his eyes I stammered, “our little baby is dead!”

Once on the Maternity floor, we listened to the cry of all the newborns through the corridors and we were invaded by a profound feeling of sadness, impotence and

abandonment. Dr. Keller was not able to explain the reasons for the fetal intrauterine death of our son. He had arrived at the last minute for the childbirth and none of them decided to carry out an emergency cesarean to save his life. I asked myself over and over again why they didn't do anything to save him. Was it too late? Were they responsible for his death? How could life change in the blink of an eye?

Now, Bob and me are here with our broken souls and our empty arms. We are sitting in front of the officer making a criminal complaint for malpractice. All we need is to find an answer. All we need is to know the truth. This is the only thing we have left to mitigate our unimaginable pain and to overcome such emotional wounds.

"The Rock"

Valeria Sieburger



"I can't spend a life going at a hundred miles an hour, I am a meteor smashing through every barrier, hurtling through the void. But the meteor has to crash at some point and it is only when you hit rock bottom that you realize that you have a choice, either you die or you are reborn." She was trembling, as if this had been the last call. She was lying on the moist sand on the beach, her body felt 200 pounds and her thoughts circled endlessly like typhoons. She was wrecked. The morning sun peeked over the waves and the birds had just started chirping, announcing a new beginning with their chants. This was the moment she thought would give an end to her sorrows, although it didn't feel so. She had all the answers she had hunted for all her life but still felt uneasy.

...

Blood, shouting, rage and panic flooded the room. Everybody wanted to save her, save them. It was the happiest terrifying moment of their life. When she opened her eyes, she could only see images of crosses and a picture of a mother holding a baby hanging on the wall. Surrounding this tiny fragile body stood long robes worn by nuns. They were all aligned with what seemed prayers echoing in the solemn room. She was delicate, she was numb, she couldn't crawl to her mom's arms and was left in an unknown room, far from the womb where she had been safe and sound for these past 39 weeks.

After some days, she was finally taken to her mom's arms. She could not breast-feed her. Her mother had been operated and emptied. This was the beginning of an unfilled life for both. Her mom was thin, was weak but her arms felt strong, maybe it was her desire to protect and give this little girl all she had left and catch up for these past absent days. The room was cold, the walls full of mechanical instruments and blankets which would allow them both to survive and stand there, holding onto each other in this world. Was this the way they wanted to start? "Life is not always the party you hoped for

darling, but while we are here, we should dance,” muttered her mommy into her tiny ears. “My little baby Alaina, stay strong.” These same words she would hear echoing in her mind all her life.

This is the way she came into existence, with weakness and strength at the same time coexisting. Not a smooth welcoming for sure, not a lifelong inspiring atmosphere, but mother and daughter knew they could and they would come strong after that. This was a stepping-stone for Alaina in her life; she needed to stay strong no matter what.

Alaina grew up in a very difficult home. After her mother’s hysterectomy, nothing was the same again. She was only 26 years old and felt her womanhood had been ripped off. How could a woman be a woman if she could not conceive anymore? “That is what women do, right?” Repeated her husband throwing cold water on the dream they both had of having a big family. These thoughts and feelings started carving deep scars in her mother’s ill-fated and resentful face. Alaina’s father felt rejected and respect amongst each other was worn out like rocks after so many years of corrosion. Elaine's life hadn’t been easy either through her childhood, and life still had so much more for her. She was an orphan from dad at the age of four, and her mom remarried moving to another country leaving her with her grandparents. Civil war was tough in those days and she grew up on the streets standing for her ideals, almost being slaughtered by militants. She longed for a happy life but instead she was beaten by deceptions one after the other throughout her miserable life.

After Alaina’s birth, her mother could never again have sexual desires. Her father was only 32 years old, very handsome, tall and very full of himself. His eyes were turquoise-blue, which contrasted with his dark brown skin and hair, which went along very well with his obscure personality. He portrayed many strange attitudes, which Alaina could not understand and overtake by then. However, what she did know was that she needed attention and being taken care of. Her body called out for heedfulness and lovingness in many ways. She was ill and hospitalized several times, being next to death. This is the way she found to have her parents close and taking care of her. Alaina felt so responsible for what was going on in her family. She was accused with

irony for almost killing her mom when she was born and for the many things that happened next. That burden chased her and overflowed her with pity, sorrow and guilt all her life.

Mother and daughter were fighters. They never gave up to live their life the way they wanted to. However, you could see pain and heaviness through their eyes. They didn't get along well though they shared so much. One felt needs and the other one could not cope with her life. They couldn't receive from the other what naturally was expected to happen.

Alaina went through life battling many wars. When she was very young she had to undertake many asthma treatments, metabolic and many other autoimmune treatments. She seemed so fragile and yet faced everything as if fighting the last battle. She needed to be loved in a way that most of the time her identity became blurred. She changed schools, had problems with friends, had problems with behavior and scattered from every classroom. She escaped from school running in circles in the streets alone with nowhere to go, nowhere to be sheltered, nowhere she could find the comfort of embracing arms. She was in some way needing to find something she was looking for. She escaped life; everyday ordinary things provoked her with disgust. She felt so lonely and misunderstood in a world and in a home where everyone was inwardly looking.

Being adolescent she had been diagnosed with depression, eating and personality disorders. She was amazingly beautiful, stunning and this personality of looking strong and on a mission attracted many people, except who she really needed and wanted. Although her looks felt like stone, some teachers could see through her transparent blue eyes and tried helping her. She was creative though; she had all sorts of fantastic ideas to go through situations triumphantly. But deep down in her heart she felt hollow, senseless. She grew older in a home that was coming apart. Silences filled the air, balls of fire spat through mouths and their resentful glances felt like stakes. She knew there was so much more going on that wasn't said or at least she wasn't told.

After finishing school she felt it was time for her to start again. Life could now be the one she wanted to be, she could be a designer of her destiny. She needed to prove herself that life had nice things waiting ahead and she would be who she finally wanted to be. She continued looking for these unanswered questions though, never unveiled. She met a boy on the street; they met in no ordinary way. They started running races each one on a parallel car. Finally in one of the red lights he said he would chase her forever, until she stopped. It was the first time she felt someone was at her speed. His words were convincing yet untrusting. He was very handsome and his amazingly crystalline blue eyes were impossible to ignore. But what most attracted Alaina was the fact that he promised her endless love. She became very fond of him and so opened all her locks. They were adventurous and spent a lot of time together. Both of them had similar stories, but above all, both of them needed to be loved and needed someone who cared for them. This is what they found in each other, correspondence and company. They travelled a lot together and lived moments high in fascination. They had a baby together and lived in this fantasy world as adolescents playing doll. This magic fairy story did not last long until the dark side appeared. This was the end for her. She discovered his love was being spread in several directions and decided to leave him. She left in that relationship a mountain of dreams, of illusions of beliefs she had carefully built. She left him physically, but deep down in her soul, she loved him desperately. She knew that leaving him was leaving so much more than leaving a person. "This is how emptiness feels, this is how illusions fade slowly through life. This is how I started living my life in a survival mode. This is how you forget who you are, again." She jotted hopelessly in her shaggy diary. Life for her went on and on this way, stumbling and falling from high ends.

In one of her psychiatric interventions she was asked about her birth, those questions that Freud loved and accounted for all of the conflicts between mothers and daughters. Her sessions took place in a typical psychoanalytical ambiance, lying on a chaise longue and with no-facial contact. As in those days people wouldn't talk about childhood as if it mattered and you were not considered a person until you could talk and give full explanation with proper language, she couldn't answer much of the doctor's queries. She could not dig much in her parent's home either; a home which had broken as such when she was 15 after her mother had found her father with another woman. But

instead, she found a chest full of photographs. There were so many faces she did not recognize among them. One of them was a man holding a baby. He was a very handsome man who looked very much like her father. She left it aside. She could find many pictures of herself but never in her mother's arms. She got hold of one particular picture where she was in a cot. She left it aside. She got hold of the picture of the man holding the baby and when she turned the pictures around she could see the dates written in pencil. They were very close to each other's date of birth, however one said Mexico and the other said Buenos Aires. She took these pictures with her and was determined to understand what her basic instincts were insinuating. She pocketed them quickly with her sweating hands and asked her mother about them. "Mom, what are all these pictures and why are they kept together in this place?" Her mom could not give her the answers she needed but went on repeating, "Your father cheated on me just as my father had on my mother." This was the life she was being skilled for. What did all these stories have to do with her, anyway?

Years went by facing eating disorders, drugs, nightlife, promiscuity and lots of other undesired realities that filled the moments in such a way she could go through life numbly. Those moments filled her days. She was in search; she didn't really know of what, but definitely this was not the way it should be. Life was going down the drain.

She planned a trip to Mexico alone. México was a place where she had been when being a toddler and a place where she had wanted to go back all her life, like a call. She arrived to this dreamland to meet some of her family's good old friends. She had a very weird welcoming from someone she could recognize from the photos of the past. She was almost her age, talked about her family and had many stories to tell. Alaina really did not know what the heck she was doing there but something told her she was exactly where she had to be. After some days she was inserted in drug deals, pills and furious raves again. She could feel the wind blowing on her face leaving traces of life she had been longing for. The wind spoke to her in raging sounds as if trying to speak.

Her son had stayed back at home so she had to go back. Fortunately she had her son to call on her. This son was a survivor too. He could show her some good things in life.

Things she could have never known without him. She had been taught how to love and be loved back unconditionally. She had sensed the feeling of caring. He called her attention with sweet words and asked her to be there for him. He was calm, serene and his enlightened eyes were a resemblance of everything that was right. She sometimes could listen and other many times could not. He indeed needed her to stay alive for him and usually claimed this with his gentle and soft voice: "Mummy, everything will be alright, I am here." This endured until he was old enough to leave and set his own direction and chose his own life.

She had returned from Mexico after her son's call, sold all her belongings and wanted to fly back again to continue exploring these unexpected feelings she encountered there . She had felt so alive, and felt there were so many answers to so many questions she could still attempt to go deeper inquiring. There was something in this woman she had met that made her thoughts mysteriously wonder. For the first time in her life she felt someone her age could understand her and although their accents were different they definitely spoke the same language and had a very strong connection. But for that, she should wait.

In those coming years she could barely think straight. She met a man in a very ordinary way. He was solid, a strong man, someone that makes you feel safe from everything, a rock where you shelter when it is stormy and windy all around you. That solid matter that promises you stability, that tells you he will always be there for you. He could really see through her rigid impenetrable eyes. She first thought about him as someone dull, she didn't know by then that he would *temporarily* save her. They promised themselves eternal love and got married. She had longed for this simple and ordinary life for a lifetime. Maybe she thought this was the solution to all her problems. She had ups and downs, which she calmed with medication. There were still so many unanswered equations and emptiness deep in her soul.

While living this super flat life she discovered her mother was sick, she was diagnosed with cancer. Devastated Alaina tried to get close to her, but it was a failure. They had never had a good relationship because there were so many secrets that lay between

them. She couldn't look her in the eyes and they could not have a talk without ending it with quarrels or accusing statements.

Some months after her mother was diagnosed, she was diagnosed too; the same cancer as her mom's was threatening her life in another way now. Life seemed to stand before her whenever she tried to escape from something. Things repeated, things came back to her as boomerangs. What was life trying to tell her? She had flirted and danced around death seducing it many times, but this was the closest she got. All this time with her husband had been a normal and trustworthy life. He was there for her and she felt very loved and respected. He himself had had a steady life and it showed in everyday situations and every decisions and steps they took together. They faced her treatment with stoical strength. Alaina felt there was so much more, she could not decipher why all this was happening and the message life was trying to portray. She needed to fill her life with certain stable proof that she was ok. She wanted the stone embracing her finger to resemble this "ok-ness". She wanted to have the house with the Christmas stockings filled with goodies, the labrador dog laying next to the fire and the smoke coming out of her chimney. But when all of that was fulfilled, she still felt unlucky and empty.

Going through her memories again, she remembered that the day of her wedding her father had called her. For some reason her father's need came first, again. Alaina had to move herself from the center to make room for the outer world. She was always reminded that her feelings, thoughts or events were last on the list. He said he had something important to tell her. "I am dying and I need you to know that someone can appear in my funeral claiming to be my daughter." In that precise moment, all of the puzzled pieces came together as they had never been. Millions of questions started to escape from her mouth and without control she spat her thoughts and opinions. "This is something I have dreaded, and yet always suspected." She even had an idea of who she could be.

So, one day she found out that she had a sister, and that she was alive. She decided that she had to go and meet her, like lost souls coming together at that moment. She felt sure that when she did so, she would feel comfort and get closure. But it didn't work

like that. When she found out the truth, it just left her cold. "The truth is overrated," she said to herself, noticing she had been searching all her life, she had run in circles trying to find what she was looking for and understood she could spend all her life searching for more. "No one, no ring, no house nor ornaments will make me happy until I accept who I am." How could she love someone if she couldn't find comfort in living in herself, being who she was? She needed to find her identity, find who she was and wanted to be.

After some deep thoughts she bought a ticket. She didn't really know what would happen, but she needed to go. When she arrived in Mexico it all seemed to start all over again.

"I've hit rock bottom." She found herself one day opening her eyes lying on a beach. She could not recognize why or how she had ended up there. What she knew was that her blanks were not caused by something upright. While standing in front of the ocean with a calm rhythm, the tide foams up on the shell-laden beach and the waves pounding endlessly on the old worn bay, she understood she couldn't continue her life like this. She understood that in search of answers from the past she had only placed herself far from living the present. She understood that all those years of fun, excitement and beauty were decayed and she needed to embrace this decay. She needed to leave the past behind; she needed to move on. Everything she had ever wanted and made her feel alive was peripheral. She needed to leave her life behind and embrace the spiritual life she had been avoiding. What seemed to work for her until that day, did not work now. Alaina needed to piece up her life while in it and not try to destroy it any longer. She didn't want to live in the past anymore, she wanted to live in the present. "The present has always been a stepping stone to the future for me. I have really never lived in the present," she thought to herself.

She felt out of breath, she felt tired and weighty and did not know how to restart. "I want to be free, I can't stand people that hide themselves and hide things from me anymore, people who hide behind images, people who treat others like idiots. Free of all those things that made me think they were essential and life changing. I don't know who I am,

and I don't know who I have become, I try to look back at who I was making those early trails and I don't recognize myself anymore.”

She started walking lamely to the rock where she used to sit, after her long nights, to admire the amazing colors of the sky and the sea when they met on the horizon becoming one. This rock where she sat to contemplate the falling of the day and the arising of the new day embedding new opportunities. She started walking to the edge of the cliff, she spread her arms wide as a newborn bird fluttering her wings, needing to start to fly. With what seemed her last breath and with a deep sigh she shouted to herself, “In this fucking world we are all fighting the expectations we had when we were younger. We imagine we will build a huge tower of light, sensations and ecstasy but life is the exact opposite of that. But what I *do* realize is that all that really matters is the journey you have been on, everything you have been through. You have to live your life full on until you have run out of breath, whatever the consequences. You don't realize just yet that your journey is only just beginning.”

"The Groceries"

Agustina Torres Tejerizo



The moment that I stepped outside, the beaming sun hit my face. It was a strange sensation which was hard to recognize at first. I had not felt it for months. The outside world terrified me. Anything you touched, someone who stood a little bit too close to you, even the smallest, most insignificant thing could get you sick and you could die.

Fear doesn't even start describing my feelings towards this deadly disease. I had always been scared of germs and bacteria, but this virus was different. Every time I turned on the television, I listened to the radio, I went into Facebook, Instagram or any social media, they were always filled with terrible news only affirming my worst suspicions: the outside world was deadly. The only secure place was the inside of my cauterized home.

Going to the supermarket was a burden that I hadn't needed until that day. The Internet had saved my life and saved me from those eternal, infectious queues. All I had to do was use my computer and the groceries would magically appear at the door soon afterwards. Thankfully, I always sanitized my groceries and I was trained in this special art of disinfecting. Alcohol and bleach were stable elements at my house.

But I had to do my groceries. I was running out of food and the trusty delivery system that I had always used had been unavailable for days. The website was down and I could not think about any solution other than finally going out for the first time since March. Only thinking about it gave me a crippling sense of anxiety that neither my mind nor my body could handle or control.

I had been planning this journey for days. My clothes had been washed and separated. My shoes were sterilized to perfection. The bags, my purse and wallet, the mask, the hand sanitizer, the alcohol, everything was ready at the door. I was ready for battle. Stepping outside of my cauterized house was even more difficult than what I had imagined. Everywhere I looked, there was a potential threat. The ground, the buildings, the people. Everywhere and everyone could spread the virus and get you sick in a

matter of seconds. The chirping birds, the cars moving around me, the people who were outside. It was too much to take in.

I had walked less than a block when I suddenly stumbled upon someone. A lady was staring at me in awe. It took me a minute to realise who she was: an old high school classmate. We were never really close, so I didn't know why she was looking at me like that. Before I could turn away and escape, Susi shrieked in delight, "Oh my God! Claudia! It's you! What a coincidence, am I right?" Her long blond hair was still the same as ever. Her heavy makeup did not leave a trace of her natural, once beautiful face. She had a tight animal print dress and neon pink heels. I wondered how she could breathe in that.

"Hi. Yes. I'm going to the supermarket" I mumbled staring at the floor, too stressed to even breathe. She was just too close to me. When I was able to look up I realized she wasn't wearing a mask! No protection at all. I couldn't believe it. I was in utter surprise and I immediately turned around, decided to go anywhere but there.

"Wait! Where are you going? We haven't seen each other for ages! We need to catch up. What's up with your life?" Before I could answer back she went on rambling about her life and thousand more things that I did not follow. I just stood there in silence, frozen. Measuring her close distance to me. She was too close.

She just went on babbling without even caring if she was being heard. I took tiny steps backwards while she was chattering about incomprehensible things. But before I could get away from her, I felt something grabbing my arm tightly. I tried to escape from it but the force seizing me was stronger than me. "Let's get something to eat!" Susi exclaimed. I just stared at her in complete disbelief. Was this woman serious? Was she not aware that she was a complete threat to me? Didn't she know that every minute we spent outside we could get sick and die?

"We can't," I stammered. I didn't even care about the groceries at this point. I just wanted to escape from the situation and all of the disgusting germs that were inside of her. But the moment I turned around I heard her whisper, "Stop. Please. Don't leave me. I'm so lonely..." Glancing at her I saw her face asking for sympathy. "I'm sick and no one wants to be around me," Susi mumbled, her eyes filling with water.

"Sick how?" I asked, fearing the answer she was about to give me.

“I have it. The thing that you are thinking about. Covid. My test got positive and no one wants to be with me. But I feel great. I don’t have any of the symptoms!” She said casually and kept on chattering about how she didn’t feel like staying in her house. It was at that moment that my head started spinning. She was sick and touching me. Sick and invading my personal space. Sick and outside. The tears fell from my eyes without any restriction and my legs trembled. Without thinking my body started running towards my house. I needed to disinfect every inch of my body and clothes. Why had I gone outside?

"Curtain Call"
Agostina Trimboli



She bowed as the curtain fell. The rough red velvet caressed the wooden stage and the fervid cheers of an excited audience drowned in the heavy fabric that wiped out the coloured lights. She melted into the shades in a deep sigh and crawled through the narrow corridor back to reality.

Exhausted and still out of breath, she threw her padded body on the unstable chair in her dressing room. Sweat had not smudged the heavy layers of ebony concealer and nor would her tears, although droplets would camouflage perfectly among the glitter sparkles on her cheeks as soon as they parted from her eyes. She bent over to free her swollen feet from the heavy own-hand-rhinestoned high heels. She could feel every heartbeat on her toes and she knew it was a pleasure and a privilege to feel that kind of pain. She choked the metallic rattling of her earrings, and left the stone pieces on the dressing table, right next to the calendar she pretended to ignore. She reached for the back of her blinding sequin gown. It was the hardest suit to get out of, maybe because she felt like a million bucks in it, an opulence she had never experienced before.

She faced the stained mirror, but her eyes were drawn to the old pictures she thought she needed to keep with her. Family. Her eyes now posed on her mother, more precisely, on her mother's dress. She could suddenly feel the burning and itching on her butt-cheeks from the belt whips she had once received, when she was surprised playing a recently crowned Miss Arkansas, walking down the stairs waving at the crowd in that satin gown, with ruffles over her shoulders. She wondered if she had been scolded for sneaking into her mother's wardrobe without permission or if they were just mad that the dress looked better on her than it had ever looked on her mother.

"Y'll right, Crystal?" She heard her dressing room partner's voice and felt her cold hand on her shoulder. She struggled for a smile.

“Sure! Guess I'm just tired,” she answered.

“If ya say so,” her partner replied in disbelief. “Just need to borrow some feathers, ya mind? Think my number needs a lil’ something extra.”

“Not even a flock of peacocks can make that number look decent!” She snapped playfully.

“You shady biatch!” The girl bursted out a horse-laugh and pulled the black boa off the wall hanger. The feathers tickled Crystal’s nose and a giggle escaped her lips. “Thanks sis’!”

Family. Sisters, friends. Those girls performing with her every night, the glamorous, talented divas she once admired, masters of pretense, had become the closest to a loving family she had ever known. They had welcomed her without even asking who she was and where she came from. She was glad they had not asked; she would not have known the answer. They were a safe destination to her tough journey from a small town to her big dreams. Dreams that were indeed too wide and wild for such a tiny narrow town that would never understand her art, her life, herself.

She stared at the phone on the boudoir. She had to learn to dial with plastic press-on nails which were now acrylic glittery claws, both admired and frowned upon. A hopeless tone. No answer. She wished to hear a voice on the other side possibly as hard as she was glad to hear none. She knew she had been a heavy burden for her old folks. She had felt their shame suffocating her heart. She could bear stares and back turns from anyone; she had become pretty used to them. However, *their* stare would pierce through her thick skin and pulverize any trace of self-confidence left in her and *their* backs stabbed her very own soul. The memory of her father’s disdain was a hollowed scar, she had always thought he, out of everyone, would understand someone who was different. But now it was too late to make amends.

The stage manager’s knock on the door, five-minute warning—it was time for the second show.

She took her powder and her swan, and stared into the mirror again. She saw a ghetto teenager sneaking through her mother's makeup, desperately trying to cover a black eye. A segregation punch on the face. The phone rang and next, the heartrending yell of a broken life. The news of a peaceful cry for equality muzzled by shotguns. She rushed downstairs. A deafening snivel flooded the house and as her mother squeezed her, she knew that there would be no more belt whipping, ever again.

"Gurl, y'totally beat that face!" Same voice, same girl. Amazed at how radically different the meaning of that seemed now, she thanked her for the compliment. "And I'm not buyin' that I'm-okay line. C'mere!" She added as she grabbed her arm gently pulling her out of her chair and held her body tight against hers. "I'm here for you."

Onstage she felt alive once again. As she was serving African princess realness, she could still feel the embrace. Toasts every New Year's Eve, candles on birthday cakes and shoulders to cry on, she did have a family after all. A new family that had watched her grow and had taught her everything she needed to know and more. Purple bruised knees had paved the way for hypnotic twirling and leaping on six inches heels, but after each fall, one of her sisters' hands would lift her back up. Thanks to loving patience her once bloody fingers could now craft a Valentino right for Fashion Week's runway. She lit up the crowd on each beat. Every step fiercer than the one before.

She dashed backstage for her last costume change. She slipped her feet into her size 13 ruby heels, she felt at home. Wig on, smile on. It struck her as lightning —She did not have to be lonely, sad Michael anymore. She was Crystal. The crowd loved Crystal. *She* loved Crystal. She remembered the words she had learned the hard way: 'if you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?' She secured her tuck and stroke a pose as she waited for her glorious curtain call. Deafened by her audience, blinded by the spotlights, alive with love. She bowed as the curtain fell.

"Spring Awareness"

Victoria Vidiri



The gentle morning breeze led its way inside through the bedroom window together with the first beams of the rising sun. Linda could sense the spring awakening and its exquisite floral perfume, outside the cherry blossoms were ready to bloom and the backyard was becoming as green as an emerald. She loved that time of the year. She had lately got used to being an early bird and having trouble sleeping at night, considering her "current condition". Sam, on the other hand, was still snoring by her side, so she was waiting till the last minute to wake him up. She kept on breathing as she had been told, in and out; it helped her relax and feel better every time she noticed one was getting closer. After some time, she couldn't resist it anymore; she slowly got out of bed, grabbed some old baggy jeans and a loose white shirt and waddled to the bathroom.

"It's time, Sam," she cried while scrutinizing her plump figure in the mirror.

She later found herself uncomfortably and painfully sitting alone in a large hospital reception room, Sam was outside trying to park the car. A blend of anxiety, nervousness and fear ran through her entire body and made her shiver. She noticed a pretty young woman sitting at the other side of the room tenderly caressing her round tummy; she seemed to be glowing with joy and plenitude. She was wearing a delicate plain white cotton shift dress, which barely witnessed her pregnancy, and her glossy hair was tidily tied up high in a ponytail. She looked like a calm and composed mommy-to-be, not a scared and cramped one like her. Watching this woman made Linda feel worse, she was neither glowing nor enjoying the moment. She moved her head back and rested for a minute trying to focus again on the breathing techniques, when suddenly the woman broke the silence between them. "I'm Dolores," she said. "Is it your first?"

“Yes,” she answered blushing. “I`m Linda. Is it your first too?”

The woman hesitated slightly before nodding doubtfully with her head. She asked quickly, changing the subject, “Did you have a nice pregnancy?”

“Oh god, no! I felt like hell all way through,” Linda moaned. “Did you?”

“I actually did!” She replied proudly.

Of course she did! Linda thought with annoyance.

They were interrupted by Dolores’ handsome husband`s sudden arrival. She smiled at him as he gently kissed her on the forehead and accompanied her inside to the maternity ward. Shortly after that, Sam also made his appearance carrying all of Linda`s new maternity collection of items. He looked funny and silly in his old red pants and his tangled brown hair. They entered the maternity ward as well.

Giving birth to a child wasn't a piece of cake, in fact, it took Linda several painful and never-ending hours to accomplish it. She had not even started pushing her baby out- and was already short of breath- when she saw Dolores and her newborn on a stretcher being happily carried away from the delivery room. She couldn't believe her eyes. Perfect! She thought full of anger.

Back in the room, exhausted and quite emotional, Linda couldn't keep herself from feeling angry and envious. Not only was Dolores the embodiment of womanly perfection during pregnancy, not only was her husband sweet and good-looking, but also she was a living goddess in delivering babies for the first time. She wept silent tears while Sam snored on the small sofa next to her bed with the baby cuddled up on his chest. Rose, the nurse, came in and found her sobbing on the bed. She quickly wiped her tears away from her face.

“Are you ok, dear?” She asked nicely. “Do you need anything?”

“I`m fine. I just feel ugly, fat and tired and this woman Dolores is sooo...so I don't know, so perfect and fresh and everything is easy for her,” she moaned staring at Rose with

shame. "I'm sorry, you must think I'm crazy! Just a stupid thought, ignore me," she laughed with a contrite expression on her face.

"Oh, honey! I don't think that! You have just given birth, it's completely normal to be emotionally affected by everything," Rose said trying to comfort her. "Tell me, who is this Dolores person that you are so concerned about?"

"Just a radiant woman with child I met here this morning. She apparently was in no pain at all, had a lovely pregnancy and delivered her baby in the blink of an eye."

"Oh, you mean young Dolores!! She is a few doors down the hall. Sweetheart, the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," she said kindly. "We all know her very well around here and her latest experiences have not been perfect at all. This is her fourth time in this facility. A couple of years ago she arrived in labour and her baby was unfortunately born dead. She had already suffered two previous miscarriages, so you can imagine that poor lady's sorrow. Luckily today, after a scheduled C-section she has welcomed a precious baby girl safe and sound," she announced. "You see, you can't judge a book by its cover."

Speechless, Linda felt stupid and ashamed.

"Now, you better get some rest 'cause that cute little bundle of joy over there will be hungry and awake and in need of his mummy any time soon," she said tenderly tucking her into bed.

"Thank you, Rose," she said with a penitent smile.

The next morning, she woke up in high spirits and in a buoyant mood. A nurse came and took the baby for his early check-up and Sam had gone to their home to feed the dog, so she decided to go for a short walk around the maternity floor; maybe spy on the nursery or peer at the baby names hanging from the bedroom doors. She was wearing the *Marin Racerback* maternity nursing nightgown and robe set her sister had chosen for her while they were shopping for the baby the week before, thus she couldn't go very far from her room. She finally decided to stop and sit in a cosy little sitting room around

the hall, where there were two comfortable sofas next to a large polished picture window viewing the lush green park in front of the hospital. She found Dolores` husband standing in front of the ample window facing outside. He was tall, slim and practically flawless. She couldn't help saying, "Congratulations on your newborn! Are Dolores and the baby alright?"

He turned around in surprise and gave her a pleasant smile before replying, "Oh, I'm not the father, just the uncle! Luckily, they are both perfectly fine! Thanks for asking."

That's a surprise! She thought, wordless.

"Oh, forgive me," Linda said nervously, "I thought you were her husband."

"No, that bastard`s not around," he muttered unexpectedly as he began making his way back to Dolores` room.

She was unable to speak, again. She sat there for a while and then returned to her room feeling guilty and embarrassed. The nurse came back with her baby and she cuddled him softly and tenderly and thankfully. She was blessed.

"Looking both good and healthy," the nurse said with a kind smile.

Sam arrived a few minutes later wearing that silly old t-shirt he always liked to wear and a 3-day stubble. She kissed him on the forehead and ruffled his already messy hair. "Let's go home!" She exclaimed with enthusiasm.

It was a wonderful crisp spring morning outside the hospital, Linda was waiting for Sam that had gone to look for the car, when something caught her attention across the street. It was Dolores. She was holding her baby with joy, looking gorgeous and stylish in an effortless pink maxi dress. Suddenly, she turned around instinctively and they both shared a secret silent smile from the distance. The air was filled with the scent of roses. Spring was in the air and that awareness made Linda feel blithe and hopeful.

