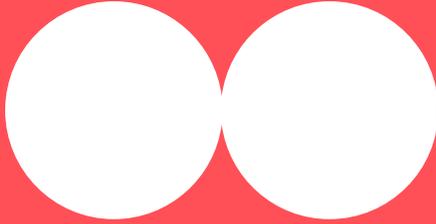


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personal essays

Chapter 1: Russia xoxo

I was born in Smolensk, Russia. I'm an orphan who barely remembers my life there. I'm aware my mother abandoned me, she was a pathetic excuse for a human being. Alcohol was her poison and wandering this cold dark country alone was her life sentence. I don't wish bad upon my birth mother but a part of me wants her to suffer. If I ever did seek her out I would be at a loss for words. I wouldn't know what to say or even be able to manage kind words. The scar she left inside of me is permanent. Her absence in my life at the beginning made me who I am today. I truly believe that she made me rough around the edges like rust on a 1960 Chevy not refurbished. A black hole fills my lungs. Leaves me to suffocate on the emptiness I feel sometimes in this vast city called home. Home is intangible. I never really had one. Trying to survive is what's important. I guess its fall in the city I love and hate. The earth hibernates for the cold to come, which washes us of our sins of the hot summers part. I remember when I was younger till middle school life was simple. Simplicity is a wonderful thing only because I could do whatever I wanted and never get in trouble. Nan Goldin once said, "I used to think that I could never lose anyone if I photographed them enough. In fact, my pictures show me how much I've lost." The reason why taking photos is important because it reminds me of what I have and don't. Every photograph is made and a piece of me goes into the image. Trying to understand light in relationship to photography may have sent me down a rabbit hole, but this is what I have been thinking about. The word photography means, from the Greek, "Drawing with Light." I make no claims on understanding light and color. It seems to me the more I know, the more questions I have. This is how life is viewed by myself. My entire life is surrounded by drawing with light, light in relationships I have with others.

Being a kid was wonderful. I would swing to the heavens in my back yard. When family came over I received gifts and constant praise for being such a good

little girl. Mom and dad would always be sweet to me like fresh honey on a summer morning. There was always a routine when I was a child. Dad would take me to preschool with a packed lunch, usually the lunch ended up on me though because finger food was a concept I hadn't grasped yet. Lunch consisted on carrots, salty goldfish, and steak to roasted pork loin. My father is considered an excellent chef and mother as well. They aren't chefs but artists and business people. Basically lunch was the best time and everyone was jealous. Kids wanted to trade me and I would simply say "No". I'm not a brat but my parents made my lunches with love. The best part was when there was a sweet treat hidden in the bag. Back then it was Spice Girl lollipops that I started to collect. Each one had a hidden sticker. I loved stickers, from Power Rangers to Spiderman. I would consider myself with a taste for boy and girls toys. Don't get me wrong, action figures are amazing but when you added Barbie to the equation it was even better. My imagination was and still is vast to this day.

My imagination was so vast that I would listen to my Discman on my swing set at our other home and imagine Pokémon that I owned. I spent hours on those swings. I could have written a book at the age of 6 if I were able. Pokémon and Digimon were my favorite shows back then. The swing set we had was by my secret garden my mother created for me. I considered myself a lucky kid because I was fortunate to have so many things. At times though I would get bored and want to move onto the next thing but my swings never made me bored. The idea of swinging as high as I could and jumping off was thrilling. The wind playing with my hair and the smile that grew on my face like sunflowers budding to a summer morning. It continued to grow and grow. I just remember those being the good ole days because everything was all right. Being a kid is beautiful and we are filled with innocence and purity. A conversation I had with my grandparents once on the swings on a weekend they came down to visit was something I'll never forget.

"Grandma and Grandpa, do you want me to tell a story about the Power Rangers?"

Grandpa said, "Sure thing. Tell us."

He's holding his martini glass swishing the vodka around. Grandma's eyes are lit up as she watches me laugh and swing away. Grandma speaks, "Why, what is this lovely story, Lana, that you have to tell us?"

I begin my story with laughs here and there. I stop my swinging for a second to get my footing.

"The Power Rangers are on the beach right now. Their greatest enemy is trying to destroy our house and they are protecting us. My favorite one is the gold ranger but he only comes out when really, really bad trouble is stirring. The rangers fight so hard and get all their machine animals together to stop the evil..."

I trail into the end of my story and my grandparents laugh with me. They always told me I had a great imagination. See, these are the moments I lived for: the summer days of ocean breezes and golden hour sunsets. My parents shore house is a place that all of the family members come together and express our love for each other. Family is very important to me. If I didn't have this family I wouldn't know what to do. Back in Russia family has a different meaning. The parallels of my two worlds will never come together until now.

My name is Svetlana Blasucci. Or maybe it's Svetlana Ivanov. I'm not entirely sure. My identity is my own but I'm not always sure of whom I am. I know I'm Russian by blood and American because I was adopted. Things go by so fast. It feels like it was yesterday that I was running out of the orphanage and into my mother's arms. My mom used to tell me how I hated to be put down. If I wasn't held a scream would form in my throat until hands picked me up. It was comforting. I finally had someone to love me and cherish me. My dad always called me "Princess." I was a princess. I never was told no because I was a good kid until I went to high school.

I am thankful for who I have in my life. I wouldn't be the person I am today. The struggles of being adopted and never feeling like I belong has haunted me. What happened in Russia and why can't I remember. I force myself and punish my mind with thoughts of regret. I

regret not doing this soon. I regret not being able to create who I am based off facts I've wanted years ago. Being adopted, what does that mean? Why was I left alone for so long? How does a mother leave a child when they haven't even spoken their first words or seen them take their first steps? I never had that, a first word or a first birthday party. No one gave me that; I am envious when people have those. I want those things. I want a redo.

Mary Lou Floyd, my mother, is a lovely nourishing woman. She's talented and extremely intelligent. She is a wonderful mother. She wanted to adopt a child because she couldn't have her own. Her and my father contacted MAPs, an adoption agency that has a special relationship with Russia. They sent my mother a picture of me and she felt nothing looking at the single photograph. She couldn't feel a connection. My father instantly fell in love with me and wanted me in their lives. My mother wanted something else to make sure she wasn't making a mistake with this child. She called Zoya, who took me under her wing while in the orphanage, and asked her to explain what she thinks of the little girl Svetlana. Zoya tells my mother about my imagination and how I can play with my dolls and create this entire story with just these plastic dolls. These dolls mean everything to me. It's everything I have and I ever wanted. My mother felt so much love for me realizing I was this gifted child with an imagination that brought me to becoming a photographer. All she needed was a few words to change her mind and open her heart to the idea of me being her child. I am what keeps my parents together. I hope I am just like them when I grow up because they have always given me unconditional love.

My birth mother was a disappointment to my siblings and myself recently. A report was written and revealed this: "All the household effects of any value however little had been sold or exchanged for alcohol. The house was absolutely cheerless and bare There had been drunken fights and parties and on one occasion she had tried to hang Yuri and then she enlisted the help of drunken friends to beat him. On 15/04/1992 Valentina was found and taken to the police station and later wrote

a note relinquishing her children. After that no one saw her again. In that situation, the bio father also wrote a relinquishment document too. There was no doubt that prior to the children being taken into the orphanage they suffered quite serious deprivations and neglect." I skipped the neglect but I left my family behind. I had no choice because it was for the best.

They said when I was a small infant I had a lot of issues. Who is they? We don't quite know but I know for a fact that some of the report is a lie. I don't like to believe things that make me uncomfortable. The past is only a reason for the present. My relationships with people have been struggles over the years and now I can blame my family in Russia for that. Being bitter isn't exactly the word I would use but the lack of love and comfort 🍷

Eric, We lay on our backs, there amidst the rich sea of purple blankets that made up my bed; our feet clad in overly fuzzy socks, as we pressed them flat against the wall. We watched the fan lazily slice through dust that was floating gently in the fading autumn light.

Through the speakers, a male voice whined softly in the background, singing about woes that were far worse than my own. The singer had a grating tone, kind of annoying, but somehow also comforting.

"It's sad music," my friend Lynn had whispered solemnly into my ear before bursting like a pipe into laughter that spurted all over the room.

Strands of her buttery hair found their way into my mouth as she rolled over, trying to muffle her giggling in the lavender sheets. "Imightbealittle drunk" she said breathily, recovering from her fit at last.

Turning her face in my direction, Lynn squinted hard in an attempt to read my mind. "You have one minute to spill your guts...like you did the wine! Or I'm going to tickle you" she proclaimed at last.

Her concern would have been touching, if only I had wanted to talk. At 21 1/2, there had still been something more thrilling, comforting, about downing \$15 bottles of red wine that tasted faintly of chocolate at four in the afternoon; it was much better than verbalizing each painstaking detail of my life that had not turned out quite as I planned.

Eric and I had met when I was 14, he was three years my senior. After dating for a year, we broke up, due to pressure from our parents when he turned 18. We shared long video chats while he was at college, not quite in a long distance relationship, yet neither of us seeing other people.

Deciding my time was up, long, slender fingers began to wiggle and inch worm themselves across the comforter in my direction.

"You know that Eric and I have known each other for seven years now." I said while nudging her spidery hands away. Inhaling deeply, I tried to buy a few extra

second, and as the album playing came to an end a thunderous white noise filled the room.

I couldn't help but think of the night about three and a half years ago, when he came back....



The taillights faded like dying embers against the black of the night. He stepped out of the car, back towards the street, his outline sketched by the dim lights from the dashboard. The winds from earlier had died down, leaving the night crisp, but not bitter.

Although it was February, the end of a vicious winter, he stood there in the dark wearing jeans and a hoodie, either unaware of the temperature or merely uncaring. From inside each house lining the street, lights sporadically flickered off, replaced instead by the tungsten glow of televisions as husbands slung themselves down on couches, and wives put their children to bed.

Nothing surprised me more than finding out that he had eagerly packed bags to come see me. When my jokingly given invitation was accepted, I pictured him darting through traffic, desperately trying to match the speedometer to the thoughts rushing through his veins. Tha-thump, tha-thump, tha-thump.

Living in Fairhaven was suffocating, as you swallowed fragments of long ago promises and foolish dreams with each breath of air. It was no wonder Eric left. In the time he'd been at college, we'd seen each other a little more than a handful of times. I didn't blame him for trying to escape the small-town suburbs. There were too many ghosts to avoid, not enough reasons to come back.

Rolling down the window, I called out his name. He turned around grinning, not quite expecting to see me, yet nonetheless pleased. I told him that I was dropping a textbook off at my friend's house down the road, and he told me to hurry back.

I rushed down the street leaving behind any doubts I had about his feelings. Maybe we would never be anything, but even so, I was going to cherish every minute I had with him. Anxiously I paced the wooden floors of my friend's room, a wind-up toy that had been given a few too many twists. She shoved me into her bathroom unceremoniously to fresh up, as she called my parents to ask if I could sleep over. Before I left, she tugged off my shirt and made me change

into a candy red bra of hers. The simple explanation was: It's for good luck. I was too scared to ask what I needed luck for.

Back at his house, Eric and I aimlessly talked while watched a movie. A second one started, and before long we were fast asleep on a soft beige couch. When the sun began to peak through the curtains, he woke me before his parents would realize what had happened.

I may have been 18 at that point, but they still weren't necessarily on board with me yet. He suggested that we grab breakfast at an old fashion diner before parting ways.

Over the aroma of chocolate-chip pancakes and stale coffee, he gave me a belated birthday present. "Sorry it's late," he mumbled, "I meant to send it in the mail, but I couldn't find a card that I like."

The neon lights from the sign outside cast reddish orange glow on the cream colored envelope. I quickly discard the generic birthday greeting, and curiously reached into the envelope once more. It was a ticket for a show to see our favorite band, three months from now.

I stuttered a thank you, uncertain of what it all meant. He reassured me that he already had one, and we would go together. Tha-thump, tha-thump, tha-thump. It was my turn to catch my breath, shell-shocked that he and I would be seeing the very band that first brought us together. Know that I had never seen them play live before; he unintentionally gave me such a loaded present.

"I don't know what to say. I mean. I can't thank you enough." I said slowly, eagerly trying to stretch the moments before we each got into our cars and went our separate ways.

I didn't know if I would see him again before he left for school tomorrow, but my heart felt light as I realized our paths would definitely intersect again soon. The following night around ten, my phone screen lit up with three words. Eric: I'm outside. Coming through the front door he simply stated, "I couldn't leave without saying

goodbye to you." We stood in my kitchen talking aimlessly for a bit, as the television wavered between various infomercials.

It was an unglamorous farewell, but it was all I would get. If he didn't leave soon for Long Island, it would be well after 1:00 am by time he arrived. It was his final semester of college, and he had class first thing the next day.

The wind had grown harsh, biting my cheeks, as I stood outside in my pajamas watching his taillights disappear up the street. When my eyes started to blur like foggy window, I cursed the winter air, blaming it for my tears. Opening the front door, I didn't hear the sound of a car come around the block, and stop idling in front of my house.

It wasn't until Eric grabbed my arm, and turned me around that I noticed he'd returned. Teeth chattering from the cold, he pulled me closer and held me there. Opening my mouth, I weakly questioned, "What—"

"Look," he interrupted determinedly, "I know it's going to be really difficult. I have commitment issues, and you're going to be starting college. But can't we just try again? Can't we just try?" Then I was kissing him.

A wonderful year of video calls, angry accusations of not being around enough, pressure of school and missing one another ensued. I emailed him daily.



E,

February 9, 2011: I don't think anyone is ever going to understand this, but I also think they don't have to.

February 18: It's been one of those nights. Times like these, I question why I'm still in Jersey? Why don't I just get in my car and go?

March 16: People always say what a nice person I am, but deep down I'm an insecure bitch. Yet somehow you still find the good in me.

March 21: I don't know how you do it, but you make me feel beautiful. It's because of you that I haven't, and hopefully will never relapse into my eating disorder. Since 2008 you have been doing

everything in your power to help me, but as of now, I know for sure that I'm finally free. I am eternally grateful for what you've done.

April 4: I need these trivial last few months before college to be over. When I'm at SVA, I'll have my work cut out for me. I feel as if I'm already falling behind. My portfolio isn't that great, I'm not taking any summer intensive classes. Hell, I don't even know how to develop my own film. Passion and sheer dumb luck have gotten me this far, but it's not going to be enough.

April 24: You have faith in me when it feels like no one else does.

May 16: It seems like you're the first person who's ever really wanted to see me happy, and was willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish that. I think you're the first person to see all the little broken, ugly pieces of me and find something special in that.

May 31: The problem is once you have all these thoughts floating around in your head; you can't seem to escape them.

June 13: Sometimes I just get scared. Scared that I'm going to get to college and they're going to tell me it was all a mistake.

June 28: If you had the chance to go to college somewhere far away, but you wouldn't be able to come home until you were finished, would you do it? Would you leave everything you know behind? I just don't know. I'm not me without you.

July 8: Distance can't ruin what we have. I won't let it.

August 20: You say I'm the most amazing person you've ever met. One day I hope to understand everything you see in me.

September 21: I am so content with life because I decently edited a bunch of clips into a video. This is just really rewarding, like the first time I developed my film. I just feel like I can actually do this. I feel like I have potential.

October 6: I mean seriously, how many times have I almost given up on this art school thing? I've felt

so lost and confused here. I've felt flat out stupid here. But I'm slowly finding my way.

November 11: "Here's to all the places we went. And all the places we'll go. And here's to me, whispering again and again and again and again: iloveyou" - John Green, *An Abundance of Katherines*.

November 26: It's 11:11, I just told you to make a wish. I closed my eyes to wish like I normally do... but I couldn't think of anything to wish for. I'm so happy right now, I have everything I could want.

December 3: I had a "good" day, I guess. I saw my friends. I walked around the city. I got fresh air. I did a lot of work on my photo homework. Yet, I feel like shit. I feel sad and empty. I want to cry. Why do I feel like this? I don't understand.

December 20: I know that these feelings of inadequacy I have will pass. I know that you think I am smart, and talented. I will try to remind myself of those things. I will desperately try to believe those things. I promise I will try.

January 7 2012: You told me that once I graduate college, you know that I'll make it all work somehow. You said I am so motivated that I will find a way to be a successful photographer. I know that my dreams are ambitious. I know that photography is a competitive field. I know that you have to fight for what you want—but I'm so scared of failing. I'm almost too scared to try.

January 27 2012: I keep reminding myself of my tattoo. The only words I know that might help me. John Green was right. "We need never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken."

And finally on our one year anniversary:

E,

1 year. 12 months. 52 weeks. 365 days. 8,760 hours. 525,600 minutes. 31,536,000 seconds. However you choose to think about it, it's been one hell of a year.

Where did the time go? Wasn't it yesterday we were celebrating our six month anniversary? Wasn't it not too long ago that you were asking me out?

I must have blinked a few times, because here we are. Someplace that 366 days ago, I never could have imagined that we'd be.

I can't even write this without tearing up. Baby, we've made it so far. It wasn't always easy, but it was always exactly where I wanted to be, with exactly the person I wanted to be with. You.

I know that you're the one person I want by my side for the rest of my life. I've known that since the day that I met you.

I've known since I was a tiny little freshman afraid to even speak to a boy, let alone a senior; all the way to 365 days ago—when I was a slightly more grown-up senior, asking the boy she loved to come back.

I never thought you were going to come back. But you did. Literally, you drove back to my house—but figuratively speaking as well.

And now, a year later, here we are.

I have had a crazy year with my parents, and school. With just the pains of being a 19-year-old girl, going to college. I've worried about what your parents thought of me. I've worried about sex and all the things the come with it.

We've had a lot of firsts, many seconds, and an infinite number of thirds.

I've learned to have a little more confidence, and to ask all my questions. I've spoken up when I needed to. I made mistakes. I had anxiety attacks. I got over it. I've changed as a person, maybe not for the better, but there's no going back.

And I don't know how I possibly could have made it through this year without you.

The thing is, you move me. You move me to do great things, to think great thoughts. You move me to be the best person that I can be, and I'm not sure you realize it all the time.

I'm not me, without you.

The Kayla that you love is not the Kayla that I would be without you. You are sometimes literally the only person who believes in me, because a lot of the time I don't.

You are my heart, and my strength. You are my polar opposite, and you complete me.

You are the wake-up call I need when I'm being a child, the slap in the face when I'm being a brat, the one who picks me back up, the one who cheers me on, the one who isn't afraid to yell at or disagree with me, but also the one who isn't afraid to love me for everything I am.

You are my best friend, and my boyfriend. My past, present, and future everything.

You have made the past year, hands down, the best year of my entire life. I cannot even begin to imagine what it would have been like without you, and I'm so glad I'll never have to spend another year alone.

One year has gone so quickly, you said so yourself. Before you know it, I'll be graduating college and then....

- K

The sound of music starting again by itself pulls me from the memory, and I realize uneventfully that Lynn had fallen asleep. As I attempt to fall asleep myself, one last memory returns to me. It was around last Christmas, his sister made a uncouth comment implying that we wouldn't last. Pulling me under his chin, he whispered, "I can't wait to make you my wife, one day soon," Eric promised he would.

Dozing off it occurs to me that I was being anxious for no reason. Sure people were constantly questioning when he and I would get married, but we had a pact. A plan. Eric is my blood. The family I choose to have in my heart, not the one bestowed on me from birth. Memory is far more fragile than the web of a spider, twisting effortlessly in the wind. It evades us at the most inconvenient times. Humans grow arrogant, and prideful. They grow old. People forget, that the blood of the covenant is much stronger than the water of the womb ☹️

It was clear after an hour that I wasn't going to win this war. There were rules and I was the only one who didn't know them; every move I made was an indiscretion that needed to be corrected. Things like me trying to wipe out multiple enemies with one move or even better, when I used the action figure of my choice to go over to his side to attack, he ruled the character dead. Apparently they had to walk down, not be carried as if they were flying; such logic failed to reach me. There were also other things here and there, that I just couldn't get right. Limiting my child imagination was the goal, I'm assuming so that he could win, another way of forcing me to give him what he wanted. Out of frustration, the joy I felt at the beginning our game had been extinguished and after childishy voicing my anger, my father lost the small amount of patience he had. His actions were equally as childish, but the feeling as if I had ruined everything was very present. The game was over, you'd think as an adult getting into fights with children was beneath him but clearly it was not. He yelled that if I was going to act that way he wasn't going to play anymore and walked out of the living room slamming the door to his bedroom shut. In my embarrassment I begged him to come back and that I'll be better but there was no one to answer. I was left alone again, blaming myself for his short temper and I looked around at the plastic carnage left behind from our war. Who was the real winner in this? The guilt that weighed down in my chest answered my question and I got up to start cleaning the mess we made together, by myself. Only the whirring of the giant fan could be heard as it blew the humidity back in my face and my sweaty hands, one by one picked up the casualties. He left again that night and I waited for as long as I could in the living room in hopes that I could see him come home. After my grandparents dragged me off to bed I laid listening just to make sure and while I drifted off into unconsciousness, I never heard a click at the door.

Before college I went to my dad's house every other weekend. My parents separated when I was three years old. If there was any kind of affection between them

I've long forgotten about it. I can't even picture the two of them being in the same room, during my high school graduation while I was donning my cap and gown, which felt too big. Nervously clutching a rose, I got onto the tips of my toes to look past my taller classmates into the crowd. When I finally spotted my family, my mom and dad were sitting right next to each other but they sat facing directly away from each other. It was such a surreal experience and even watching them from a whole stage away made me uncomfortable. Whenever I recall that memory I have to think about it for a while. I keep telling myself that it didn't really happen. Even though I told people I was going to my dad's "house" it was actually my grandparent's two-bedroom apartment on Old Mamaroneck Road. My dad just showed up whenever, mostly whenever I was there. The people who actually raised me were my grandparents, that also included my grandmother and step-grandfather on my mothers side.

On Sunday my grandfather would drive me back to my home, my actual home. Driving up the small hill lined with houses on both sides, at the top of Robbins Avenue is a small three-story house with a huge backyard. It's beige exterior complements its pretty white porch and the sandy colored walkway is lined with small bushes, when I knock on the big green door my mom opens and my grandmothers cooking wafts out of the house and in the warmth of the moment my mom gives me a kiss on my cheek. I walk into the house and my grandfather asks my mom how shes been and soon he waves bye and his car backs out of the driveway and zooms down the hill. As she closes the door I see the look on her face as she turn towards me, the look of irritation is present on her pale visage and she lets out an exasperated sigh as I hear her heavy footsteps climbing stairs. The door slams. I sit on the couch for a few minutes collecting myself and I walk into the kitchen to find my grandmother angrily stirring a saucepan full of beef stew. It smells amazing and I realize how hungry I am and I give her a kiss on the cheek, I'm eyeing the food the entire time. Asking her whats wrong, she tells me it's nothing, clearly that's a lie but I nod and collect my bags and go to my room. Trudging up the stairs with two bags thrown over my shoulder as if I'm hiking up a mountain, after two flights of stairs I reach my bed in the attic and across the room I see the pale face of my dismal roommate flipping through channels on the TV.

My mother, Wendy Denise Gonzalez, is what you would describe as a free spirit. Which is ironic considering shes categorized

as a hypomaniac depressive. She would consider herself fun-loving, always ready for a good time, but beneath her façade was this tragic character that struggled to feel alive. Her interactions with other people validated her existence so she chose to drown in partying. This venue of expression allowed her to saturate herself in the attention of human warmth, but even that wasn't enough to sate the cavernous depth of her loneliness. A lot of this was caused by the judgment of our immediate and extended family; my mother constantly rebelled against my grandmother whose super strict guidelines failed to keep my mother in check. It didn't help that my mom had me at the tender age of 18. From then on out my grandmother would deny my mother any sort of affection and chose me as a sort of surrogate daughter, raising me with affection and patience my mother would never experience. She was the black sheep in the family and the harsh treatment and rumors by the elders labeled my mother as an outsider. As a child I could feel this sadness in her, so I devoted myself to her. I would be her shadow and I made it my job to assure her some sort of happiness in life. The word "madonna" in Italian means "my lady," like Mary, the mother of Jesus, she was always suffering and constantly praying to some faraway power. She always had this religious fascination, which struck me as weird for someone who my grandmother labeled as morally loose. But regardless, she was my Madonna and as she sat before the statue of his holy spirit, idolizing his practices, I idolized her in the same fashion. Only instead I felt I could be her savior of some sort and maybe if I were strong enough I could shield her from the judging eyes and the pain inflicted from people who I felt could never love her as much as I did.

We'd go from one friends house to another, Bronx, Queens, Manhattan; there were lots of restaurants involved. I vaguely remember glittering lights and that specific nighttime smell. It was all a blur, her with her friends, her with her boyfriends. I'd always silently watch on, a voyeur into her fast-paced life. We'd usually be out until two or three in the morning regardless of the time of the week, and when we came back, my grandmother was

almost always there, waiting. I can remember seeing her at the top of the stairs, staring down menacingly onto my mom as if she wanted to bite off her head. The disappointment was clear on her face and she was never afraid to voice her judging comments. My mom merely ignored her, walking up the stairs defiantly pushing past and continued to the second flight of stairs to our shared room. As the shadow I silently followed behind, my grandmother stopping me to murmur a prayer using her thumb to trace a cross onto my forehead. She then planted a kiss right on the crown of my head and embraced me in a warm squeeze; I bounced up the attic stairs through the soft glow of lamp light to find my mom getting ready for bed. I followed suit and grabbed my pjs from the white bureau across from my bed and quickly slid off my shirt and pants to throw on and zip-up pink footie pajamas. In a whisper, my mom said she was going to turn off the light, "I love you" and "goodnight" was said. Then a click and darkness flooded the room. Before I drifted off I could see her swaddled in a blanket across the room on her bed, she had fallen asleep so fast, I counted the light movements of her breathing and with that comfort I drifted off into the silence.

That morning the alarm went off five times, each time my mom croaked, "five more minutes" and slide her arm out of the warmth of the comforter to slam the snooze button. The light of dawn pierced through the thin strips of window that the shades didn't cover, but other than that the room was still veiled in light shadows and nothing could be heard but the muffled sound of birds singing their songs outside. After the fifth screaming attempt of the alarm to wake us, my mom lifted herself up off the bed to look at me, the grogginess in her face extended to her voice "Do you want to go to school today?" she asked sounding a little bit annoyed. "No," I replied as I snuggled into my covers, I put them over my head. "I'll call your school later, just let me sleep a little longer." She then turned around the bed squeaking loudly and after a few minutes I could only hear the faint sounds of her breathing. Underneath the covers my eyes were wide open and I fidgeted on the bed feeling the need to do something, so I popped my head out and contemplated the room for a while. Of course I got bored. I slid out of my bed and tip-toed to the stairs, I tried to descend them as silently as possible but considering how old the house is, each step was a loud creak until I reached the second floor. On the second floor is my grandmother and step-grandfather's room. No one's there; they're both at work, so

I continue to the first floor. My bare feet smack against the kitchen's tiled floor in the quiet of the bright morning as I walk to the dining room. I climb onto the wooden dining room table to reach the fruit bowl, the light reflecting on the glass bowl and highlighting the colors of the fruit inside as I pluck out a shiny red apple. Climbing down from the table I'm careful not to hit any of my grandmother's many plants which line the sides of the room, their leaves fan out to drink in the sunlight. I go to the living room to watch cartoons and eat my apple waiting for my mom to wake up and join me 🍎

Calloused ashy fingers slide over smooth plastic, "Pass me the screw driver," he said. I nodded with a light "a-hum" as I reached into a rusty red toolbox rummaging around before I found the screwdriver. Everything in the toolbox including the screwdriver is covered in mysterious dirt and my hand is dusted brown with foreign matter. I don't notice, as I'm too busy paying attention to what my dad's doing, the entire time my big eyes glued to where he is kneeling on the floor. He spreads around small plastic pieces, tiny arms and legs and a head or two. They're various colors, some white, while others bright orange, the hard plastic contrasts with the soft beige rug. In his other hand are two chest pieces, painted onto the plastic is a green vest and underneath a yellow shirt. "Which one do you want to use for the legs?" he asked picking up and inspecting pieces. It takes me a few seconds but I point at a pair of legs and arms painted in camouflage. He picks them up and then I pass him a head. The face painted on the head was of a war veteran with five o'clock shadow and an eye patch; I assumed he was missing an eye. His rugged face frowned at me while he takes the piece with what seemed like giant fingers compared to my tiny ones. My dad strings together all the pieces with a rubber band that's inside of the chest piece and, begins to use the screwdriver to screw in the bolt in its back. When he's done he hands me the fully finished action figure. I accept it with a giddy excitement exclusive to children; I thank him profusely as if what he gave me was a gift, as if he really made something, even though this required minimal effort. Almost like he didn't just put together pieces of broken toys. Pleasing children is so easy; it's almost a joke.

My father, a short-tempered Puerto Rican man with violent tendencies was as short as the length of the fuse that sets him off. Typical of guys with what my mother labeled as short-man syndrome, Ernesto Soto, Jr., better known as Junito to friends, family and even the people who were involved in his street life, was an ex-con and self-proclaimed playboy who internalized hyper-masculinity as a persona he could never get past. Today my dad has

packed on the pounds; he feverishly works an office job that causes him more stress than it's worth and lives contentedly with his girlfriend and my second brother. But in my early memories I remember a thin man wearing baggy pants, always with his signature Mets cap. Trying on different shirts, it's as if going through a list of what fits his attitude that moment and when he finally finds one that feels right, he takes a few seconds to admire himself in the mirror. He slides heavy rings onto his fingers, all the way to his bruised knuckles and adorns himself with necklaces made of gold as if he were a prince. The final touch was always a heavy mist of musky cologne; whenever I kissed him on the cheek goodbye I could always taste it, nauseatingly bitter. He would leave me to venture to places unknown; to spend time with women I knew nothing about. Watching him go off to do god-knows-what always left me feeling empty and left behind. I wasn't enough to keep his attention and as I lay in bed struggling to catch dreams I felt myself drowning in a murky sea of loneliness. I idolized him for all the bad things he did, I was too young to realize that adults are only people too. Just because they're older than you doesn't mean they're right.

From a young age my dad made it very clear that as the oldest I had a responsibility to be strong. For him strength came from having a penis. I didn't have one so I would have to try my hardest to make up for that. He praised me for doing anything boyish; he thought it was hilarious that I would never wear skirts because I was such a tomboy. I took pride in his pride and anything he approved of I tried to emulate. He even used to teach me how to walk like a guy. Once while waiting in a parking lot of a supermarket for my grandparents we sauntered down the row of cars, walking with legs spread open and bent. I guess I was making room for my imaginary balls. When it came to my feelings, I was never allowed to cry. Honestly I think it was because he couldn't really handle it, he was so out of touch with his feelings he didn't know how to handle blatant emotion. So instead he just chose to ignore his feelings and to deny the feelings of everyone else around him. If anything bothered him he replied with anger and force. He expected the same of me. "Get the fuck out of my face!" he'd say when tears beaded the edges of my eyes. With the burning in my throat I'd walk away in shame and hide myself, biting my tongue in an attempt to choke back the hot emotion wet on my face. I dug my canine tooth into the soft flesh of my tongue and I prayed that I'd bleed; I felt it would be better if I bled than cried, "I need to fight it." I'd panic. The most I'd leave were strong

inidents, I was too chicken to achieve my goal. It stung for a day or two as if to mock me for my weakness. When I hurt myself from roughhousing and didn't cry he would always shower me with praise: "That's my girl, daddy's little soldier!" I was daddy's soldier and I would do anything in an attempt to please him, just a little praise would urge me on. There was no real affection in those words but I desperately thought that maybe if I could prove myself he would love me unconditionally. In reality he saw me as an extension of himself and any weakness in me showed weakness in him; never was I an individual. That wasn't a part of his plan; I wasn't a part of his plan. Now that I'm older I consider maybe this is how brainwashing works, taking apart someone's brain and creating insecurities that last a lifetime.

Bruises dot my legs; I count them one by one. Draped on an orange, plastic-covered couch, sweat drips down my face as I point at each one, recalling each injury. The humidity make my thighs stick to the plastic and I rip one of them off as I lift my leg to pick at a scab located somewhere by my ankle. My grandparent's small apartment is like a tiny oven in the height of the summer; my grandfather has something against air conditioners and all there is in the room is a big metal fan that blows around hot air. The closer you get to the kitchen where my grandmother is making dinner, the hotter it gets and I choose to lay on the couch as still as possible in an attempt to cool down. From the corner of my eye I see my dad walk in holding a big grey duffle bag, the same one that has all the action figures in it. The toys in that bag are all hand-me-downs from my dad and uncle's childhood, many of the toys were heroes from cartoons I've never seen but I enjoyed playing with them. He kneels next to the couch and pours out all the toys onto the carpet and I sit up on the sticky couch to get a better look at what he's doing. For a few minutes I watch him separate the toys into piles and finally I ask him what is going on.

"We're going to play war," he says. His voice is dripping with amusement and I take that as a hint that something fun is going to take place. I lapped up the

attention like I was a starving puppy—no one else just him and me.

"What's that?" I obnoxiously ask, I get onto the floor and I put my hair that's almost to my backside up in a bun. The bridge of my nose scrunches up in confusion as I try to comprehend what he's talking about, but I'm all ears and he's caught my interest. Honestly, he's never had to do much to be able to.

"So, basically you get one side of the room and I get the other. Then we pick out our men, you know the ones that are going to fight," he points at the pile with action figures in it. "Then you pick out weapons," there is another pile with tiny plastic firearms and ammunition. "There are also vehicles and animals. Then there's a pile with random shit in it, we're going to divide all these piles between us." I nod looking at him in excitement. He looks back mirroring my expression. Starry-eyed and restless.

We begin the process of picking and choosing and occasionally arguing over who got what. He always played the seniority card when it came to arguments he wanted to win against me. He always got the best because he was an adult and I got all the leftovers because I was a kid. He assured me with time I would be strong enough to force people to give me what I wanted, too. I didn't believe him; I felt I was going to be small and weak forever and it made me a little bit nervous to think I would be able to live up to the expectations he had of me. But I pushed the feeling aside and went to my side of the room to set up my "main base" as we called it. Once I was all set up, I looked upon my army with pride and the intricate setup I made of the dining room table. The game was about to begin and I was ready to fight 🏹

We all smoked weed at Coley's house after school; that was the tradition. Her mom was never around so we'd fill the house with smoke and sink into her puffy couches for hours until we were clear-eyed enough to go home. Coley taught me how to smoke before a Halloween party one year. We stood on a dark street corner and she held a glass bowl to my lips, instructing me to breathe the smoke deep into my lungs. She smiled proudly and told me I had done a good job. I rode the high I got just from impressing her all night long.

Coley was tragically beautiful, with pouty lips and scars on her arms. She had a sharp tongue and a quick wit—a little intimidating before you know her. But she was inwardly sad and troubled and no one ever knew quite why. In 10th grade she swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills and disappeared from school for two months. Senior year, we all whispered about her sudden dramatic weight loss—out of concern for her health, we told ourselves. We were all drawn to her, especially me. I was a moth and she was a fascinatingly bright light.

"No one is like Coley," Jackie once said, and she was right. She said exactly what she was thinking, wore whatever she wanted, changed her hair color whenever it suited her. On Halloween, the year we first got high together, she wore a blue dress. When anyone asked what she was supposed to be, she simply answered, "Blue." I envied her and often wondered if I wanted to be with her or just be her.



"Everyone thinks you're a lesbian," my friend Kelly told me. I was 13. "I'm not—I'm not!" I protested. It was the highest insult amongst the mean, cliquey girls in my middle school to be called a "lesbo." I was so embarrassed; I knew no one at school liked me but what had I done to deserve this reputation? Sure, girls were pretty—Kelly especially, like a Barbie with her long blonde hair that I loved to braid—but I liked boys, not girls.

I became increasingly conscious of my behavior. I found myself watching my friend's older sister, Lauren, as she roamed their house in her skimpy dance clothes. Why was I so entranced with the way her muscular thighs looked when she climbed the stairs? I'd always decorated the walls of my bedroom with pictures of girls. Lindsay Lohan was the love of my life. But this was normal, right?

I had inherited a stack of outdated teen magazines from a neighbor and I pored over them endlessly. I folded down the corner of one article that particularly interested me. It was titled "Girl Crush" and explained the concept of this then-unfamiliar term. A girl crush, according to the author, is when you really like and admire a girl—you maybe even want to be her—but you don't like-like her. The author made that point very clear. *So that explains it*, I thought. *Of course I don't like like Kelly or Lauren. They're just really cool and pretty and I want to be like them.* That's what I told myself.

Jackie's dad went out of town one weekend and she and her brother threw a party at his house. I cried in the bathroom, as I do every time I drink. I was so confused, I told Ariel.

"It's okay if you like girls," she said.

"No, it's not," I sobbed. "I want a husband and I want kids." More sobbing. The problem never gets resolved. Later that summer, I tell my friends I like girls. No one seems surprised and no one ever mentions it again but they act weird when I get drunk and kiss them on the lips. I'm reminded of when I was 12 and became obsessed with rainbow jewelry. My mom didn't like it and I didn't understand why; I just thought the colors were cute. What I realize now is that my liberal, open-minded mother was afraid her 12-year-old daughter was turning into a raging lesbian.



Coley holds the glass bowl to my lips. "Gasp like your mom just walked in," she instructs me and I breathe the smoke into my lungs. I cough a little as I exhale and take the bowl to my mouth again. A proud smile spreads across her face. She clicks the lighter. Her full lips are briefly illuminated and I think about kissing them 🍷

On April 1, 1980, New York City transit workers went on strike. News footage showed Mayor Koch walking the Brooklyn Bridge with a million others and encouraging us to have a martini after work to decrease the homeward-bound congestion. To reach my beloved Central Park from my Lower East Side apartment I bought a bicycle.

A storefront bike shop on East 12th Street just east of First Avenue had old bikes chained together on each side of the open door. Bicycles hung in the picture windows, all of them used. Inside was overwhelmed with bikes lined up together, and a wooden platform above them had more bikes. It was a cavern of bikes from floor to ceiling, even from the ceiling where hung shiny rims and graceful, curving handlebars until it seemed three bike shops were pressed into this one.

Despite the seeming disorder and entanglement, the shop was peaceful, not even a radio. Incense burned somewhere, its scented smoke spiraling upward through the spokes and slick smell of oil. There was a path open in the center where a black air hose snaked its finger-thick way outside; deep in the shop a man repaired a bike. He was tall, dark, slender, patient; smiled quietly at me as I entered.

"I need a bike," I pleaded, "with gears and handlebars that drop down. And a skinny seat. And no basket."

He calmly considered this as he continued working, then put down his wrench, wiped his hands on a rag and carefully untangled a used white Peugeot 10-speed from the heaps. He oiled the chain, the hubs and levers, pumped up the tires, then stuck a yellow sticker on the down-tube: "Bikes, By George!" I liked the grammatical emphasis.

Before diving into city traffic for the Park, I practiced some; years had passed since I rode a bicycle and never one like this. On East First Street I coasted, I swerved and sprinted, moving to balance and balancing to move. Never locking it up, I always carried it inside where I gazed at its circles and symmetry, its lightness and strength.

My maiden flight to Central Park occurred late on a cool April morning. Up wide First Avenue, left at 60th Street and simply glide across Fifth Avenue into the park. Nothing to it. On a fragile, thin machine I spun into traffic, cars blasting past, taxis frantic with hunger, while beneath me bus-devouring pot holes and the merciless pavement sparkling with shattered glass (and my tires more narrow than my thumb). I considered riding to the park on the sidewalk but I'd look foolish, so I peddled reluctantly on. Suddenly one wild man on a bike with a large blue bag across his back raced past me in the middle of the street, slipped between moving cars, vanished in traffic, appeared again far ahead reckless, bold, skilled, mad. In time, I was a messenger too.

A century and a half ago we were called "runners," scuttling on foot along Wall Street and between the city's municipal buildings. I worked for a company called Good Rush, its office in a long, narrow storefront on East 7th Street with a twisted tin ceiling, faded blue walls covered with cork bulletin boards, tattered maps of Brooklyn, Queens and several of Manhattan, and a 1940s pin-up girl riding a bicycle, her dress blowing, a delicious thigh revealed. Jimmy's desk was in front, two dispatchers behind him at tables with note pads and several telephones. When you start and quit is optional but there was always work early in the morning and often into night; with need and stamina you could make \$100 in a 12-hour day with good weather. We were paid strictly on commission, how much was picked up, how much dropped off: Jimmy's health insurance policy was, "Don't get hurt." From the street I called the office on a special 1-800 number so as not to carry a bag of quarters, but many public pay phones had receivers torn out, a dangling metal cable with exposed, colorful wires; messengers often met at those that worked.

Besides a bike, our equipment was a large, strong canvas bag with a thick strap thrown over the head on the opposite shoulder so we could swing it on our backs when riding and swing it forward to get what's inside. Besides letters and manila envelopes and packages

we carried apples, candy bars, water, a street map, and a valuable photocopied chart to find Manhattan addresses; if a drop is at 576 Third Avenue, the chart indicates the cross street is East 38th. A pick-up at 1632 Broadway means near 50th Street. We rode with disinfectant and bandages, a strong lock and cable often worn around the waist for quick access, and the youthful illusion that we'll get home safe. Most messengers wore baggy jeans or sweatpants (with padded shorts underneath so our scrotums don't go numb), a t-shirt, sweatshirt or windbreaker, all depending on the weather. Some messengers resembled the bad guys from *Road Warrior* with shoulder pads, knee guards, and fingerless gloves, all in black. One covered himself with bird feathers and did a great imitation of a crow. There was Pit Bull, The Flash, Geronimo (yelled each time he leapt a curb), and Achilles, unhurt after seven crashes. And for a while on the streets of New York City rode Nelson Vails, gold medalist for the individual sprint in the '83 Pan Am Games and silver in the '84 Olympics. His name was "The Cheetah," fastest cat in the jungle; the only time you saw Nelson was when he stopped for a delivery.

Sometimes we'd ride together jabbering along Fifth Avenue before one of us raised a clenched fist and cuts down a cross-street, and we always stopped if another needed help with a breakdown or flat. For in some ways we all shared something besides a love for the bike. We were young and struggling and fit, but also renegades, outlaws, Indians. The work was hard and dangerous and few made any real money, but we were outside in all weather and felt hardy and free and wild because of it. Like the true business spirit of New York, time is money; we were all Mammon's Messengers despite what company is stenciled on our bag. We rode on sidewalks, the wrong way on one-way streets, and streaked through crossing lanes against the light, just missing someone shouting profanities at our backs, rapidly fading in traffic. The cops caught some of us

and a ticket was a day's pay. Pit Bull tried running, spent a night in jail and never again saw his bike. Stoner had a weed-delivery service on the side; you knew he was carrying when you blasted past him stopped at a red light and, smiling, he gave you the finger.

I liked messenger work best in summer: wearing a cut-up "Born to Run" or "Chicago Bears" t-shirt, blasting through the heat rising in visible waves off the street while singing "Ride Like the Wind" by Christopher Cross: "I'm on the run/ No time to sleep/ I've got to ride, Ride like the wind..." and finding cool relief in air-conditioned lobbies. Soft rain was nice though soon iron plates on the street turned slippery and brake pads don't clamp well on wet rims. Winter was roughest: icy streets or, worse, snow quickly turning to slush, and the brutal North Wind who the Greeks named Boreas, cheeks puffed, ice in his beard. All day I was cold and wet, the weather slowed me down and I worked longer for less money.

Back then nearly a dozen messengers were killed each year on Manhattan streets and nearly all in the same way, the deadly "right hook." A car turning from the right lane stops for the messenger but the car in the center lane also makes a right just as we're riding through the intersection. Sometimes you'd see a bike spray-painted white, a "ghost bike," chained to a lamppost near where the messenger fell.

On a damp, chilly November day I had a pick-up on East 13th Street, the first dull door east of First Avenue. I buzzed the top name –Studio–then walked a long corridor, dim and dusty, where inside a large freight elevator a young man waited. He was tall, lean, hair combed back as if with Brylcreem. Definitely an Elvis man. After tugging a rope that slammed together two iron plates, one rising, another descending, he pulled another rope and the elevator lurched up with a great, mechanical racket as a huge counter-weight along the wall descended. Six flights later the elevator clamored to a stop, the two plates parted again, and I entered a

kitchen to my left, a long living room stretching in the distance. Colorful paintings hung on the walls between dirty windows.

"Want some orange juice?" the young man asked.

In the kitchen on the glass table, amid coffee cups and bagels, several open jams, butter, cream cheese, a rubber dildo and a box of Cheerios were two large books each two inches thick. On the covers, a painting of Fred Astaire dancing, with LARRY RIVERS in red capital letters across the top.

"One's going to the Marlborough Gallery on 57th," the young man said, "the other to the Brookford on Central Park West."

From deep in the back end of the loft behind the kitchen an elderly man emerged, his gray and black hair ruffled, with a nose like a hawk's beak and eyes penetrating and curious. He nodded at me before signing something first in one book with a paint-spattered hand, then the other. The young man placed both in a heavy-duty paper bag as the older man handed me a twenty dollar bill. It was the only tip I would ever receive on the job.

"Thank you."

"Be careful," he replied in a deep voice sounding like a threat or omen. The young man and I again rode the elevator down to the long, dim corridor. The books were a load in my pack.

I blasted up First Avenue to 57th Street beneath a sky darkening from the west, and cut a left almost to Sixth Avenue where I dropped one book at the lobby's front desk. I took Sixth Avenue, two blocks and entered the park, appropriately for today, at "Artists' Gate," sailed across the broken walkways, down the empty Mall, past the quiet angel and then wound through the Ramble. The second book I left with the doorman at Central Park West and 91st Street.

I then flew to the Boathouse as the rain began, drops the size of black nickels hitting the walkways. Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast* how "all the sadness in the city came suddenly with the first cold rains

of winter," but that November afternoon the park was beautiful and melancholy, wet and silent and empty. With a few dollars from the twenty, I bought hot chocolate and an apricot danish, then spent the rest of the late autumn afternoon in the Boathouse by a warm fire watching the lake in the rain ☔

short stories

The Legend of the Harmonica Man

I think personally the most absurd party I've attended had to be one of my own back in 11th grade. I had thrown a bonfire party to kick off the summer. After many laughs and songs, the gathering eventually began to wind down. In the end, the few left were my closest friends. Erik on the guitar was strumming softly to an acoustic rendition of "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen. A gentle breeze, crackling of the fire and the vocals of the crickets provided perfect harmony. Though life is unusual sometimes, People always say "expect the unexpected in life." I don't think I truly knew what that phrase meant until this night.

Erik finished the song and soon it was unusually quiet, all of us just staring at the fire reflecting on life.

'Where had the crickets gone?' I thought to myself. Then came the harmonica.

Yes, a perfect pitched harmonica began playing in the distance. As this symphony continued, blues-fueled music circled us with no clear source of the sound. One of my friends, Joe Miller, had the bright idea to give The Invisible Man a standing ovation once the private concert was finished.

The second song quickly began when I had a strange feeling like something wasn't right. I quickly ran up to my house to express my concern to my dad. My Dad laughed and had thought it was some sort of prank until my friends sprinted towards the house.

Jason began to scream. "He lunged at me!" he shrieked.

With an axe in his hand, my dad confidently, but cautiously, assured us that he'd go to the back of the dark, large yard and figure it out. The yard seemed darker and larger than ever before. We stood with bewilderment and listened to my father. His findings were of a 32-year-old schizophrenic named Adam who had mixed some alcohol with his medication and refused to leave our property. In his unrealistic mind, he thought it was alright

to just come and jam with a bunch of teenagers. He began to argue with my father saying it's un-American to not let him play his harmonica as our property was everyone's land. In between disputing, he would alternately play his harmonica and light his lighter as if he were at a concert. I was frightened for my father, but he knew you couldn't reason with insanity. He headed back up to the house and the police was called.

A couple weeks later, we had learned more about Adam. He had a horrific police record that deemed him highly dangerous, doing everything from claiming he was Abraham Lincoln to making a bomb threat to a police department in Orlando, Florida to almost murdering his parents with a hammer.

Yes, we've had a few more bonfires, but needless to say, I always find myself looking over my shoulder in fear. That guy, I'll hesitantly call my neighbor, is someone that you don't want to "jam" with.

Max Allen is Gonna Shoot Up the School

I've always been fascinated with small towns. While quiet, little Medford, New York seems like a perfect suburban town during the day, a sinister type of darkness seems to surround the town every now and then. Hate crimes, shootings, missing persons and murder are just some of these crimes I have witnessed over the course of the last ten years. Out of nowhere these events occur and the town is suddenly thrown into a whirlwind of paranoia. One student at my high school named Max Allen was fully convinced the world was going to end in December of 2012.

I'd always hear people talk about how awful of a person Max Allen was, but I never knew him myself. The first and only time I had seen Max in person was in the cafeteria one day being publicly ridiculed by a group of people. He had worn a snapback to school and someone had stole it from him. He stood on a chair and screamed

"Gimme my hat, you fuckin' faggots! It's my hat!"

The crowd all laughed at him. I stood off in the distance.

He was known for making threats towards the jocks, and for telling all the popular girls he wanted to rape them.

While no one should be subjected to bullying, it was obvious that Max Allen had no filter.

A couple months then passed with no word from Max Allen. I was standing up against lockers with a group of friends where my friend Chelsea ran up.

"Max Allen is threatening to shoot up the school on the 21st. He said we're all gonna die anyway so he might as well have fun with it." she said frantically.

Everyone laughed it off except Chelsea and I who both seemed caught off guard by it. Without knowing what's right or wrong, I wasn't sure if Max Allen would actually do it or not. I truly was disturbed by this even if it were a rumor. The school had swallowed up Max and spit him out as some sort of monster.

One of my biggest fears is school shootings, ever since we had our first lockdown drill in fifth grade. We were crouched near the closet of the classroom.

"This isn't real, right!?" 10-year-old Sean O'Brien had asked.

A member of the custodial staff shook the door knobs of the classrooms making sure that they were locked.

"Oh no, this is real. I just saw the shooter walk by, Sean. I think we're gonna die." said Joe Feeney.

Joe's words crawled deep into my skin like some sort of poisonous spider. I was such a gullible child that I believed him. Once the drill was over, I was very relieved. However, every time I saw something I thought was suspicious, I would go to the nurse and pretend to be sick so that my mom would come pick me up. Fear of getting shot has—definitely—has always been a fear of mine.

The day before the supposed shooting was a very rainy day. Throughout the locker rooms and halls,

you would hear a new rumor each minute about Max, like a long, elaborate game of telephone. I had expressed my concern to my mother who ended up calling the school. The school assured her that everything was under control. While this made me feel a little bit better, I couldn't help being nervous still. Where was Max Allen and would he really do this? Along with half of the students of Patchogue-Medford High School, I had made the decision to not to attend school on December 21st. Of course, there was no shooting as Max Allen had been suspended from school for the rest of the year. Chelsea came over that night. We sat by the light of the Christmas tree and cuddled close together.

"What if the world did end today?" she asked.

"I don't think I'd be very happy if it did." I replied.

During the War

We crawled through the woods wearing button-downs and ties that we all haven't wore since the end of the year dance in middle school. Jason had blonde hair with brown eyebrows and was often described as a "fish-faced motherfucker." He carried a duffle bag full of guns. Hunter, who was trained in hunting since he was seven years old had red hair, freckles and wore a baseball-themed children's tie. Richie wore a gas mask we stole from the local fire department that masked his quasi-Puerto Rican identity. I was lanky and awkward and held a camera in my hand along with the other duffle bag full of guns. We reached our destination, which was overlooking the beach. The few beachgoers looked like ants from where we were standing. There was no way they would see us from here.

"We're gonna storm the beach," Richie said firmly.

"...but I like the beach..." Jason added, trying to lighten the mood.

An airstrike began to happen as we sought shelter near a giant boulder. All four of us now had

guns in our hand aiming at the sky pulling our triggers simultaneously.

"THIS IS IT, BOYS, THIS IS IT." I tried to encourage them, but it was too late, Richie was shot. He fell over and of course I wanted to help him, but there was no time, we were in battle. All of the sudden, a group of bicyclists drove by in our battle zone.

I ran towards them grabbing the camera off of the tripod and yelling cut. We were ninth graders who went out early Sunday morning in hopes to make the Great American War Film. We kept filming once the bikers had passed. Now Richie had removed the gas mask so we could cover his face in baby powder to make it look like he got some sort of virus within the woods. We're sitting by the tree and doing this, still with the guns in our hands as I notice the bikers had stopped to make a phone call in the distance. We start filming again continuing our battle into the frenzy of the war. Hunter was accidentally shot by Richie as we all screamed while waving our guns in the air. A truck drove past our shot. I yelled cut again. We continue filming as Hunter says his last words.

"Tell my wife I love her." he coughs.

The truck drives in frame once again this time stopping in front of our camera. This time, I don't yell cut. A park ranger steps out of her vehicle, she has red hair and looks like she just moved here from the border of United States and Canada as she began to speak with her Fargo-like accent.

"Watcha boys up to in these parts of the woods?" she said while giving a nice warm, yet suspicious smile.

"I bet this woman owns a closet full of ugly Christmas sweaters." Richie whispered to me.

"We're just..uhh hanging out!" Jason said with a smile right back at her. She did not seem amused.

"I got a report of a bunch of adult males havin' a shoot-out ovah here, do you know anythang about that?" she asked.

Hunter ducked and hid the duffle bags full of fake guns under a boulder near by. I felt guilty.

"We were just shooting a movie, m'am. I apologize if we caused a problem." I said.

She reached for her walkie-talkie out of her beige fanny pack that seemed to match the woods around us.

"Awwwwshit, stop the back up, stop the back up!" she screamed into the handset while squishing a big green bug on the ground.

"You see these things, they're poisonous! Betta watchout!" she suggested while getting back on her walkie-talkie.

She smiled at us, but we all still were white as a sheet. We thought for sure we were about to be arrested.

"The things we do for Sean O'Brien." Jason joked.

"Yeah, at least you're not covered in baby powder." Richie said while giving me a push.

She had us line up against the boulder now after explaining to the cops how we were just shooting a film. When it was all taken care of, she gave a speech to us.

"The SWAT team was being prepared to come stop the shooting, you guys can't do this without lettin' us know furst. Y'all can always shoot your little family film here as long as you let us know in advanced about these guns." she said while giving me a pat on my back. She took down our names and phone numbers to file a police report and we were sent out of the park for the day. On the walk back to the parking lot, we came up with a plan to use this as an advantage.

"Imagine how many girls are gonna think we're cool if we say we were almost arrested over the weekend for shooting a movie?" Jason suggested.

We all agreed, and the following Monday we told everyone we knew the story. We even ended up recording a rap ballad about it because that's exactly what ninth graders do to seem cool. For better or for worse, this was only the start of my reign as a guerrilla filmmaker throughout high school. I would later have my film banned from the school's film festival by the Anti-Bullying Club due to scenes depicting suicide during the end of

the world. I had vowed to then make the raunchiest film I could come up in rebellion towards the school.

The cast of the film consisted of John Hartsough, who was hired to play "the coolest guy in school" because, well, he was known throughout the halls as the coolest guy in school.

"That guy is high...as a KITE..." he paused. "FUCK!" he shouted into the camera while pointing towards Peter. Peter was a bearded wrestler who secretly happened to be a movie buff like me, so we ended up connecting. We called him Peetus for some reason. I'm not really sure why we all called him Peetus or what that even means, it just kind of stuck after Chris Lombardo started saying it. Chris was like that. His wildly Italian themed persona had created catch phrases like a breakout character on a sitcom. He would shout "HOLD MY DICK" at no one in particular in the hallways and total strangers would shout it right back at him, because that's the kind of guy he was. He was always so likeable. He spent most of his years in high school admiring the love of his life, Kid Cudi, and his girlfriend Sam.

Chris had also starred in the film along with Sarah, a freckled, curly-haired lesbian girl who made sure to tell everyone she met that she was a lesbian; Joey Vincenti, who self-proclaimed himself "Little Dank" and Charlotte, a theater kid who everyone used to call "The Hippo" because of how large of a mouth she had. We worked as a team to make something so absurd, yet so very filthy to be filming on school grounds. The film was titled *Just One of Those Days*. It was a John Hughes-meets-*American Pie* high school comedy told from the perspective of four different students during one day. The characters did acid, wrote bomb threats and had sex—all on school property. It had its first (and very censored) public screening at the Patchogue-Medford High School Student Film Festival in May of my senior year. The film had finally helped me develop a group of friends that I felt

comfortable with. I realized who my friends were now, which would be the start of a new beginning near the end of high school 🍷

We were sitting downstairs in the living room, just sitting and looking at the television. Ma was upstairs in her room, and every now and again I could hear the floor creak above my head as she shifted her weight. Ma was looking at her television too, and game show sounds would fall down the stairs. She left her television on all day and all night and it served Ma well—as her sun and stars, as lover and child and window.

"I saw Winnie at practice the other night," said Travis.

I imagined Travis standing next to the bleachers, leaning against his truck. I imagined him pulling from the flask his father had given him for graduation, his eyes burning while he watched.

"She came up to me after," he continued. "She talked about my record. Just standing there with her fuckin' pom-poms and pigtails."

Travis holds the state record for most yards rushed in a single game, which people still talk about in town even though it happened four years ago. In Narrows, Georgia, people care about football.

So we were sitting in my truck, and I still had that half pint of Jack, and we were drinking it and talking.

"Do you know what she fuckin' wanted to talk about?"

I cleared my throat. "No," I said.

"She wanted to talk about Lori. Fuckin' Lori, that dumb dead bitch. Like I haven't had to enough to think about. All that shit wasn't my fault," said Travis as he tapped his foot.

He was still looking at the television. He took a deep slow pull of whiskey and breathed out. He passed the heavy glass bottle back to me without looking, and I took it and drank from it. My insides felt warm and full like my guts were pressing gently out, stretching my skin thinner. I took a drink of beer from the can and I could feel the cold liquid running down inside me evening the temperature out, the whiskey and beer mixing to a wonderful equilibrium of cold and hot. I heard the ceiling creak as Ma moved.

I said nothing, and took a cigarette out of the pack on the table between Travis and me. I lit it, and breathed in the precious acrid smoke. "I'd like to really fuck Winnie," I said, and passed the bottle back over the table.

I started to think about those times at the quarry, when we were all in high school together. We used to drive out at night on Saturday nights and drink and smoke dope and take turns jumping off the cliff. The wind would rush past you as you fell, howling in your ears. The black water rushed up so fast, and it felt like you were hanging, perfectly still, and it was the whole world that was rushing up to you. And then you would plunge into the water, and it went so quiet so fast.

I lit a new cigarette off the burning stub of my old cigarette ■■

screenplay

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

*Two lengthy man hands rub the back of a woman.
We hear kissing. The two hands lifts the back of her shirt.
He finagles with the bra-strap.*

MELANIE

Dracula!

*The woman pushes the man off of her. She is MELANIE,
a plump woman wearing lots of yellow.
He is DRACULA, a tall scrawny man wearing an
assortmen of red and black clothes topped off with a
cape. The two sit on a bed facing each other.*

DRACULA

What?

MELANIE

We can't.

DRACULA

Why not?

MELANIE

I'm not ready.

DRACULA

I wanna move this relationship to the next level.

Dracula touches Melanie's hand.

MELANIE

We can't. We shouldn't even be kissing.

DRACULA

But c'mon you know Drac will give you that
good lovin.

MELANIE

Can you please stop talking in third person?

Dracula sniffs her neck.

DRACULA

Ughh let me please just get a taste of your blood
then. It smells so-

MELANIE

No! Absolutely not!...Drac we can't..trust me. I'm
not ready. I don't know if I ever will be.

Dracula stands up.

DRACULA

What are you saying..bitch?

Beat.

DRACULA

After all I've done for you. I walk your dogs when
you're out, I send you flowers at work..I even
went to the beach with you..on the sunniest day..
when you know if the sun hits my skin I'm burnt
to crisp. I sacrifice myself for you and you won't
give me a taste. I thou—

MELANIE

I have HIV!

Dracula laughs.

MELANIE

I said I have HIV.

DRACULA

And?

MELANIE

I-I'll infect you and you'll die.

DRACULA

(laughs)

Melanie, I'm fucking Dracula. Nothing kills me.
I'm over 200 years old.

Melanie's eye light up.

MELANIE
Really?

DRACULA
Yes.

Dracula sits down on the bed.

DRACULA
And HIV is the tastiest blood.

*They stare deep into each other's eyes.
Melanie bites her lip.*

MELANIE
Oh Dracula..

*Dracula sicks his teeth into Melanie's neck. She moans.
Blood streams down Dracula mouth.*

DRACULA
Oh it tastes so good.

MELANIE
Bite me again you dirty little vampire.

*Dracula takes another bite. She moans and giggles.
Melanie unbuttons Dracula's shirt.*

MELANIE
I never thought I would find true love.

DRACULA
I never thought a girl would actually let me suck

her blood.

They look in each others eyes.

MELANIE
Dracula?

DRACULA
Yes?

MELANIE
We really can't have sex though.

DRACULA
Why?

MELANIE
I have my period.

Dracula looks at the camera.

poems

He spent his entire life
Refracting his father's image in a mirror,
But when bestowed his weathered leather pair,
The Man decided to walk a mile
that swelled to ten,
until he decided to retract,
and outline his reflection.

The indentations on the surface were unique,
but the roots beneath intertwined.

They always have.

I want to live in your hair,
where the beauty marks sleep beneath shy sheets,
and a rhythmic mass bounces
to the sway of your own beat.

I want to live near your roots,
a museum displaying who you were,
and smell the coconut breeze
that flows from your pores.

I want to vacation on your curls,
those fine follicles that rest above your eyes
just so I can see,
what you see,
when you see your mane.

A salt and pepper mustached man
smiles at me like an old friend,
and hands me a large paper cup
steaming with promises of something more.

Across the way, a shop overflows
with a gaggle of giggling girls
sipping grande gingerbread—
on second thought, make it skim \$6 lattes.

Passerbys glance from burnt coffee beans
to my tiny ten tabled narrow strip
of creamy, dreamsicle sky
that can be called home, at least for a while.

I simmer back, watching lovers choose
the corporate cup of poison. Me?
I'll take my joe from an Average
Joe named Mike.

Recalling the way you smiled at me
over her shoulder kissing her,
you slice me open.
Pour the poison into my brain.
Saying no one would understand,
saying how you were
the only one who could love me.

So why not let you
push me down in your back seat
like dirty laundry
you were afraid to let people see.
Choke out any dignity
or self-confidence I had as you
stuffed your tongue
down my throat
swallowed me whole
and let your hands roam
to all the parts of me you claimed
were not good enough.
It wasn't until someone smiled
at me directly,
tickling my waist
questioning why I never ate
that I realized how
much of me I gave away, realized
I carried your words
as a weight on my vocal chords.
Now if I should
have a daughter, never
will I ever say to her that
when little boys
pull on your pigtails,
calling you names
that it's because they
like you.

Write a novel
make a list
make a book
make a Facebook,
to find old friends
those you can live without.

Sunny suburban houses, squared lawns, picket fence,
a cliff faced front lawn. chemical cut bleached blondes
with whitened teeth, tattered and torn UV light tanned
skin wrinkled in time.

Wrap around stained porches pasted next to technicolor
treated grass. 9-5, weekends free, empty extra bedrooms,
acrylic crusted french cut finger nails fishing online for
friends.

Prescription pill popping ex-prom queen passed out,
cooped up in a souped up coupe de ville with the devil.
writing rent checks in bubble letters, stuck to the younger
years. 17 to 27.

I can feel your pulse beat through the sheets
as you try to avoid touching me
sleeping next to you is just a nights bad dream
and I just don't know what you mean
when you slide your long body closer to me
or when your arms slither around my waist
and your hands sand up and down my sides
and your lips slip into mine
and you suck the salt out of my lungs
and fill them with your smoke
and let me soak in your skin
and swim in your spine
until the sun seeps through the room
shifting the time
separating your cigarette body from mine
while you drip-drop into my morning dreams
I go in and out of sleep
in and out
forward and back
and back
and I find myself watching you sleep
because I just don't know what you mean
because a night with you
means a night where I cannot sleep.

Everything I hear you say
has a half-a-second delay
and my mind can only process
what I don't hear you say
but all the silences in between.

I crawl into love with the idea of you,
 but walk up straight in your presence.
 As if my spine doesn't ache from all the crouching.

You can walk in solitude the long desert road
 Step by step like an old lonely toad
 You can let the scorching sun stoop you so very low
 As it tattoos your forehead and adds a matching bow
 You can spend your days searching for food and water
 While mainly feeding your soul with bitter.
 Or...
 You can hop on the fast riding stretch white limo
 Where the real party is just in its primo
 Your ludicrous demons are all there going wild with
 babes, champagne and good music
 If you just let them they can show you how to lose it and
 really groove it
 So get in, lay back, let go of your shields
 And watch as the show slowly begins
 Let them amuse you with how ridiculous and silly at times
 you can be
 Laugh with them, at them, at yourself, at life and at all you
 can see
 Forget for a moment your big dreams and hopes
 Surrender to guilty pleasures and anything that pops
 And most importantly
 Don't you forget
 To enjoy the ride and life
 And never ever tell your wife.

What would you want to talk about?
The past?
I have memories.
Teetering, crumbling piles of them.
There are vipers in here.
There is a secret buried.

Once, I saw a girl
walking down Orchard Street.
She was beautiful.
There were blue ribbons in her hair
and starlight.

I came across footprints
in the glowing white snow.
I followed them for a time,
but they only led me home.

I cut my finger
on a grasping thorn.
A drop of blood fell,
and then a tree grew
rising in a moment.
A sanguine miracle; or else a portent.

On the subway,
a man pulled a snouty silver revolver
from the pocket of his rain-wet jacket.
He didn't seem to want anything,
not with those who were present.

I met Alice in a bar on Second Avenue.
We were getting drunk shooting pool.
She was slung low over the table.
The angle in her hip, a razor.

I searched for silver
in a rotting, stinking mire.
Grasping and churning the filth,
my arms sore and scabbed.
One thousand years.
A touch of cold metal.
And then, found.

Ode to the Elephant at the American Museum of Natural History
Who Was Kind Enough to Stand Me Looking at Him for So Long

Lily Wolf

I would like to write a poem for each of an elephant's wrinkles.

To fill the breadth of each fanned ear with sonnets,
to wrap the trunk of each leg in diction of my choice.

The coil of its facial appendage would serve a perfect page for my prose,
the pirouette and arabesque of words as it would sway.

I would fit to each majestic ivory tusk an adjective as immaculate and alchemic as their own grandeur.

When I am finished,
when this elephant is reduced to words both more lilliputian and more vast than the creature itself,
then I should like to be as pulchritudinous as the pachyderm.

We should all like to achieve that sort of beauty.

Words is a collection of writings by students, faculty and staff at the School of Visual Arts, with some guest writers and is published twice a year by the Humanities and Sciences Department. To be considered for publication, submit your work to Louis Phillips, SVA faculty and editor of **Words**.

Poetry, short stories, short film and theater scripts, and personal essays will be considered. Please attach your work as a document (RTF format preferred) and send to **LPhillips@sva.edu** with the subject **Submission to WORDS**. Please include an email address and phone number where you can be reached.

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