

English 229 Online, Sp '20
LECTURE for April 17th

Working with Your Flash Fiction: Reviewing the Elements of Any Story and Reflecting on Ways to Improve

Please scroll way down read the sampling of student stories. Then come back to the top.

Let's review what we've been doing.

For the last couple of weeks I have encouraged you to write your own flash stories with abandon—just spin some stories without stress and simply for fun. There was really no way to fail at this; pretty much everyone got an A+. The stuff you guys produced was a kick. It was inventive, odd, interesting, entertaining, and varied.

We can now go a bit further and reflect on what you produced, considering consciously how the pieces make us feel and what, if anything, doesn't quite work or feel right. It can be hard to get a flash piece—a story only 100-300 words or so—to “work,” and there's a lot of trial and error in learning to write one well.

We can take this next step in part by reviewing the basic elements of any story, and thinking about how you guys specifically have been handling these elements in your stories. (Recall that we spent some time on basic components as we began the fiction unit.)

Ultimately, I want you to ask yourselves some questions about what you wrote, and what you are writing.

So now let's review some elements of fiction.

Character

Remember that character development will be a big part of your fiction project. I want you to think about how to write character-driven stories rather than plot-centered one. Plot-centered ones are fine, but the best stories have amazing and memorable characters.

Reflect, in the flash pieces you've written and in your drafts for the fiction project:

1. Is your main character believable, complex, memorable, nuanced? Remember that real human beings contradict themselves, can never be fully summed up, are always in some kind of flux, and have qualities we can't quite put a name to.
2. Would your reader remember your main character an hour after putting down your story? A month after? Five years after? What does it take to create a character whom your readers remember even for their entire lives? Is there a fictional character you yourself

remember from what you've read, someone who just stayed with you and still intrigues you?

Plot: Situation or Problem

= whackery, disequilibrium, dissonance, tension. What is often called the story's "conflict."

Something's messed up. The main character has some issue to deal with, and the heart of the story is how well, how honestly, completely, and believably the character resolves, copes with, or invents something out of the issue.

Here's a random handful of well-known stories and movies, and their "situations":

The Wizard of Oz

Situation: the main character has been cast out of home and community—she's lost or in a kind of exile—and is trying to get back. Common theme: The Hero's Journey.

The Great Gatsby

The main character is getting to know a wealthy tycoon and how wealthy people live; he's kind of a fish out of water—an innocent in a decadent and corrupt new world. He witnesses some wonderful stuff and some very disturbing stuff, and the situation is: how will this experience change him? What happens when he encounters the truth about the other characters, and himself, and humanity generally? Common theme: The Fall from Innocence.

Avatar

The main character encounters an alien world, one he was taught to believe is inferior, dangerous, evil, and entirely "other." That is, it is wholly unrelated to his own world. Gradually he gets closer to this other world and its inhabitants, and finds that the truth is quite different from he has been taught. Situation: he is caught between worlds, and must finally decide where he "lives." Common theme: Encounter with The Other.

Reflect:

1. Can you identify or state what your story's situation is?
2. Is the situation interesting enough, fresh enough, without a predetermined ending? Is it entirely external, with no connection to a central character's evolution?
3. Is there a resolution to the problem, and does it work? See "Plot Endings" below.

Plot: Endings

Unearned Endings

Endings that happen too fast and lack credibility. Endings which are sentimental or kind of cheesy and very predictable. Usually linked to a weak narrative question (a question which isn't real; one that we already know the answer to).

Unresolved Endings

These can often be quite fabulous. Real life doesn't give us tidy, happy endings; the trick in fiction is to provide endings which are real and possibly indefinite or unresolved, but at the same time leave the reader feeling satisfied.

Good unresolved endings often imply or hint at possible endings, but refuse to explicitly reduce to a single one. These may be endings and meanings which are contradictory, paradoxical, or simply cannot be articulated. Remember how much is left implied in "Poet's Husband" when the main character looks "at the moon through a spot on the window she missed." See also Melaine's and Alyssa T's pieces below, as well as "Endings with Unrealized Promise" below.

Twist, Trick, or "O'Henry" Endings

A trick ending with a neat twist or reversal at the end. Kind of the Twilight Zone ending. Can be fun and clever, but gets old fast. At the least, don't do this all the time. What happens is that the twist becomes the entire point of the story. Character, plot, theme, setting—all wind up being weak, and there's ultimately not much of a story there. And, as a writer, you don't learn how to handle other story elements.

Endings with Unrealized Promise, Untapped Power

Stories that don't yet recognize how interesting they actually are or can be. Such a story raises question it never winds up exploring fully. The unexplored content often resides in what the story and its moments *imply* rather than state explicitly. The writer is not paying attention to the resonance of their own language and images, the metaphoric meanings and archetypal echoes, unconscious material which is often the most interesting stuff you will ever encounter as a writer.

Examples, taken from students' own stories:

- Something buried in a car trunk. A big scary secret that the main character or even the story's reader can't face or that society in general can't face.
- Something vulnerable lost underground; someone has to find and rescue it; recover it.
- A central character is somehow exiled from home, comfort, wholeness and community (the known), and must embark into the unknown to find or resolve something. Often involves the character having to face his or her "shadow" self, repressed feelings, contradictions, human weaknesses. Only when they do that do they become whole again and can return home; or only then can they at least create a workable self and reality that can live with.

Think of Clara’s piece about someone facing their sexuality, or Sydney’s story about diving with her father, Melissa’s Poppy piece.

Reflect:

1. Is your story enriched by implied meanings that you didn’t consciously recognize at first?

Does something in the story kind of “shimmer” with suggestiveness you can’t quite name? Are there any “charged images”?

2. How can you *fully realize and engage* that shimmering?

Modes and Themes

Reflect:

1. What *kind* of story have you written?
2. What is your story about, *really*?

The Prose Haiku

Like a haiku poem, this type of short-short story is a description of a single, pleasant, warm, often fleeting moment. No real “situation” or conflict. This kind of story affirms known truths, comfortable truths, and can be very satisfying.

Ultimately, writing this kind of story all the time can be a problem. It becomes predictable and you (and your reader) are never challenged. It’s great to feel warm and satisfied, secure in what you know. But the most fabulous and exciting writing upsets what we know. It surprises us with new truths. That’s why some of the very best haiku or haiku-like flash stories contain beauty and stillness *as well as* darkness, “situation,” conflict, drama, paradox, *dissonance*.

Can you identify stories of this type below? Perhaps you wrote one yourself?

The Dramatic Monologue

We are inside of a character’s mind, we hear everything they are thinking, we see everything from their point of view, and the story is actually enacted via the character’s thoughts. Their thoughts, that is, actually *are* the story.

Reflect:

1. Which, if any, of your classmates’ stories are dramatic monologues? How are they working?

2. Since most of us never really know fully why we do what we do or who and what we are at any given moment, a first-person monologue should to some extent reveal the speaker's self-blindnesses; in some key way they are unaware of what they are doing and why—but we, as readers, are aware. This creates a fabulous dissonance and what's called dramatic irony: we can see the character in ways they cannot see themselves.

Do any of your classmates' stories contain dramatic irony?

The Theme of "Creating Your Own Reality"

We see characters who struggle to cope, make do, create something workable out of what they've been given. Can be really moving, even exhilarating. Often deals with imagination as well as the ability of a character to face what *is*.

How *do* we create realities for ourselves that we can live and prosper in? How do we **MAKE** our own lives interesting and meaningful? Does it sometimes involve going against the meanings we've received or inherited from our culture, family, religion, politics?

Where do you see this theme in your classmates' stories?

The Theme of "The Journey"

See "*Endings with Unrealized Promise, Untapped Power*" above.

As we've already noted, "The Journey" or "The Hero's Journey" is a really common, nearly universal theme that appears in stories the world over. A character undergoes an archetypal journey to self-discovery, a quest; they experience exile and disconnection, but ultimately find their way back home or create their own kind of new home. A new reality

Which stories below work with this theme?

Other Themes

- Fish Out of Water
- Lost (and Recovered or Reinvented) Love
- The Problem of Evil: External vs. Internal
- Encountering The Other
 - Longing for The Other
 - Dread and fear of The Other
 - Reconciliation with, merging into, The Other and becoming a new, whole Self

A SAMPLING OF STUDENT STORIES

I've made a crazy-ass selection below, sometimes intentional and sometimes random, just for purposes of demonstration and illustration. The selection is not a statement about whose stories are good or bad.

NOTE: I tried to include at least one story by each student. In my crazy-ass copy-pasting and drafting, however, I managed to ultimately lose track.

If none of your stories are shown below, please CONTACT ME right a

Forbidden Love

What is it like to fall in love? How do I know when I have found real love? I have said it to her, in my mind at least, but how do I know it is really true? My mom tells me that when you know you know, but what does she know, she's a divorced bible hugger. I'm sixteen years old, I guess I'm too young to really know, but this one just feels right. It has always been a secret; I have never really perused anything serious. This is the first time I have thought long and hard about it. She doesn't know where she is at, but I am feeling really confident. I want to be with her, I want to be her girlfriend, but I know she has some doubt. We have hung out a few times, we have even had a sleepover. I'm crazy about her. I look down at my phone and my cheeks turn as red as a tomato whenever her name appears. Sometimes I write her notes to let her know I'm thinking about her, or one time I commented on an old photo she posted on Instagram. I think she is the hottest, cutest, smartest, strongest, and most independent person I have ever met. I know I love her. I know I want her. I want to come forward to her about my feelings, but we are still taking things slow. We have been friends for a long time, not super close like best friends, she is definitely one of my go-to people. She is questioning her sexuality. We would be each other's first. I want her to be my first. I will do whatever it is I have to do to be with her. Even if that means hiding it from everyone. She doesn't want people knowing. She is still dealing with it herself; she seems to be very conflicted. I know it is probably something I shouldn't be getting myself into. I know I probably deserve better, but right now this is what I want, and I will fight to maintain it. I'm in love with Marina Breeze Nyberg.

The lake

Waking up on a Sunday morning at the lake is the most peaceful thing in the world. I look out and see the crystal clear water as the sun starts to rise. While the sun starts to rise and the birds start to chirp, I smell the fresh cut grass. So many walkers walk the beach in the morning before it gets too hot out. Going out and sitting on the dock watching the boats start to take people tubing and watching the fish beneath me nibble at my toes. Throwing in little pieces of bread so the fish can have some breakfast trying to spot the biggest fish that day. When lunch time rolls around, we pack up some ham sandwiches and take the boat to the sand bar. The boat starts up with a loud rumble. Driving the boat

fast to the sandbar we hit many big waves. Loving the feeling of the waves bringing me up and down with a big smile. When we get out to the sand bar, I inflate my favorite donut floatie. Relaxing on my tube at the shower trying to find shells to bring back to the cabin is one of my favorite things to do. I apply my spray sunscreen that smells the beach every 30 minutes. A day at the beach is so relaxing filled with my favorite people called my family.

Snowboarding

I wake up in the morning so excited to get out on the mountain. Taking the first lift up to the top I see the sun rising in the distant. The cold brisk air starts to hit my face. Looking over the whole mountain when I get to the top, I see so many skiers and snowboarders. Some are going so fast doing tricks and others are just casually going down the hill at a slow pace. When I begin going down the hill, I see the white fluffy fresh snow. I see the green pine trees covered in snow. The tips have all turned white. Little kids in between their parent's legs so they can have help going down the hill. So much going on while I am just casually snowboarding down the hill. People watching in the mountains and looking at how beautiful the surrounding is. Everyone has on different snow gear. So many different colors and brands. I see so many people in all black and I see some people in white pants and a colored jacket. I am wearing all maroon besides my boots that are grey and my helmet is white. Finishing down the hill I quick skid my board to a stop.

Untitled

The kids singing in the back of the minivan, the pulled into the last parking spot. There they sat as the sun set and the projector turned on. Mom and dad bought popcorn and drinks and sat in the back while the kids sat in front of them. A weekly tradition, they made memories as a family. As long as the kids were growing up, they would attend the local drive in. Not a huge thing for some but it was a tradition and really the only outing mom and dad could afford.

Years later, the kids were grown, having their own families. When they came to visit their parents, they too loaded their kids up and drove to the local drive-in. A family tradition now passed onto the grandkids. Something for them to cherish and remember as they grew up.

Untitled

It's the middle of the night when Cara wakes up to the sound of rain. Finally rain and not snow, means that Spring might actually finally be here. Warm in her bed, a cat at her feet, she embraces the moment of being in her bed. The cat stirs hearing that she is awake and comes up to her, resting his head on her shoulders. His soft purr is calming to her as she cuddles in closer to her sweet cat, Tobie. The rain, trickling down from the sky, comforts Cara. These are the simple moments she lives for - she thinks to herself. A warm bed, a loving cat, and the relaxing sound of the rain. What is it about the rain, it's just so soothing. Cara remembers the rainy days growing up and how much she loved them. Being cozy at home or somewhere inside as the rain stormed outside was something she always loved. Rainy days meant being able to stay indoor and work on fun crafts or projects, something she really liked doing. As a child, her father would take her for walks in the rain, where she got to jump in all the puddles a long their walk. What kid doesn't like jumping in puddles? Getting completely soaked, her father embraced it, letting Cara enjoy the moment. Rainy days are welcomed in Cara's mind as they bring up fond childhood memories and outings with her father. The rain continues to

brush past her window when she feels her eyes getting heavy again. She's not sure what time is it, but by the looks of it outside she would guess that it is somewhere around 3 am. Tobie, now sound asleep and curled up in a ball, Cara drifts off too dreaming of rainy days.

Where Did the Boys Go

They boys ran off to play. They didn't come home by supper. I left the house to find them. Down four blocks by the church, I find my youngest son. He's under a tree, fast asleep, shoe missing and sock torn. His brother ran off further. It took another hour. He's in the fields outside of town, with three other town boys, covered in dust and complaining when found.

A One Way Ticket

"Hi, I need a ticket." the poor girl has a bruise blossoming on her sunken cheeks.
"Where to?" the airline employee asks.
"As far away as possible." she shoves a wad of bills on the counter.
"Do you have an ID?"
The poor girl shoves it face down across the desk and shrinks in on herself.
"Okay, with this amount you can get to Exeter Airport."
"Good enough."
"Do you have any luggage?"
"Just a carry on."

Where Has Smokey Been

It's been four months, and suddenly Smokey's sitting at the door, ten pounds heavier. His fur is fluffy and shiny, he looks good. He looks like he's been taken care of in the months he's been a stray. But only Smokey knows what happened.

The perfect day

The room is filled with a strong scent of freshly pulled roses. Decorated ceiling to floor with the beautiful blossoms and candles. The pews are lined with ribbons and lace, ready to be filled with guests. A nervous groom paces the corridor of the church as he waits for the special moment. One hour till he will be waiting under the wooden arch for his wife to be. He didn't have cold feet, no, he was excited. Though, nerves still ran through his veins because of the fear of what's to come. He checked his watch and noticed that it was already 3:30, only a half hour till the biggest moment of his life. He needs to put on his tux and tie. He rushes into his freshly ironed clothes and buttons his cuffing's. As he is tying his patent leather shoe, someone knocks at his door. It is his best friend, Ryan. "It's time, bud" Ryan states as helping him up from tying his shoes. They walk their way to the doors of the church. Ryan gives his friend one last look over and fixes his tie before sending him on his way.

Untitled

The waves lapped at the side of the boat. The cool sea air kissed my cheeks, blowing my long, wavy blonde hair in an almost melodic way. In the distance, I can hear birds squawking and the quiet hum

of the fishing boat's motor. I look towards the open water, I see a deep, rich blue colored body of water and lighter blue where the sea stopped and the sky started.

"Val, you ready?" My father asked. He was a marine biologist with an emphasis in sea life preservation. We had been traveling around, diving and observing wildlife in the ocean for as long as I can remember. I turned my attention from the vast blue to my tall, tanned father. He had a sleek, black wet suit, goggles and a large pair of yellow flippers for me to put on. He handed me the items,

"Suit up, today is going to be a fun one."

I peeled my oversized shirt off, revealing my new olive green bikini. I slid one leg into the wet suit at a time. I pulled the extra layer of skin onto my body. The way the wet suit hugged my whole body felt right. I knew this is why I was on the earth, to explore the unexplored. I grabbed my goggles and pulled them over my head. My dad handed me my scuba gear. The large silver oxygen tank teasing me, only allowing me so much time in the deep blue world. I strapped myself in and sat on the edge of the boat. This is where my adrenaline starts pumping. I feel my body moving with the waves. The motion is so easy to get lost in.

My dad joined me on the side of the boat and looked at me. He gave the signal and we plunged backwards into the water. The white air bubbles propelling up towards the surface as we floated gently down to the sea floor. The vast colors of fish was amazing. The reefs however looked dull and damaged. My dad took photos documenting the change. All angles of the reef looked as if it was decaying. My dad gathered the photos he dove to get and signaled it was time to surface. The colors of the beautiful reef had disappeared. Human consumption killed the reefs. It killed the ocean.

Untitled

Liv skied down the small ramp exiting the chair lift, avoiding a collision with the first timers standing in front of the exit. The cold mountain air scraped against her cheeks, leaving them raw and pink. She pulled her goggles on and face mask up. Liv felt alive, the mountains were her safe haven. The tall, snow covered trees were beautiful; kissed by Jack Frost himself. The sky, a shade of blue only seen from the top of a mountain. The snow, a perfect white blanket laid over the land, in some places, untouched.

Liv propelled herself towards the slope, preparing to drop in. Her adrenaline was pumping, heart beating fast, stomach in a knot and palms sweaty. The decline began, her skis leaving two lines showing where she has been. She was in charge. She controlled where she went, having full awareness of her body. The trees whizzing past her on her way down. She slowed down and went into the trees. Meandering her way through the maze of trees.

THWACK!

A rather large branch struck Liv's helmet. Causing her to lose balance a little. She recovered and looked back to see what she had struck.

THWACK!

Everything went black. Liv's ears rang. Her body laid limp. Poles and skis went flying. She had hit a tree. After about five minutes of laying still, she finally was able to see again. She sat up and evaluated the situation. She was deep in the wooded area of the mountain, not on any sort of run. She frantically looked around searching for her missing ski. How hard could they be to spot? They were bright blue and purple skis. She stood up in order to have a better view. She spotted them a little way away and walked to them. Once to the lone ski, she clipped back in and rode the rest of the way down. Staying clear of unmarked tree areas.

Untitled

Kallie and Hanna returned home from running errands. The two went to Target and spent way too much money. They settled on making spaghetti and meatballs for dinner tonight. After they put all the groceries away in their large pantry and cupboards, Kallie began boiling a pot of water. Her kitchen was state of the art; the gas stove had a pot filler attached for convenience. Tall ceilings and crown molding made the space even more appealing. Hannah got the meatless meat balls from the freezer and the red pasta sauce from the pantry. She started preparing those ingredients. Reaching for a hanging pan from above their granite island. She turned the stove on and poured the pasta sauce in. It was cold, red and slow moving. Hannah stirred occasionally and once tiny bubbles broke the surface, she added the frozen, brown meatballs.

Kallie grabbed the long skinny spaghetti noodles from the pantry and put them in the pot once it had large, rapid boiling bubbles.

“Here, put some salt in the boiling water. It’ll help the noodles not stick,” Hanna explained. She tossed the salt across the kitchen to Kallie at the stove. Kallie missed the salt and it hit the floor, shattering the delicate glass shaker it was in spilling tiny crystals of salt all over the kitchen floor.

“Hanna, what the hell? Why couldn’t you have walked this to me?”

Hanna embarrassingly answered, “I threw it hoping you would catch it, I didn’t think it would shatter upon impact with the floor either.” Kallie looked back at the new mess on the floor and back to her best friend. They burst out laughing. Hanna ran to the closet and grabbed the blue broom. She swept up her mess and finished cooking. Kallie drained the noodles in a blue strainer and then dumped them back in to their bowl; cooking a feast for them and their dogs.

DriftoberFest

It’s a crisp and cold October day. Near the tail end of 2018 drifting season. In the middle of nowhere, in the cornfields and of course it had to be in North Dakota. I hear that there is a new concrete race track. Compared to my day, drifting at Brainerd International Raceways in an asphalt track, that’s where my love for drifting began. The new track opened up and I was able to make it in time for DriftoberFest. Excitement courses through as I stare at my 80s, retro beauty, wrapped in pearl blue with a boxy yet aggressive figure, The Silvia. With its motor and front end imported from Japan, it was a beauty. I take The Silvia out for a spin for the proficiency test, with nothing but a sweatshirt on my back on this chilly day, I am fired up with adrenaline. I pull up to the starting line, adrenaline is coursing through. I drive slow at first but because I didn’t realize the tracks were so tight with tighter turns. After a couple runs, I adapted to the track and it was becoming easier to maneuver around. I started to finally race around with all the adrenaline pumping through, the feeling of accomplishment, a great, smooth run, I was drifting with this high.

Trapped

Loud meows bellowed out from the depths as people started to crowd around. Earlier that morning, Poppy had heard the yelps of kitten during her morning run. She discovered the screams coming from a nearby storm drain. The baby kitten must have fallen through and its mother cat left it behind. A group of people had begun to form as Poppy lifted off the metal gate. Everyone is very concerned for the crying cat. “How can we get it out?” a neighbor stated. Poppy was quick to volunteer herself to be lifted in to the drain. A neighbor held onto her leg while she slowly descended into the small area. Another helper shined a flashlight from their phone so Poppy could look for the small cat. She spotted the tiny

orange tabby covered in debris. Poppy carefully picked up the kitten while signaling to the helpers that she got it. They pulled her and the kitten up to safety. Poppy dusted the dirt off of the cat and held it up. "I think I will call you storm." Poppy exclaimed while taking the kitten back to her place.

Untitled

I don't remember what it was like to be 5, but I do know that there was always a dip n dots stand whenever there was a big event in the city. Kids in my school would always be in awe in the idea of dip n dots because they were the great thing in the world. I couldn't understand why but I never argued it. It was just ice cream in shape of balls and some would be in multiple colors or in one color. They were appealing to the eye. I thought it was whack, for the creator of dip n dots to create ice cream like that. Imagine so tired of scooping out ice cream from a container they thought it was a better idea to eat a bunch of balls of flavor at once. Even when I go to the stores, I see they sell dip n dots at stores too. I was astonished when I saw them so I ended up buying a couple of them. The first couple times I ate some, it was great but there was barely any ice cream, so I was left unsatisfied. I ended up eating more and more of them until it was all gone. That was until, I went to my first baseball game in the summer. It was a beautiful day, I got free tickets because of my friend and I was excited to go to my first game ever. And there I saw it, a dip n dots stand. It had 5 flavors, I remember it. It was expensive, a large cup was roughly 8 dollars. And it barely looked like a full cup of ice cream. It was insane. I ended up buying one anyway.

And there I saw it, a dip n dots stand. It had 5 flavors, I remember it. It was expensive, a large cup was roughly 8 dollars. It was insane. It barely looked like a full cup of ice cream. But I bought it.

And there I saw it, a dip n dots stand. It had 5 flavors, I remember it. It was expensive, a large cup was roughly 8 dollars. It barely looked like a full cup of ice cream.

Hocus Pocus

Suspicion of being a witch. That's what everyone thinks, but why is it so weird for a girl to go out and play by herself? I mean if no one wants to play with me, then of course I'm going to go out by myself. Plus, how is a twelve-year-old a witch anyway. I always read that witches don't get their powers until they are turn sixteen, but maybe I could be an exception. Maybe everyone is right. Maybe this is why I don't fit in anywhere. Maybe I am a witch. I don't know though its all hard to say and all theoretical implications anyway. The same thing happened back home where we lived before we came here. The people there thought I was a witch too and they were planning to take matters into their own hands. My mom wouldn't tell me what they were going to do but she took me and ran away, so we ended up here. This little town called Homer. I haven't been able to make any friends here. All the kids at school think I'm weird. It's so frustrating. I feel like everywhere I go the whole witch thing follows me. I'm not able to go anywhere without anyone thinking I'm a witch. I don't know how it would be true. Neither of my parents have magic, so how could I have gotten magic? I don't think I could have. I don't think its possible. I just have to forget it. I have to try harder to make friends. I have to try harder to fit in, because maybe if I do, all of this will end. I will have someone to stick by my side. Someone to agree with me that I am not a witch. That I am a normal. No more hocus pocus nonsense.

Subtle Success

Brian Clemmings was a brilliant independent man. At a strapping 31 years old he had already developed his own computer security software and started up a computer and technology safety company. He lived alone with his border collie Chance in a charming one-bedroom apartment in downtown Chicago. Being that he was extremely successful it was evident that he had always done well in school. When he was in high school he was very well known and involved in many things. He was on the boys' soccer team, captain of the math team, and president of the robotics club. It is said that all of his involvement led him to be successful and further his education to become great. After graduation he went on to study mechanical engineering at the University of Illinois. He graduated with a 4.0 GPA and got offered an externship at Intel Computers. It's safe to say that Brian had been pretty successful all his life and he had accomplished his goals early on in his career. Being successful was not all he wanted in life, however. He had dreamed of a wife and children, maybe even moving to the suburbs to settle down. There were not a lot of women in the industry he decided he might try online dating. On a rainy Saturday afternoon, he went to the nearby coffee shop and sat down to set up his profiles. Suggestions that his perfectness may not be all it's cracked up to be when he faces the moment of describing himself. That is a super interesting situation. A few days pass and he got a couple of likes on his profiles. There are a few women who spark his interest, so it may be time from him to venture out into the dating world. He reaches out to most prominent candidate and they start messaging. This continues for a few weeks and Brian asks her to meet him for dinner at the Grand March restaurant. "Nicole Stevens, I'm here to meet Brian Clemmings."

Faith in Him

Wont god do it? Just ask. Relax. Pray. Meditate. And just wait for god to revenge for you. In my heart I thought I found the right man, but god was sending me so many signs of the good and the bad. The cleanse and the uncleanse. The trust and the un-trust and I continued to believe the man was mine, but he wasn't, and god kept telling me, but I was twenty-seven and I was tired, I was tired of running around and trying to find the right one. I want kids and a house I want a family, I guess that's too damn much to ask for. I graduated college with my degree in Political Science and minor in business. I was ready for a family. Don't know women want to live the rest of her life alone unless she crazy. I don't know but I sure don't. I'm young straight out of college and the last thing I need to be is... single you know. I don't know if I ask god for too much or too little? I don't want to come off too desperate to a man, you know men don't like that, especially when they feel like you easy to get like a cup of tea. And I'm one fine black woman and I can't be seen as easy... no the devil is a liar....

North Dakota

North Dakota has winter about 9 months out of the year. So due to that we always have white on the ground from all the snow. Every day I wake up and look out my window I see white fluffy powder. This white snow some days is fluffy and light and other days it is wet and heavy. When it is fluffy and light that is great snow to go snowboarding in. When it is wet and heavy it is great snow to make a snowman with. When I go out and begin to make a snowman you need to roll up 3 big circles but the head a little smaller. When you connect all those together you need to find 2 sticks around the same length and size. I always use my blue checkered scarf to tie around the neck so that is a tradition I have. For the three buttons up the middle you can use whatever you want. Such as rocks or buttons. I usually like to use rocks because I can do so many different sizes and colors. When you get to the head to you need to little rocks for the eyes and a big orange carrot for the nose. Lastly, you need to add a hat and that

can be whatever type of hat you prefer. I always do a brown cowboy hat because it is unique and I do not see that very often if ever.

Quarantine Queen

What day is it? Stuck in quarantine the days all start to blend together. Monday, Tuesday, WedThurs, FriSat. My life used to be so much fun. I miss people, coffee shops, shopping, eating out, and traveling. Should I even get out of bed? Shower? Put on makeup, no thanks. Well, I guess I should eat? I need coffee, what flavor should I treat myself to today, vanilla or hazelnut? What difference will it make anyway, no one cares. How long is this going to go on for, is this how my life is going to be forever? I decide to flip on the TV, Tiger King is on from last night. Who in the world thought of this TV show concept? Instead, I turn to the news to get my daily fix, my Cuomo daily fix that is. Why are so many people dying, it's really hard for me to believe. It's scary and I don't even want to go outside anymore. Good thing I don't have a dog to walk. I hope that this is a wake-up call for everyone, that we need to take care of ourselves more than ever, but also take all precautions so we can flatten the curve. In a way, is it bad to admit that I like working from home? Maybe this was a good change. What time is it now anyway? 3:30 pm, really? Yikes, I'm just so bored, there's only so many naps I can take in a day. Flipping through my phone, I downloaded the Tik Tok app last night. This app is stupid, why did I even bother. But everyone is so obsessed, let's see what it's all about. Maybe I should make a Tik Tok. Will anyone watch? This person looks interesting, the Quarantine Queen. Okay fine, I'll make a Tik Tok video.

The Color Brown

“My name is Benjamin George Williams and I am simply walking back to my home. I live at 13620 Oak Drive in the Meadows Community. How can I help you this evening?” The blood was pumping through my veins like a body builder on steroids. My chest was pounding like the drummer of a punk rock band. The sweat was starting to accumulate along my hair line. My parents told me exactly what to do in a situation like this. They wanted to make sure that I would always be able to come home to them, and that was all I wanted to do in this moment. I could see the intense bright blinding light flashing against my dark brown skin, but behind the light I could see a ghostly white appearance. It was in that moment that I knew for sure I truly did nothing wrong. I was walking home from my friend Adam's house. He lived about a mile away, so it's not a far walk for me, but I guess for some stupid reason it looks dangerous when I'm walking down the street when it's dark outside. It's only 10:15, so I'm not out past curfew. I wasn't vandalizing, loitering, or doing anything illegal, so I know this is strictly racism at its point. I'm a 14-year-old, hard-working, and playful young boy, but they don't see me as anything more than black. “Do you have any weapons on you” the officer yelled out to me. “No sir” my voice shook in response. “How may I help you this evening?”. “Where are you coming from” he said. This went on for what felt like an eternity. Question and question, it was like I was on a game show. Finally, he said to me “Get on your way then” and I could finally breath. The pound of bricks was listed off my chest. My parents saved my life in that moment.

Untitled

I saw a glimpse of you in my future. You were exactly who I created you to be in my head. A military boy who loved me and respected me. You played with our children. You were the husband I always wished you would be and the daddy to our children just like I dreamed. I loved you. And I loved the

character of you I built in my head. Your effortless demeanor and loving self. Your family who welcomed me in so easily. You who came home day after day after day and continued to love me like you did while I knew you. But dreams don't always pan out. You are a distant memory now. Someone I may never see again in my future. You weren't actually someone who loved me; you were someone who loved to take advantage of me. You will never be the father to my children, and I have become okay with that; knowing what I know now, I can rest assured that you and I were not meant to be. We don't see the struggle. Our future was nothing more than a dream of a young girl.

Untitled

Their love started like any other in this era. Facebook dating. He picked her up and they took off. Driving around the countryside talking about their lives. He was a red head, her a brunette. He loved Colorado and she only dreamed of moving there. He's done his fair share of rebellious things while she only dreams of what may happen if she were to rebel. They drove around and talked for hours and hours and ended with a drink at the bar. The following night and following four nights after, they hung out until 4am. They just couldn't get enough of each other. In a certain amount of words, they both shared they haven't felt this way before; something about each other is different. The next weeks followed with late hangouts and early drives home.

A Sudden Stop

Stressed and in a bad mood, Brad and his soon to be ex-wife, Mona, leave their first mediation. Married for 12 years, they've decided to call it quits. Not wanting to make eye contact, they wait together at the elevator to go down to their cars in the parking garage. The elevator door opens, a group of people get off, and Brad and Mona get on. Feeling overwhelmed, they both let out a sigh and at the same time reach for the garage button accidentally bumping hands. Their meeting was on the 19th floor of the tallest building in their town, so they had a long way to go to get to the garage. The feeling of immense awkwardness filled the elevator as they both jittered in their place, anticipating getting off the elevator and going their own way. The elevator, zooming downwards, beeping as they passed each floor, came to a sudden stop. Terrified and losing her balance from the sudden stop, Mona falls into Brad's arms. Brad, not feeling too sure about what just happened, consoles Mona telling her that things will be okay. Next thing they know, a voice comes on the speaker inside the elevator letting them know that someone is on the way. Forced to talk to each other, they reminisce on the good times they had together being in similar uncomfortable situations throughout their marriage. They laugh at how this is happening to them now, could it be some kind of sign? Time passes, but they don't pay attention to the fact that 3 hours have passed. Stilling on the floor of the elevator for the last couple of hours, they don't move when the elevator starts to move again. The doors open and a group of people ask if they are okay. Brad responds, "Yeah! We decided to not get divorced after all".

Untitled

I woke up, dazed, looking at the room around with no memory of how I may have gotten here. As things slowly became less blurred I started to get a sense of where I was. I was in a hospital room of some sort, but why? What was I here for? How long had I been here for? I started to lean up to call for someone, but I could barely get my voice out the first time, I tried again my voice slowly getting its sound back. No one answered, I heard no footsteps or voices, nothing. I looked around for ideas that didn't involve me having to move my foot since it was in a cast I figured it was injured somehow. The emergency button, I pressed

it over and over again. Still nothing. I pulled myself out of the bed, a shock of pain going up my leg once I put weight on it. I limped over to the remote that controlled the tv in my room. I turned it on flipping through channels until I found the news. The news anchor came on, describing these horrible events of another species invading our planet and taking over. The anchor said the day was March 10th, I looked at the clock, it said April 1st. This was a rerun from last month meaning I had been asleep this entire time. While I was asleep the world had ended, so now what.

Untitled

I lay on the sandy beach front with my towel watching the sun rise and the birds begin to chirp to welcome the new day. This was how I liked to start all of my mornings, coffee, sunrise, and quiet. My parents and I have lived in a small beach town since I was born, it is all I could remember for the last 15 years, we had never left it, never vacationed or went anywhere else. Strangely enough all of us were completely content with never leaving up until this morning. I woke up with the thought of might be out in the world, what places and people I have yet to meet and may never get to if I continue to stay here. Then I began to wonder why we had never left. I walked back into the house, my dad was the only other one up I told him my thoughts and my wonders hoping for an answer or explanation of some sort but instead I was met with aggressive yelling which eventually led to being locked in my room. My dad had never reacted to anything like this before it was terrifying, so I decided to not test it the rest of the day and just sit in my room, leading to even more overthinking. So, I turned on the tv to watch some crime documentaries, the girl in this kidnapping one had the same name as me, she was kidnapped as a baby and never found.

Untitled

As I walked to school I saw him as usual, sitting under the same oak tree reading the same book as the week before. The oak tree branches flowing down around him almost as if protecting him from the world outside of it. He had light brown sandy colored hair and church clothes on. I didn't even know his name, but still thought he was more interesting than any other boy I had met at this point in my life, all they cared about doing was throwing balls. I sat through school and headed back home again passing the oak tree expecting to see him and I was right, but this time he noticed me too. His glaring blue eyes finally caught me. I walked as fast as possible, so I didn't look like a complete stalker. I laid in bed that night tossing and turning, wondering if he always noticed me staring at him, or what the book he was reading was about, or if he had ever noticed or thought anything of me. I fell asleep and woke back up with the same thoughts stirring in my head. I walked the same route to school the next morning determined to keep my eyes at the ground this time. I was about to pass the oak tree, I couldn't help but look but he wasn't there this time, so I continued on my way, instead he was standing on the side of the road up ahead. "and that is how I met your grandfather" I tell my granddaughter.

Spicy

Mmmm, how can anyone ignore the idea of fried chicken? It's savory, crispy texture from the batter, having 6-8 different kinds of seasonings. Being deep fried in oil, to give it that hot, crunchy feel to it. It's salty, savory, sometimes you can make it sour or sweet if you dip it in sauce. Sometimes people want it spicy, but usually enough so that it isn't overwhelming. That isn't the case for me, I would get a spicy entrée and ask for more spicy sauce to give it more heat but sometimes it isn't enough. The sauces made

are either too vinegary, some are too sour, some don't have enough heat or not enough flavor. I want the heat that causes pain, where my eyes start watering and my nostrils and sinuses start to clear up from the capsaicin. I am not sure why I prefer this. The feeling that I can actually cry, tears flooding my vision when pain is inflicted, the feeling that I can finally breathe, when all the contents in my nose is blown away when it gets too overwhelming. The spice level so high that even it isn't tolerable that sometimes you feel like you'd prefer death over this pain right now, but I have it under control.

Dreams

The shiny drop-top blue convertible makes its way along the highway as Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" blares off the radio. Her long blonde hair flows in the wind as her polka dot scarf failed to keep it tied down. She grips the leather of the vintage steering wheel between her fingers as she rounds the curves of the mountain the car climbed. The engine roars with each coming contour. The sun beaming onto her skin was refreshing, like a tall glass of lemonade. Shifting into gear, she speeds past the old pickup truck in front of her. Rumor has it she is on the run. "I'm never going back again!" she screams at the top of her lungs. Is she actually running or just adventuring into a new part of her life? The golden hue over the hills starts to shift into a pink glow as the sun goes down. It will be getting dark soon. She pulls her dusty blue mustang into the nearby parking lot, where an old 'motel 8' sign flickers. As she puts her car into park, she pulls the scarf out of her hair to let it down. Two loud thuds erupt from nearby along with some mumbled out screams. "Quite down in there." she says politely as she taps on her trunk.

Gudetama

All over the desk is filled with documents, piles high of them. Personal documents, school documents, blank printing paper. Scratch paper with random writing on them are scattered all over the 4x4 desk. I'm drowning in it all and there seems to be no end to it all. The kitchen is empty, there is barely any food except for eggs. They are my friends. I've been eating rice and soy sauce when there is nothing else in the fridge. Sometimes I'll pair it with some vegetables, such as pickled cabbage so that the flavor doesn't get too bland. The crunchiness from the pickled vegetables, the sour flavor that is provided along with it helps the salty rice from being overpowering. Oh, how bland it would be if it weren't for other things coming in the way. A knock on the door surprises me. It was a light knock, someone was nervous to make noise. A small parcel is placed, obliquely along the wall. It looks worn from the journey, but it isn't heavily damaged. It smells like the pages of a new book, the cardboard is dry but fuzzy. Package for a lazy egg.

Untitled

I watched him watch me. I told a story already knowing how stupid it was. He'd smirk, trying desperately not to make real eye contact. He'd fold his head down and run a hand through his car oil colored hair as a sign that my shit was getting too deep. "What's the matter?", I'd ask all innocent. He'd look up and shake his head, him and I would be lead runners in a race for most enormous eyes. Usually, he'd followed that by saying something about how strange I was. Right before, he'd walk around the counter that held us to our own playgrounds and pull me into his strong but loveable chest. I wouldn't stop talking until he'd groan in fake annoyance. I'd laugh uncontrollably, knowing I'd found what I was looking for. I'd squeeze him into me and pinch his cheeks like I had a purse full of shitty candy. I loved him. Not in the way that you whisper it over a candle lit dinner or send it over text followed by a "goodnight". Not in the way you

say it out of formality as they leave for work or in a corny Facebook post on their birthday. But in the way that you'd watch them in class and find humor in the way they spoke too passionately. In the way they'd barge in the bathroom as you sat on the toilet after just weeks of knowing you. In the way they'd called potatoes by their scientific name of "russets". In the way they'd smirk at your joke because they didn't want you to know that, despite your being annoying, you were quite funny. In the way they let you say and do whatever you wanted because you didn't fear their judgment. The kind of love you only become aware of once you've gone your separate ways. The kind of love you only have for someone who was never really yours. The kind of love you feel through memories. Beautifully tainted, memories. I loved him. Unfortunately, he who loved not only me but dirty money.

Untitled

I recalled the time he snuck me out of my home. That kind of behavior for me was like drinking beer out of a wine glass using a straw. I'd tiptoed across our wooden floors that night better than most of the ballet dancers at our ant hole sized public school. I opened our back door in the same motion cars went through our Quik Trip wash, but I ran like a bat out of hell down that rattle snake shaped, gravel driveway. A black, rusted out, grandpa's-youth aged Chevy truck, with what used to be two purple and white stripes down its side, waited for me at the end of the snake. It wasn't his truck, I knew that, but I also knew who's truck it was. I was driving in the truck with a stranger who I'd known personally since Pre-K. The cloth interior felt like sandpaper on my indecent thighs as I forgot about the myriad of questions I had for that boy. On our voyage to his lake, the sun baked color he wore on his skin acted as some sort of drug that had me forgetting about the man-made waterfalls which escaped my ocean eyes damn near every night in those last three months. I was serving as General in my own personal World War III with the clock that late June night, that we spent far too close in his parents' camper - which I never got the chance to adorn before he had yet again called us quits. Although, even my poor attempt at a closed off nature couldn't hide the fact that I hadn't had that level of excitement since the last time he used my moral compass as a stomping ground for his perpetually boring reeboks.

Untitled

I would hardly notice the vomit inducing ride take place, trampling pothole after pothole. Not to mention ever really hearing what sounded like, not a helicopter, but a private jet attempting to land itself on the roof of the big yellow inchworm. I was distracted. Feverishly focused on the conversation ensuing behind me. In those days I was never part of the back of bus talk. My one friend and I would sit somewhere amongst the middle section of the bus, usually by kids way younger than us. She'd yell at the little pups who'd try to sit further back than us and out of mere embarrassment I'd pretend I didn't care where we sat because nothing was worse than her broadcasting our lack of popularity like the evening news. She'd offer me the plethora of treats her mom routinely packed her and then she'd pass out for the entirety of the ride. So not only was I eavesdropping but I was doing it alone. He was always part of the back of the bus chit chat. I mean why wouldn't he be? He was the basketball coach's son and carried himself as if his shit smelt like petunias. All the things that the adult version of me now finds repulsive in men, the younger version of me once salivated over. He'd sit with them, laugh with them, make fun of younger kids with them, whisper with them, and yet I was barely even visible to them. My ears would grow tired of being strained and I'd try to sleep but I wouldn't. We'd travel nearly six hours round trip and I'd be lucky if he'd make eye contact with me once. So, years later he and them graduated and I found a new peace in being nothing like they were but mostly came to the realization that bus rides were wonderfully bumpy and incredibly tumultuous.

Lullaby

Eclipse rubbed at her eyes, sniffing. Why should this continue? Why should she continue doing this hell? Was it worth it? She sniffled more, tears falling from her eyes. She had thrown her phone to the other side of the room, not answering it despite the buzzes that seemed endless. She laid out on the floor and stared up at the ceiling, watching the fan spin slowly around from the breeze that blew in from the open window. The only light in the room was from the window as well, the outside lights shimmering and glistening. Her radio was on, playing soft music, but she had already tuned it out. Until a message came across the radio, one meant for her. She heard the voice of the person on the other side, asking her to try one more time and to listen to this lullaby. She listened to the music, her eyes eventually starting to feel heavy and began to close on their own. The message was working and before long, she had dozed off into darkness. On the other side of the radio, the voice suddenly felt relieved, knowing that she had finally fallen asleep.

Right or Wrong

Moira stared at the flask in her hand, swirling it around with slow movements. She hummed as she did so, watching the reaction inside. It went from a bright yellow to a dark purple, a one life-restoring solution now would draw life from the individual unlucky enough to come across it. She heard the monitor beeping in the background as it continued its progress on keeping an eye on the test subject. She set the flask down and glanced up at the digital board on the wall in front of her. She touched it and there must have been a glitch in the system because instead of it coming up with more data, it switched to her personal computer screen. There was a picture of her with a little girl in her lap, smiling. She froze, staring at the picture. She knew what she was doing was considered wrong. She had spent her entire life working on creating life and destroying it as well. Her work in genetics had caused so much pain in the world, but she needed to keep working. For her. For their lives together. Her eyes slowly floated down to the flask, now dark purple and still swirling. No, she was not wrong, she was right. She knew she was right because it was for her. She picked up the flask and turned towards the test subject, ready to test it.

Protect Her

Reinhardt growled, holding his shield in front of him and her. She whimpered in pain, gingerly wrapping up her leg. He glanced back at the small blonde woman; Mercy was her name. He was the one charged with protecting her. He had promised to give his life to protect her. She was the doctor that could fix everything. She only cared for everyone else. He looked forward again, seeing the bullets still flying toward him as he held his shield. His teammates were firing back somewhere around him, shouting orders to try and hold off the enemy. He could see his shield was beginning to break, but he still protected Mercy. She grabbed onto his arm. "Leave," she begged him, and he shook his head. No, he would never leave her to the enemy. He would always stand in front of her, no matter what the consequences were. She was the healer, and he was her protector. That was his charge, that was the promise he was going to keep. He looked forward again, seeing an enemy in a black hood coming right at them. Reaper. He frowned and stood up tall, letting his shield fall as he charged Reaper. He would protect her.

Untitled

Scroll down and read Elizabeth's story. This piece is special in that it is quite long and so not really a piece of flash fiction. It's actually useful for us, however, because it's so rich and interesting, and can allow us to play a little bit. That is, I want you all to make certain kinds of changes to it, just to see what that feels like and what results. I'm not proposing these changes to Elizabeth, though of course she's free to go with anything we might be doing as she continues to work on the piece.

Untitled

Life today isn't what it used to be. I remember when I could go out with my friends. We would walk downtown in our cheap mini-skirts and fake leather heels to whatever bar called our name. We would go get \$1 margaritas that tasted more like mix than tequila. We would walk to go get beer at a hick hole in the wall that smelled of cheap alcohol and low standards. Other times we would go spend extra cash on martinis that we really couldn't afford and that our small bodies couldn't handle. Most of the time we would share an Uber. We would cram into a mini van driven by a man that couldn't wait for us to get out of his car. I remember a time when this guy kept making funny comments and my friend next to me just kept egging him on. At the time I thought it was hilarious. I can still remember the look on the drivers face as I was laughing uncontrollably in the back seat. Those times are the ones I remember now, as I can't go in any of those places. Covid-19 has done a lot to different people. To me it's hurt my social life and my social health. Going out with my friends and drinking the weekend away made it easy to forget all the problems that Monday through Thursday had in store for me. I would count down the days until I was able to finally get to drink with my friends and laugh off the comments of unhappy customers with them fat guts asking me why their pasta tastes like something you get out of the bag. Everyday, I'm supposed to smile and apologize to them while they hurl insults at me. That is the part I don't miss. I don't miss people complaining on why their food isn't right or the service isn't like its supposed to be. I don't miss it. It's funny because I still have a job. Most people don't. Most people are at home and really can't leave the house. They say its to lower the curve, but I think they are too scared to leave. Or they are too miserable inside their own homes, so they lash out at other people that leave because they need to leave. When all of this first started and all my classes were canceled, I cried. I never thought I would be the person that cried over school, but I did. I would call my dad that lives states away to look for comfort. He would say "Honey, you have to be responsible. You can't spend any money on things you don't need. Do you have money saved? Do you have cashed stowed away where no one can get it? What if your job fires you? Are you going to find a new one?" Five questions all in one breathe was too much for my delicate head to handle. My sister would say "Don't talk to him, all he is doing is making you feel worse!" I would cry and cry because I'm the only one that talks to dad. He lives so far away, and he lives alone. Living alone right now, would be the nail in the coffin for me. I don't think I would kill myself. I think I would just become clinically insane. I can't be alone. I have tried it and it just doesn't work. I lived alone for a week before I bought a cat. My cat depends on me and she loves me so much. It was just her and I. It was just the two of us before I couldn't handle that anymore.

During the weeks leading up to me trying to live alone, I was living in a two bedroom apart with a friend of mine from high school. We hardly ever saw each other. He worked nights as a nurse in the ER and hated it. Hated it, for drunk stupid people that would come in. I would work during the days as a bartender of a family restaurant. I hated it for the sober people that would get overpriced drinks and complain about the lack of alcohol. We hardly saw each other but when we did, we would take night walks and talk about how much work sucks. We would walk for a few hours until our feet were tired, and our mouths couldn't muster up anything else to talk about. These little warm night walks were my haven. There was no judgment, there was no emotional connection, and there wasn't anything that either of us were looking for. We were just talking. This summer would be the last easy summer of my life. Looking back on it I wish that I had done more to really take in those moments. Take in the moments of how my room looked when I was laying in bed and light from the moon would come through my window. I would take in the scent of pot lingering in the air as we would walk by each house through this empty college

town. I would take in every moment and soak it in to just remember everything that was happening in that moment. After summer would turn to fall my life would change and I would have no way of knowing it.

When I would go out and drink alcohol with my friends before this pandemic, it was like my therapy. I had gone to therapy so many times. The first time I went to therapy was with my mom. My parents were getting a divorce and my mom was bouncing us from therapist to therapist to heal us from this life change. I never used to cry then. I didn't care that they were getting a divorce. I didn't care that they were both two broken people, not trying to fix themselves but their children. I just didn't care. I cared about my friends and where I wanted to go in life. Back then I never thought my life would be as to how it is now. When I thought of my self at this age of 25, I never thought that I would still be in college. I would be drinking to forget all the memories and pain that had been brought my way in the few years from then. Drinking with my friends made it easy to forget the people and the pain in my chest. Popping pills to change my state from anxiety to not. Those pills were fun when you were drinking. You would get drunk just as fast. Taking an anti-anxiety meds and taking anti-depressant when drinking something that makes people depressed is such an oxymoron. Taking these pills helped me. They made me feel good, they made me feel human. My brain would freak out at the slightest of inconvenience and these meds would bring me in and make me feel whole again. One guy at the time I was dating told me that these meds were just a crutch. I never forgot that. Something that helped me feel good was wrong. Maybe that's what alcoholics think when they are drinking. They don't think that its wrong, it just feels good. I changed my whole mindset after that. I didn't take them anymore. Life just got worse. I couldn't cope with anything. Anything and everything that was said to me in that relationship would make me cry. Yet I held on to that relationship for dear life. I didn't know that, that relationship would take me down to the very depths of what most people would think of an emotional hell. That would only be just the beginning.

During the summer when I was living with my friend from high school, I started dating someone new. I was so excited for this new relationship. A fresh start to get to know someone and fall in love all over again. I was so excited for this part of my journey through life to start. It felt so freeing and so lovely. I made new friends because of the friends that he had, and I started to love each one of them. We all just seemed to mesh together and just fit. It was like I was a new member of their family. During this time, I started to see things from my past start to pop up. I would worry that he would cheat on me, just like my dad would do to my mom. I never wanted to be that, because I strove to be anything like my parents. I didn't want to build a relationship on resentment and lack of trust. One day all the good things came to a screeching halt when someone appeared at my front door. A boyfriend from my past had appeared and had mustered his way into my apartment. What made it worse was that he sweet talked his way into my bed. I had become everything that I had strove not to be. I had let this person that controlled me for years, come into my haven that was built for me and for my little furry friend. I let him just slide right back into my life in a blink. I knew I wasn't this person. I wasn't the person that would cheat. This guy had cheated on me with so many self-absorbed girls with. I wasn't that person that would just let this happen. At least, I thought I wasn't but maybe I was. It started with this one night. I told myself to just let it be over after this one night, but he kept coming back. My mind would sit there and be firm but the words that would spill out of my stupid mouth just let him keep coming back. The cheating was something that started to happen all the time. It came easy, easy like it is to get addicted to alcohol or pills. The next thing that started to become easy was the lying. Lying about who I was with and where I was going. I wasn't just lying to two different guys in my life, I started lying to myself. I started telling myself that this was okay. I told myself that everyone does this. This wasn't self-destructive at all. Nobody would get hurt if I could just keep it a secret for as long as I could. When you build lie upon lie it is never good. Secrets are never good. I couldn't wrap my head around why I was turning into my parents. They weren't good people. They weren't good role models. I just let that happen. When I was with one guy, I would feel so good. He was so sweet and kind. He made me feel so good. When I was with the other, he made me feel like what I was. A liar and a person that wouldn't go anywhere because I would just hurt people for the rest of my life. Don't ask my why I just let this abuse happen, I just did. He would come over, have sex with me, eat all the food I had bought myself for a week, annoy my cat, and then leave. Most of the time I felt numb, and I would blink, and he would be out the door. I would sit in bed

after it would happen and tell myself that I could end it. I could tell myself that if I went back to that first night I would turn around and get in my car and drive. I would drive until he was gone, and with it his memory. I would tell myself young, naive self these things, but that's just what I was. I was young and naïve. When people do bad things, the bad things catch up with you. I didn't know it at the time, but it would catch up with me very soon.

When the boy would come over and have sex with me, he would always wear a condom. He would go into my bathroom and make sure that I was taking my pill every day. I knew he was doing his best to cover all bases. He didn't want me to get pregnant. Then he would have to tell his parents what he did. Then I would have to tell everyone what I did. He would hate me for it, and I would hate me for it. It would be the kind of hate you'd feel when bang you elbow hard. You're mad at yourself, but you did it and now you have to deal with the pain. I knew what I was doing was wrong. I just kept doing it, and it lasted for months. I wasn't a little kid; my parents couldn't tell me what I was doing was wrong. I had to stop it myself. I had to be the one to put myself in a time out and tell myself that I was being bad, I had to stop. Stopping came all too quickly for me. His deepest fear came true one spring morning. I started getting morning sickness. I would lay in bed and feel my mouth pooling with saliva. I would whip the covers off my pale body and run over the cool floors. I would press my red chapped kneecaps into the floor and let all the contents of my stomach run into the white cool toilet. Exhausted, I would climb into bed until the feeling would come again and I would run across the cold laminate floor all over again. I cried as I held that white and purple crap pregnancy test in my hand. I cried as if my tears would clean up the mess that I had made. I wasn't taking any pills, so the depression came all too quickly and willingly. I stayed home; I never left the small one room apartment. I started to hate myself, I hated myself for what I had done. I would sit on the couch and watch T.V to forget, but I would sit and let my mind wonder. I was petrified to tell anyone of what was growing inside of me. Just the thought would make me go into hysterics. One day, I finally allowed one of my close friends to come over. She brought soup and a drink packed with electrolytes for worry that I had become gravely ill. She looked around the dirty apartment, clothing everywhere, dishes caked with food remnants, and trash thrown about. She looked at my eyes, puffy and vacant. All I had to do was hold up the 5 different tests that I had taken, and she knew. She held me, and we both cried together. That afternoon that she stayed with me; I knew that she would always be there to help me. She made me take a shower, helped me clean up the dirty apartment, and helped me come up with a plan on what to do for these life changes. She stayed with me the entire night. She held my hand when I cried and tucked me in when I finally fell asleep. She woke me up early the next morning. She said "It's time, you need to stop. You need to face life and what you have done. It's time to be an adult."

I first started out with telling the father. I was too scared to do it alone. She was there to help me. She was there when he was screaming at me. When spit was coming out of his mouth because he was so mad. When his entire body was shaking, and his eyes were filled with anger and regret. He told me that I was worthless. He was already telling me exactly what I was feeling. I will never forget that moment. That moment my friend stood up in between the two of us and slapped him square across his rage filled face. She slapped him so hard that her handprint was perfectly detailed on the side of his face. His stunned face was the last memory that I have of him. He walked out and never talked to me again. He blocked any text message that I sent. Any call that I tried to make to him wasn't received. He showed me in that time that he wasn't a man ready to deal with consequences. I was a woman that was ready to deal with hers. The next few days were filled with the same feeling of worthlessness. My friend, still there when I told the boy that I loved what I had done to him. He was quiet the entire time that I was spilling my guts to the person that had been nothing but kind. I watched as his face would twist and turn as my words would come out of my mouth. He finally broke down crying on the floor, as I did the same. We stayed on the floor awhile. The three of us just sat in silence. My friend finally got up and left. She knew that it was time for me to be alone. Her work was done. After everything that I had told that boy, after everything I had done to him, I knew I deserved to get yelled at. I knew that I deserved every harsh word would that would come out of his lips. Instead, he pulled me from the floor and hugged me. He hugged me so hard that I could feel every muscle in his arms as he pulled me in. I could feel his heart pounding out of his chest and into mine. I knew he wouldn't stay. I knew he wouldn't want to be around me. I

didn't even want to be around me. He gave me a soft kiss on the lips and said goodbye. Unlike the boy before he called and texted me every day to check and see how I was doing. He wanted to make sure I was healthy and that the bean inside was growing. He was a man. He thought about someone other than himself and gave way to show that everything was going to be okay. I was in awe of his kindness. To this day it has taught me the best lesson in life. That no matter what, we should treat others with kindness.

I never had the baby. The baby died in during my first trimester. All the alcohol and partying had caught up with me. Blood was all that lay on the floor. Blood and tears were everywhere, and I was exhausted. I felt like this is what I deserved. For all the bad things I had done, this is what I deserved. I didn't deserve to have something so pure in my life. Life had come full circle. The man that helped me cope with everything going on, helped me to heal. He came over everyday and was there to comfort me. He helped me clean the blood off the floor. He helped me shower and was there to tell me that everything would be alright. After everything was wrong in my life. This finally felt right. He didn't want to date me. He didn't have any emotional connection with me, he just wanted me to be okay. I owe him so much for that. I think about him often. I think about him when I'm walking the streets with my friends in our cheap mini-skirts and fake leather heels. I think about him when I'm drinking those \$1 margaritas that have very little tequila. I think about him when I am drinking martinis that I can't afford. I know that somewhere, he has someone in his life that is giving him everything that he gave to me. I wasn't the person for him. At the time I wasn't anyway. He was everything that I wanted in a partner, and I couldn't give him anything back. Covid-19 takes away a lot of things from people. It doesn't take away who you are and where you came from. It doesn't take away your story. It adds to it. I don't like being alone, and I know I'm not alone. My best friend was there with me through it all, and still is. She's the one that takes me downtown and makes me laugh until I can't breathe. She's the one that will always bring out the best in me. I get to live with her and be around her light every day. I am so thankful for that. I'm thankful that she picked me up off the floor and gave me my life back. After she smacked that boy across the face she said "She's not worthless. She is everything."