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Editor

In Abstentia

Moderator

Robert Hutchison

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Kevin Berns, Laurie Kohler, and Emily Ledbetter

Table of Contents

Cover: *Picture by Max Stroyeck*

<i>One Last Dance</i> - short story by Sean Joplin	3
<i>Fiery Dragon by Kade Chan</i> - Origami by Matt Wemhoener	6
<i>Clover Folding (3-Stage) by Shuzo Fujimoto</i> - Origami by Matt Wemhoener	10
<i>Great Faith</i> - photograph by Mr. Joe Wotawa	11
<i>May 29</i> - poetry by Mr. Andy Lange	12
<i>The Dark Side</i> - short story by John Higgins	13
<i>Introspection</i> - photograph by Mr. Joe Wotawa	16
<i>Clover Folding (11-Stage)</i> by Shuzo Fujimoto - Origami by Matt Wemhoener	17
<i>Bascetta Star by Pado Bascetta</i> - Origami by Matt Wemhoener	18
<i>Love</i> - poetry by Ta'Kwahn Ward	21
<i>Life</i> - photograph by Mr. Joe Wotawa	21
<i>Cruelty</i> - short story by Zachary Jones	22
<i>Flower Tower by Chris K. Palmer</i> -- Origami by Matt Wemhoener	24
<i>Fiery Dragon by Kade Chan</i> - Origami by Matt Wemhoener	29
<i>The Pacer</i> - short story by Grant Kraemer	31
<i>Clover Folding (11 Stage)</i> by Shuzo Fujimoto- Origami by Matt Wemhoener	32
<i>What Next?</i> - photograph by Mr. Joe Wotawa	35
<i>Renewal</i> - photograph by Mr. Joe Wotawa	37
<i>Drive</i> - poetry by Kameron Ziercher	37
<i>Teen Angst</i> - short story by Doug Dolan	38
<i>Fiery Dragon by Kade Chan</i> - Origami by Matt Wemhoener	39
<i>Great Promise</i> - photograph by Mr. Joe Wotawa	42

ONE LAST DANCE

by Sean Joplin

Before Prom, Will and his best friend Charlie went to Good Will to pick out some ties with Will's mother. Will wanted to get the space-themed tie, but his mother liked the formal skinny, black tie. Charlie grabbed a bolo tie, trying to get a laugh out of anyone who saw him. That's why the two were friends. Will sometimes took things too seriously, Charlie didn't take anything seriously.

They went to pick up their dates, Claire and Janine, on the way home to dinner. Claire wore a Tahitian-blue, short, sleeveless ball gown with sheer illusion dotted with silver beads along the neck. It didn't matter to Will. It only needed one adjective: beautiful. Janine wore a purple-paradise, sweetheart neckline with mermaid bottom that matched Charlie's shirt perfectly. The two had spent an entire Saturday finding the perfect shirt; a Saturday Charlie would have liked to drive down to the lake with Will.

The four arrived at Will's house where a home cooked meal of burgers and salad awaited them.

"You idiot!" Janine shouted as she shot daggers with her eyes towards Charlie for spilling salad dressing on his purple-paradise shirt.

"I might have an extra shirt upstairs."

"It won't match my dress perfectly. Now how I am supposed to win prom Queen?"

Charlie shook his head, "Would you please calm down? It's just a shirt, and not even yours."

The two quickly up to Will's room, but the only button-down they could find was a red, plaid shirt.

Charlie chuckled to himself, "Janine is going to be pissed. This make me look like a lumberjack."

"You don't care that she's going to flip?"

"I kind of want her too. She's just been awful to deal with lately."

Janine took one glance at Charlie, "We are going to my house and getting you a different shirt."

Stunned, Charlie took a second to compose himself. "The dance starts in twenty minutes.

We don't have time."

"I'm not going to be seen with you when you're dressed like that"

"I guess we're not going together then."

Now it was Janine who was stunned. Claire not wanting to completely ruin Janine's night, "I'll drive you separately to the dance."

The four left the house in awkward silence.

Will stood in the back of the dance hall, continually brushing his hair out of his eyes. His leg prevented him from dancing. Charlie, Claire, and he had been at Mammoth Rocks Park climbing around when he slipped trying to climb as high as his best friend. He still had a little anger towards Charlie for daring to jump that twelve foot gap, but he always reminded himself that he had accepted the dare to impress Claire. "Where is she?" he mumbled to himself. "Probably just dancing with Charlie." He laughed as he remembered his last attempt to dance; maybe the boot wasn't such a curse after all. His smile fit into his well-structured face, with his high cheekbones and thick eyebrows framing his deep turquoise eyes. His ears stuck out just enough for him to worry, but not enough for anyone

else to notice. A steel-colored elbow patch jacket hung over the cheap, wobbly chair next to him, on which his aluminum crutches also rested.

The gym started to get hot from the sweaty dancers. He rolled his pink, regent slim fit dress shirt, which contrasted perfectly with his grey suit, up to his elbows. He then proceeded to adjust his poorly tied black tie. His hair constantly bothered him. Having fiddled with all the things that needed fiddling, he decided to walk over to get a drink. His sleek silver pants were a little constricting, but he had to go slow anyway. His leg ached if he walked too long on his boot without his crutches, but he would return quickly to his comfortable position along the back wall, out of the way of all the dancers.

As Will stretched his leg like his doctor and parents had told him, Charlie walked over. Will recognized him instantly because of his distinguishable brow: it drew the observer's eyes right to it. It wasn't ugly, gave Charlie the overall look of a no-nonsense guy. Will knew he was all nonsense.

"Have you seen Claire?"

Charlie shook his head. "Sorry bro."

“I’m sure she’s fine. Just off having fun with her friends.”

“Like Janine?” Charlie laughed as he said her name.

“I’m finally free of her.”

“Why didn’t you just break up with her?”

“Because then I wouldn’t have a date to Prom. I’m having more fun without her though. She took the whole prom queen thing way too seriously.”

“Who are you dancing with now without her?”

“Just different groups. Making a fool of myself. I’ll run into the middle of groups, dance like a madman and then leave for the next group.”

“At least you can dance. This damn boot’s keeping me from dancing.”

“To the relief of everyone here, you’re an awful dancer. You’d think as valedictorian you would be able to remember where your feet are.”

“Well sor-ry Mr. Fancy-Feet running back. Not everyone here spends hours a day trying to make their body to look like the Rock.”

While he would never admit it, Charlie had put on a lot of muscle the past year. He had to switch his shirts from large to extra-large. On the charts at the doctor’s office, he was obese because of his above average

muscle mass.

“Well star running back isn’t really an accomplishment here. We suck at sports remember?”

They both laughed because they had only ever had one win in their entire football career and that was against their JV squad.

“Hey let’s get something to drink.”

“Want your crutches?”

“Nah, my pits are getting sore and sweaty from them. I guess the wetness would fit into the under the sea theme.”

Charlie looked around at the walls. He took pride in his artistic efforts in helping decorate the gym. He never would have joined the committee if Will hadn’t insisted. He felt especially proud of the clownfish.

Will continued, “You did a good job, except on the fish. They look like a blind person painted it.” He chuckled to himself, “I remember you showed up to my house with paint smeared all over your clothes. My mother got so pissed.”

“Guess I just have a talent for spilling things onto nice shirts.”

Both the boys laughed at this. Charlie’s jovial attitude continued to amaze Will. If he had dumped Claire right before the dance he would not enjoy



artwork by Matt Wemhoener

the dance. However, Janine was no Claire.

The two finished grabbing their cola's and began looking at the dancers they could see. Most of them were hidden behind each other. The dark room did not aid their eyes; not enough carrots in the diet. As "No Hands" by Waka Flocka came on assaulting Will's ears, he scoffed at the jocks, "Look at all your 'home boys' doing those weird, two word dance moves. The songs about them are shit. Just repeat the name of

the dance, make millions."

"Yeah well those weird dance moves got them some nice dates. Look at the nerds. Standing there awkwardly daring each other to ask the girls to dance. Pitiful how snobbish the girls are."

"Let's do something about it. You're a fairly attractive guy with your dark skin and high cheekbones, and everyone knows I'm a trustworthy guy so we could probably convince the stuck up West End girls to dance with them."

As they slowly progressed to the group of girls who had refused dates, Will noticed Charlie eyeing Grace. Will caught her attention, “Hey Grace! Would you do us a huge favor and convince some of your friends to dance with some of my friends?”

“Depends on whom.”

“It’s the quote un quote ‘nerds’” He looked at his friend. “And my unfortunate friend standing right here.”

“Gross. We’ve seen them staring at us all night long. It’s creepy. Charlie on the other hand,” she moved a little closer to him, “maybe.”

Charlie for the first time all night was not prepared, “How-how-how do you do? I-i-i- mean how’s it going?”

She laughed derisively at the dumbfounded man in front of her.

Charlie suddenly stood tall at the banter. He cleared his throat and spoke with more confidence, “Maybe they are staring because they want to ask you to dance, but know that your reaction would be exactly this. It takes guts to ask girls as beautiful as you and your friends to dance.”

Grace loved to be flattered, and Charlie found it easy to flatter her. She looked back at

her friends and they merely shrugged. “Alright.”

Charlie suddenly happy again exclaimed, “Sweet! They’ll be so happy. Will, care to dance with us or are you too tired?”

“No thanks. Walking without crutches has put too much stress on these old-man legs. I’m going to sit down again.”

Charlie understood. He led Grace to the dance floor.

As Will sat down in his chair, his eyes scanned the crowd to try to find Claire again. After a couple songs he found her. She was dancing with Jonny, her ex. Jonny was the star-quarterback and had everything going for him. Tall, muscular, handsome, and charming; everyone loved him except Will. He knew that Jonny cheated on Claire, and he was worried Claire might fall for his lies and dump him. His leg never hurt more. He grabbed his crutches and walked out of the gym to get some fresh air and admire the beautiful, clear night sky.

He suddenly heard a voice that floated like a feather on the wind.

“I thought I might find you out here. I know how much you love the stars.”

Despite being mad at her

he couldn't help but notice her beauty. Her blonde hair curled for the night resting on her slim, but fit, shoulders. This framed one of the most delicate faces he had ever seen. Her pale blue eyes in her soft cheeks added to this.

"Not as much as you love Jonny." Claire turned to him with a perplexed expression. "I saw you dancing and talking with him."

"That was for one song, and yes he asked me to get back with him despite him cheating on me. Besides, I have you." As she said this she embraced Will to let him know that she meant what she said. This was all Will needed.

"It's just everything's been going so good lately I expected something to go wrong eventually."

"It already has so don't worry."

"What do you mean?"

"We're going to different colleges in three months. Instead of seeing each other every day we'll see each other only on the holidays."

The thought had never crossed Will's mind. He was too concerned about leaving his parents' home he had forgotten who he was also leaving behind. He let go of her.

"We can always Skype and text. It won't be the same as having you here with me every day, but it will suffice."

Claire thought for a moment before responding.

"I guess Dayton is fairly close to Notre Dame. We could meet up for special occasions outside of the holidays."

"Like our anniversary and birthdays. See? it won't be too awful."

As the two stood there happy with their solution, the slow dance song of the night came on. Neither of them had ever heard it, but they knew it signaled the end of the dance.

"I still can't dance, so care to take a romantic walk around the school with me?"

She couldn't help but laugh. "You are unlike any boyfriend I've had before. In a good way though."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes I will go on a walk around the school with you."

They proceeded out of the gym parking lot and onto the football field. The sight of the tired bleachers paved with bits of food combined with the smell of hot dogs and summer brought him back. He smiled as he thought about all the times he had gone hoarse screaming "Lick 'em good. Lick 'em real

good.” The Licksville Tongues never licked anyone real good, they were usually licked, but they didn’t care. They knew that they would lose to the larger counties in the suburbs, but they had the most heart. He reminisced about the games, like the time they almost beat the Cougarsville Cougars. Down by six with one play left on the one yard line, they handed the ball off to Charlie who proceeded to get his clock cleaned by their massive linebacker. He had missed their only win because he had had a soccer game that night. He wished their school was better at soccer. He was sick of losing. He never made it to the finals in soccer and their coach had always yelled at him. He wished the coach had at least told him once, “good job”.

“Will why are you crying?”

He didn’t even realize that he had been. “Thinking back on all the work I’ve put into this school and how no one’s recognized it.”

“Well that’s because it’s sort of assumed. I mean you do really well in soccer and track, stars of both really, AND you’re valedictorian. What is there not to be proud of? Why does anyone need to tell you you’re the best? You are the best by definition.”

Will still had difficulty believing it and she could tell.

“You’re going to the University of Notre Dame to study Business. You’re going to make tons of money and be successful.”

Will let a single quick “ha” out.

“What?”

“That’s exactly it. I’ve tried so hard in school because of my parents, not for me. I’m doing business for them. I’m making lots of money in business so that it will make them happy. I want to work for NASA.”

He said these with such conviction that she knew that it had been bothering him for a while. He was starting to sob gasp for breath in between words.

“I’ll make plenty of money if I became an aeronautical engineer, but nooo, I’ll make more money going into business.”

She let him cry it out before responding.

“Then go work for NASA.”

She let these words sink in.

“Some people spend their entire lives searching for their passion, their vocation and they never find it. They live day by day, never dreaming beyond the twenty-four solar cycle. Go do what you love to do, even if it means being distant from your family. You can’t choose blood,

but you can choose to love them. You're nothing like any boyfriend I've had before, and that's because you're special. Follow your dreams. It's not a bad field to go into. I will support you whatever you end up doing."

That's all Will had ever wanted: unconditional support.

"Let's head up to the baseball field. You've always loved baseball."

Will slowly got up and walked with her to the south

end of the school; here he stepped into the batter's box. Taking a nearby rock, he tossed it up and swung his crutch. *Whack* The crutch made direct contact with his head on the follow through.

Will laughed and his own stupidity while Claire guffawed and fell over. Will needed that. He had taken senior year too seriously. Apply to this college and this scholarship, never stopping to make sure he didn't miss life. "I wish I had tried out for the team four years' ago."



artwork by Matt Wemhoener



artwork by Joe Wotawa

Claire still gasping for breath, “I can’t believe our four years are already done.”

Will’s phone buzzed. It was from Charlie. *Hey can Claire give you a ride home? Grace and I are going to hang out with some of her friends. Figured you didn’t want to come.* Will showed Claire the text and she agreed. *Yeah that’s fine. Don’t get too crazy.* The two proceed to Claire’s silver Toyota Camry. Will wasn’t ready to head home quite yet.

“We should head to the park and sit by the lake and enjoy the night together.”

“I thought your mother said

you had to be home by midnight?”

“She did”

“Well it’s eleven forty-seven right now.”

Will lied, “She won’t care if I’m a little late.”

When they arrived at the park they went to their favorite bench by the lake. The sky had remained clear from before.

“Where’s Orion? That one’s my favorite.”

As Will scanned the sky for him his phone buzzed again, this time with his mother’s special ring. *Come home now or you’re grounded for a week.* Will sat there staring at it,

weighing the options. He put his phone back into his pocket.

“Who was that?”

“My mother threatening me to come home.”

“Damn. Guess we should probably leave then.”

Will stated firmly, “No.”

“No? Won’t she ground you?”

“Yes, but now I can spend all night with you, hell the whole summer. She can only

ground me if I go back home.”

Claire wasn’t sure she was ready to spend the whole summer with Will. “The whole summer?”

“I’m just exaggerating.

What I’m trying to say is that instead of spending thirty minutes with you, I can stay out as long as I want now.”

Claire saw his point. She snuggled up against him.

“So where’s Orion?”

MAY 29

by Mr. Andy Lange

A new baby boy comes to life
Happy are the husband and wife
Along with the baby, a new goal is born
His future education we now adorn

How to save for our baby ever so well
Among many ways would be Coverdell
But our focus is college, the costs ever inflated
To not have to pay we’d be so elated

College cost growth today is just absurd
In 18 years... (Insert curse word)
I need to save money to pay for the cost
My boy needs an education or else he’ll be lost

A state tax deduction is what we look for
With a bit of growth we won’t fear the bookstore
The tax man will keep his hands off our growth
Deductions and exclusions, not often we get both

This account seems so grand, the benefits abound
In every state in the nation can this plan be found
The best college savings tool I do opine
What a blessing it is, thanks be 529

THE DARK SIDE

by John Higgins

I remember once, when I was a teenager, having trouble holding down friends. Every few months for a couple of years, I'd have to start from scratch because I did one thing or said the other that obliterated all the hard work I'd done to forge those friendships. I went through two groups of friends before finally finding a home. Although I had a certain few friends who stuck with me through it all, most of them cast me aside once I said or did something that they thought of as "unbecoming" or I had outlived my usefulness, as it were. At least, that's what I told myself.

After successfully alienating my second group of friends, a disturbing thought began to bounce around my head. Every once in a while, I would ask myself, *What if they were right about you?* I would quickly tell myself, *Who am I trying to kid, that's nonsense!* and poof, out of my head the thought would usually go. Sometimes, though, an even worse thought would present itself. *The only one you're trying to fool is yourself, and*

it's not working very well, is it? It never went far beyond that, though, because at that point I'd find myself in a conversation with somebody about video games or sports or "How'd you do on the Drummond test?" But then, once I had nothing better to dwell upon, my mind would still ask itself, *What if they were right?*

One of my few real friends, Anthony, came upon me having the "Were they right?" debate with myself one day. He was 16, like me, and stood six feet tall with an average build and spiky brown hair. He said it took him three tries to get my attention because I was so deep in thought.

"You ok bro?" he asked once he finally snapped me out of it.

"I'm fine. Just... thinking about some stuff," I responded. "*I really don't want to talk about this...*" I tried to telepathically tell him.

It didn't work, of course, because he asked, "What about, then?"

Screw it, I thought, I'll just spit it out. Maybe it'll help...

“I’m just wondering...” I began, “What if all my old friends were right about me? What if I *am* a stuck-up, self-righteous son-of-a...”

“No, you’re not,” interjected Tony before I could finish.

“Don’t beat yourself up like that. It’s not healthy.”

“Tony, this is America,” I quipped back. “Since when is someone telling me, ‘That’s not healthy,’ going to stop me from doing it?”

“Touché,” he chuckled, “but please try and stop telling yourself that.”

“Ok,” I sighed halfheartedly, “I will.”

“Good,” said Tony as he walked away. Again, I was alone with my thoughts.

I walked around in a fog for the rest of the day. Everything sort of... blurred together. It seemed like one minute I was in English, then I’d blink and wind up in chemistry for five minutes before catching the end of Spanish and floating past math. That whole time, my inner demons were nagging at me. *What if it’s you? What if they’re right? Nonsense. They couldn’t be right. Oh but they could, couldn’t they? You’re not fooling anybody but yourself. There’s nothing for you to be fooling yourself about because*

your friends were the problem. Didn’t we just go over this?

Back and forth and back and forth they went all day and just when I thought I would go insane the final bell rang and I could go home. I breathed an audible sigh of relief, packed my things, and trudged to my car.

You’d have thought my brain would be able to get its act together to get me home in once piece, right? My head kept up its unceasing barrage of self-interrogation and once again I was stuck in a haze. I tried as hard as I could to focus but it was no use. Suddenly, everything was clear for a brief moment. I saw a red light and helplessly watched as my car zoomed through it. I looked to my left, and everything slowed down to slow-motion. I helplessly watched as the SUV barreled toward me, unable to stop or get out of the way. Then everything went black.

I woke up after I don’t know how long laying on my right side in what looked like a Victorian-era study. I saw a desk close by, with bookcases all around. From what I could see, the clock showed 3:25. Because there was little light beyond a candle – wait, a candle? I felt around on a table next to the

sofa I was reclined upon and found no glasses. Then I realized I could see just fine without them. Then came the pain. Oh, God, the pain. It felt as if I'd taken a bullet to... my appendix. With a newfound feeling of dread that may or may not have also been a case of appendicitis I rolled onto my back and saw him. Gerasim (looking strangely similar to Tony). Asleep in a chair. With my feet in his lap.

Then it hit me: I was in "The Death of Ivan Ilych," and I had donned the mantle of Ivan himself.

Then there came a voice in my head. *You aren't actually in 19th century Russia, it said, but you are in a coma. Your brain can make you see weird things in a coma, and this is one of them. I suggest you wake up Gerasim now to advance the plot.*

"Gerasim!" I said in a weak voice. He woke with a start, looking as though afraid he'd screwed something up. He quickly turned his newly be-whiskered face toward me and gave me a soft smile.

"Yes, sir?" he said tenderly in a voice strikingly similar to Tony's, "Do you need me to get something for you?"

"Actually yes, but you needn't go anywhere," I said

coarsely. "I just want to talk to you."

"Then let us begin, sir," he replied, "What would you like to discuss?"

"All of a sudden," I began, "I've gotten this... feeling. I feel as though my life has been all... wrong. I married my wife because I could find no reason not to; I drive all my colleagues away from me with my strict professionalism and have no friends as a consequence; and I can tell I am on the verge of death but you, Gerasim, are the only one who seems to care or take notice. Is it too late for me to redeem myself?"

"Sir, I have no idea what you could possibly be talking about. I'm here to talk out *your* problems, not Ivan's. I'm as much a figment of your imagination as everything around you, including yourself. So, ask me about what's *actually* troubling you," he said.

"Oh, forgive me, Gerasim," I said, "I... forgot this was all a dream for a minute. But, if you insist upon hearing my problems, I'd be glad to tell you." He settled back in his chair and prepared to listen. He suddenly gave me a thumbs-up, and I took that as my cue to spill the beans.

"All of a sudden," I began,



artwork by Joe Wotawa

“I’ve gotten this... feeling. I feel as though my life has been all... wrong. Just when all seems well with my friends, they scramble away from me and keep their distance. No matter what I try, I still can’t figure out what I’m doing wrong. They say it’s because I’m self-righteous. They say it’s because I enjoy rubbing my intelligence in people’s faces. They say it’s because of my beliefs. They say they wish they’d never met me and leave me sad and alone, and then the cycle repeats. Every. Single. Time. Yes, there are a few like Tony who stay by me through it all, who have known me for the longer than anyone else. Today, Gerasim, I ask you: Am I doing something wrong?”

“Well...” said Gerasim

with a touch of apprehension, “Yes and no. Just like everyone else in the world you have your faults. Yes, you do sometimes come off as a braggart of your intelligence. Yes, you’ve said some things you probably shouldn’t have. But, like I said, everyone has his faults and yours are probably the most common ones to have. The problem lies with your so-called friends and your willingness to trust people. Some of them took advantage of your trust to make friends and got rid of you once a solid group had formed. Some of them weren’t able to see past your faults once they exposed themselves. At the same time, though, some of them have stuck with you because they were good and honest people.

Those are the people you need as friends.

“In order to do that, however, you need first to defeat your dark side. Don’t ask me why, this is your dream after all. In a few moments, you will get up and walk out that door to face the darkness inside you. Because this is *your* coma dream, the darkness will be in a form very familiar to you. Are you ready?”

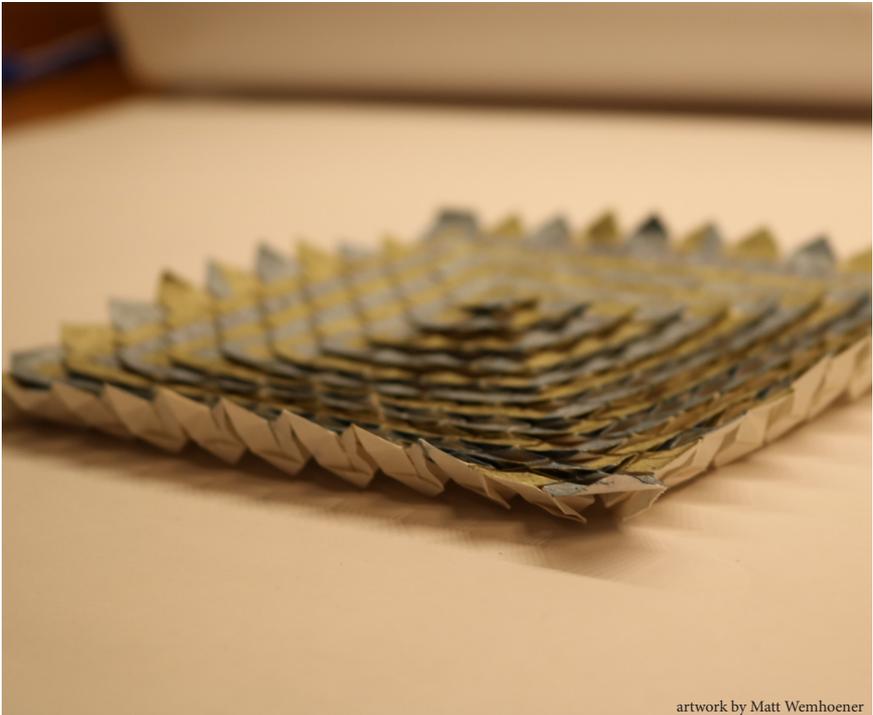
“Yes, Gerasim, I am. Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t thank me, thank yourself,” he chuckled, “After all, I’m just a figment of your imagination. Good luck on your

journey.”

I heaved myself off the sofa and made my way to the door. I slowly turned the knob and opened it to find a wall of darkness before me. After a nod of encouragement from Gerasim, I stepped into it.

After a solid ten minutes of walking I found myself at another door. This one was a gray metal automatic door. It looked like an elevator door out of *Star Wars*. I walked through it and my suspicions were confirmed. There I stood on the Emperor’s observation deck on the second Death Star. It looked just as it did in *Return of the*



artwork by Matt Wemhoener

Jedi. Standing at the top of the stairs leading to the Emperor's chair was Darth Vader. I looked down at myself and noticed my nineteenth-century pajamas had been replaced with Luke Skywalker's *Episode VI* outfit, and his green lightsaber was hanging from my belt. The pain in my gut had subsided as well.

While I stood silently taking in the environment the Force ghost of Obi-Wan Kenobi appeared before me.

"Hey, it's Gerasim," he said. "Well, now I'm Obi-Wan, but you get the point. Remember, winning

or losing this fight will decide who you become from now on. Don't ask me why. Again, this is your messed-up coma dream, not mine. Good luck, and may the Force be with you." As he said this he faded away. No sooner had he disappeared than did Vader turn around and notice me.

The voice of James Earl Jones said, "Welcome. I've been expecting you. In case you don't already know, I am

your dark side. Every ill-willed thought, every misguided action, every sin you've ever committed, every dark moment you've ever had, and every dark secret you keep stands before you in me. I am the part of you that questions if the loss of your friends was your fault. As of now, I am winning. And I can never truly lose. Even if you best me today, I will linger deep within your soul forever, just as I do in everyone else. Everyone

has a dark side, and I am the way you choose to see yours. Now it is time to decide my role in your

future." His red lightsaber activated with its classic hum.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Of course I am," I said as I activated my own lightsaber.

Vader used the Force to jump down to meet me, and I countered his strike with my own blade.

"I see you're confident with a lightsaber," he said, "but are you as confident with the Force?"

Before I got a chance to



respond he used the Force to push me back against the wall, and my lightsaber flew out of my hand. Vader Force-jumped toward me again but I was able to retrieve my lightsaber in time to counter.

“Most impressive,” he mused. “Now, the real fun begins.” A lightsaber duel fit for a *Star Wars* film ensued. Sometimes he would attack and I would counter. Sometimes I would attack and he would counter. I would push him away with the Force, and he would Force-choke me as he recovered.

After about ten minutes of dueling I was able to bat away Vader’s blade for long enough that I could strike a second time and cut off one of his robotic hands. I grabbed his lightsaber out of the air and he charged at me as if to tackle me. As he was almost on top of me I activated his saber straight into his gut and used the Force to push him away. He flew backward ten feet, saber still in his gut, and landed flat on his back. In a weak voice he beckoned be to his side.

“So...” he wheezed once I was next to him, “It appears... you... have... beaten me... this time...” he coughed for a minute and continued, “But...

I... will... never... truly... be defeated... I... live on... in... everyone... forever...” more coughing, “Though... you... see me... dying... before you... this... is... only a figment... of your... imagination... I... will never... die...” a solid minute of hacking, “Now... take off... this... mask... so you... may gaze... upon the true face... of... your... dark... side...”

I carefully began the arduous process of removing Vader’s helmet, taking off the outer shell before lifting off the mask itself. Beneath it was my own face. In my own voice, Vader began to laugh.

“You see...” he hacked and cackled, “I... am... always... with you... No matter... what... you try... and do... to... stop... me...”

At this he descended into a fit of laughter and cackling. It reverberated throughout the whole chamber until I had had enough. I reactivated my lightsaber and swung it at his neck.

The instant it connected I was enveloped in white once again. Gerasim was there to greet me.

“Congratulations on completing the test,” he said. “You performed well. Vader won’t bother you again any time soon.”

“He told me he would never truly go away, though,” I added.

“And that’s true,” replied Gerasim. “He will never go away, no matter what you try and do about him. That’s how dark sides work. It’s the same way in everyone else, too. That’s just human nature. It’s time for you to go back to the real world now. If you ever need me, I’m always right here waiting for you. Just do me a favor and don’t put yourself in another coma if that time comes, okay?”

“Okay Gerasim,” I chuckled, “but how do I contact you?”

“Just pray. I never got the chance to tell you this before, but now is as good a time as any. I am your guardian angel. I’ve been at your side constantly since the day you were born, and I’ll continue to be with you until the day you die. I sound like your friend Tony because that’s the voice that’s most comforting to you as of now. Other times I’ve sounded like your parents, your grandparents, and a whole bunch of other people, too. It’s been great to finally meet you. Take care of yourself, now.”

“You too, Gerasim.”

“Call me Julius,” he said as

he faded into the white nothingness that surrounded us.

Slowly, the white began to fade to black. I started hearing muffled sounds all around me. They became clearer and clearer until I could tell who was talking. I heard my parents and some doctors. I heard someone mention that I was coming around. When I finally opened my eyes I saw my parents, both in tears, at my bedside and a nurse in the doorway. She left to get a doctor and my parents filled me in on what I’d missed.

I had been out cold for a day and a half. My doctors said I was lucky to be alive with no permanent damage. I had broken a few ribs, a leg, and both arms. They couldn’t explain why I went under for so long beyond shock. I knew better, but I just rolled with it. Over the week I was in the hospital, more than half of my high school class showed up with balloons, candy, and cards for me. It turned out I had more friends than I had given myself credit for. I noticed my self-doubting voice in my head was gone as well. Even now, years later, I rarely hear from my dark side, but when I do, I know I can beat it.

LOVE

by Ta'Kwahn Ward

My heart aches as it cries out for this thing called love.

Why you ask? It's because I never had love.

As I observe those around me, they're comfort by hugs.

I never had that feeling but I wish I did.

I just drown in my sorrows and wish I was dead.

But I manage to pull through,

because I know there is love out there for me too.



artwork by Joe Wotawa

CRUELTY

by Zachary Jones

Eric sat silently at the dinner table, playing with his food rather than eating it. He wanted to go outside on a nice Friday afternoon like this, not be stuck at the table with his family. After a long week of home-schooling, he didn't want to see his parents any more than he had to.

"Eric," his mother said, "I was thinking that we could move on to Shakespeare next week. What do you think?" Eric didn't answer her; he was caught up thinking about his thirteenth birthday which was next week. The only thing he had asked for was a bike. That was the only way he could ride away from home and never look back.

"Boy, you better answer your mother or else there'll be consequences," his father threatened. Eric felt the anger rising in his father's voice. Regardless of how much he wanted to get away, he knew not saying anything would be worse than being forced to sit at the table.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever." The table was silent. Eric's dad was

staring intently at him while his mother stared down at her half-empty plate.

"Excuse me? What the hell did you just say to your mother?" the anger in his voice tripled. Eric could almost hear the steam blowing out of his dad's ears. "Did you really just blow her off? I'll beat some sense into you;" He quickly stood up and began making his way around the table toward Eric.

"Charles, please don't! It's no big..." Eric's mother tried to speak up in her son's defense.

"You stay the hell out of this, bitch." He was yelling at the top of his lungs. "It's bad enough he doesn't learn any manners with all those damn classes you teach him. I'm sick and tired of how this little shit acts! It's time he learns something worthwhile!"

Instinctively, Eric reached up to cover his face with his hands. He felt the first punch connect hard into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Eric couldn't help but reach down to grab his stomach. His father took advantage of this

and drove his second punch into Eric's nose. Eric could feel the blood pouring down his face as a third punch connected into his jaw, knocking him flat on the ground.

The pain consumed Eric's entire mind. He could just barely hear his mother's shrieks in between his father's punches and his own screams of pain. His father didn't hold back; hits continued to rain down on Eric's head, face, body, and arms. The pain in Eric's body rose to the point where he couldn't feel any more of the punches he took. Tears filled Eric's eyes, blinding him.

After what seemed like hours, the hits finally slowed and stopped. Eric's father hauled him up off the floor, forcing him to walk through the house. No matter how hard he tried, Eric couldn't stay up on his feet. After a few steps he would collapse, resulting in more hits from his dad.

"That blood better be cleaned up when I get back inside, bitch, or I'll do the same to you!" Eric's dad called in through the door as he pushed Eric down the two steps to get from the ground to the front door. Eric was forced to his feet again and made to walk the short distance between the

house and the barn.

The barn was an old wooden building, the type people look at and think has been around since the beginning of time. It had always scared Eric, so he tended to avoid it, especially now. His dad pulled open the large door and pushed Eric inside.

The barn was mostly just a big, empty space; occasionally Eric's parents used it for storage, but it was otherwise empty. Along the right wall a short, dirty chain was attached to the concrete floor. Eric's father forced him over to the chain and used the shackle on the chains end to keep him in place. He planted a heavy kick into Eric's rib before storming out of the barn and slamming the door shut. Eric could hear him click a padlock onto the door.

Eric lay on the cold concrete, moaning in pain. Every move he made sent more intense spears of pain shooting through the rest of his body. He could feel blood flowing from a cut above his eye. He tried to sit up, but the stain of the movement combined with the pain caused him to black out.

Eric woke up with a start. For a moment he couldn't remember where he was, but then the pain in his body reminded

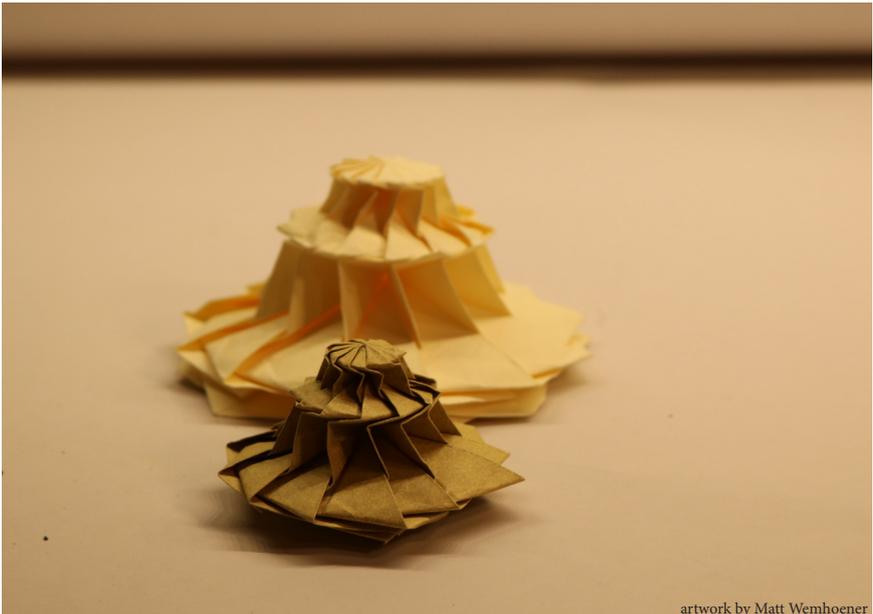
him of the night before. He sat up, still feeling pain but not enough to make him black out again. Late afternoon sun shone in through the gaps in the barn's wood. He looked down at his watch, which miraculously hadn't been broken during his father's beating. The watch read five o'clock P.M.

"Five o'clock?" Eric thought to himself, "It was six when dad put me in here..." He dismissed the time thinking that the watch must've actually been damaged during the beating. He felt his stomach growl. It was then that he realized just how hungry he was; and how dry his mouth was. He reached up to the cut above his eye. The blood was dried and caked to

his head; the cut already had already scabbed over. Eric began to understand. He had been in the barn for almost twenty-four hours.

His father had only started using the barn in the past two months, but Eric had still been locked up almost one day every week. The last time he had been imprisoned, his father had left him there all weekend. The only reason he hadn't died was because his mom had snuck him food and water when his dad hadn't been paying attention. After that incident, Eric had made sure he always had a failsafe.

One day while father was asleep, Eric snuck into his room and stole one of the keys to the



artwork by Matt Wemhoener

chain in the barn. When his dad had discovered the theft, Eric and his mother had been given a beating in an attempt to find out where it was. But he had never found it. Luckily he had never bothered to look in the barn itself, allowing Eric to have a means to escape if he needed it.

The key unlocked the shackle without a problem. Eric looked around the barn to see if there was a hole that he could squeeze out of. Despite being old, the barn was not missing a single plank. While moving boxes around in his search, Eric discovered a very odd shaped object covered in a tarp. When he pulled the tarp off, he was surprised at what he found.

It was a bike. The exact bike he had wanted for his birthday. Eric felt a surge of happiness knowing that his mother had actually gotten him a bike for his birthday, but also felt bad. Since he hadn't found any way out of the barn, he knew that there was only one way out. Hanging on the wall next to the door was the axe his father used to chop wood. Eric picked it up and walked to the back of the barn.

He paused, debating whether or not he should actually go through with what he was planning. Maybe it would be better to just let his dad come

back and get him, that way he could just return to his normal life. The thought of leaving his mother all alone with his father made him wince. The wince sent pain throughout his face once again. Without a second thought, Eric brought the axe crashing down on the barn wall.

The wall broke up easier than Eric originally thought. After a few swings of the axe there was a hole big enough for him to fit though. He pushed the bike though first and closely followed behind. As quickly as he could ride, Eric peddled past his house and onto the dirt road. Dust flew up and hit him in the face, sticking to the blood, but he didn't pay any attention to it. He had to get as far away from home as possible, and he knew just the place.

It took him hours to get there by bike. While he was peddling it had grown dark, making it difficult to see where he was going. After a while his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he was able to keep going. Eric looked up at another white farm house that looked almost identical to the one he lived in. He had stashed his bike a little ways off of the house's driveway, making it difficult to see unless you were looking direct-

ly at it. He took a deep breath and stepped towards the house.

A tall trellis stood standing along the house's west side. Eric tested the trellis, seeing if the wooden structure would hold his weight. He had seen people climb up them in movies, but he had no idea if he could do so in real life. When he was sure that the trellis would be able to support him, Eric scampered up to the second floor window.

Although it was later in the afternoon, Eric could seek light through the window's thick curtains. With only one hand precariously holding himself from falling, Eric reached over and lightly knocked on the window. For a while, there was no answer. Eric was beginning to worry that nobody was home when there was a crack in the curtains. A young girl's face appeared in the window. She had a confused look on her face, wondering why she had heard a knocking on her window. When she saw Eric hanging outside of her window, her eyes widened and she disappeared behind the curtains again. Eric heard the window being opened and climbed through. Eric lay on the floor while the girl closed her window.

"Eric? What the heck are

you doing here so late at night?" she asked him.

"Hey Jane, I was just, you know, *hanging* around the neighborhood and..." he responded.

"Oh my god!" she interrupted him, "what the heck happened to your face!?" Eric reached up to feel the cut above his eye. Jane grabbed a mirror sitting on her dresser and showed him his reflection. Eric's face was covered in bruises and dried blood. If he hadn't known he was looking in the mirror he wouldn't have even recognize himself.

"Eric." Jane's voice sounded very stern and motherly despite the fact that she was a month younger than Eric was. "You have to tell me what the heck is going on! Did you get in a fight?"

"Well if it was a fight, I just lost the title..." Eric and Jane had been friends since they were born. Growing up, their mothers had organized play dates while their fathers worked out on the farms. Despite Jane going to public school and Eric being homeschooled, the two had grown to be best friends and trusted each other with everything. "Jane, it wasn't a fight it was..." He was interrupted by a sudden flash. Jane had taken a

picture of him with her Polaroid camera Eric had given her last year for Christmas.

“Sorry, I just wanted to have a picture, just in case. Now tell me what happened.” Eric began to recount to her the events of the previous day; his dad beating him, being locked in the barn, blacking out, his escapes, and finally how he had ended up outside her window. Throughout his story, Jane’s eyes grew wide and her hands reached up to cover her mouth. When he finished talking, they both sat there in silence. Jane didn’t take her eyes off him, even though Eric tried to keep from making eye contact.

“Eric...” she said, “that’s terrible! You have to tell someone about this! I’ll go get my parents...”

“No!” Eric said, trying to get her to stop. He tried to block her way to the door. “You can’t tell anyone about this!”

“We have to tell *somebody*! My parents told me that you shouldn’t keep anyone hitting you a secret! I’m not just gonna sit by and watch my best friend get hurt.” She pushed past him and began walking down the hallway. Eric heard her yelling for her parents and she began down the steps.

Eric froze. He couldn’t let

Jane’s parents know he was here; that’d get him in even more trouble than he would already be in. Plus, he didn’t even want to think about what his dad would do to him when he found out he had told someone about what had happened. Without giving his actions a second thought, Eric opened the window to Jane’s room and climbed back out onto the trellis, mostly closing the window behind him. He hung there and listened as Jane dragged her parents into her room.

“He’s right in here! You have to see...” she was saying. “Wait, where did he go?”

“Jane, sweetie,” Eric heard her father say. “You shouldn’t get us all worried over a story you make up.”

“No! He was just here when I left my room! He told me his dad had beaten him up! Look! I took this picture!” There was a short silence, in which Eric held his breath.

“Oh my...” Jane’s father said. “Erin, honey, call the police!” Eric didn’t wait to hear anymore. He practically jumped from the top of the trellis and ran to where he had hidden his bike. He began pedaling faster than he had on his way to Jane’s house. If he could just get home, everything would be

alright. His father would find him in the barn, just where he'd been left the night before and he could lie about ever being at Jane's house. Sure, there'd be a hole in the wall, but he could make something up.

After twenty minutes of pedaling as hard as he could, Eric could hardly catch his breath, but he didn't stop, he just kept pushing himself forward. He rode on and on along the dirt road until he could see the lights from town.

"It must be at least ten o'clock" Eric thought to himself. In the distance, he could see headlight shining in his direction. He was about to pull off to the side of the road when he noticed the headlights were also accompanied by flashing red and blue lights.

Eric froze in the middle of the road. He was stuck, the police would see him if he pulled off the road and they would catch him if he turned around. So he waited in the road, unsure of what would happen to him next. He could hear the siren now, getting increasing louder as the vehicle grew nearer.

When the vehicle finally reached him, Eric was relieved to see that it was an ambulance, not a police cruiser. Eric began to pull his bike over to the side

of the road when the ambulance stopped and the paramedics got out.

"Eric Malone?" the paramedic in the passenger's seat called to him. "Eric, you have to come with us. We're going to take you to a doctor." When Eric began to take a few steps backwards, the paramedic said, "Don't worry buddy, you can trust us!"

Eric dropped his bike and ran. Behind him he could hear the passenger paramedic begin to run after him as the driver got back in the ambulance to follow them. Eric didn't get far before the paramedic caught up to him. He grabbed Eric around the waist and pulled him to a stop. He struggled against the paramedic's grip, kicking his legs and screaming as loud as he could. The paramedic just held Eric in a gentle bear hug as the boy thrashed around, saying soothing words to him. Eric eventually stopped resisting and began to sob into the paramedic's shoulder. That was the last thing he remembered from that night.

Eric was awoken by the light shining in through the window. He slowly looked around and realized that he was lying in a hospital bed. His clothes



artwork by Matt Wemhoener

were gone and his cuts had been stitched up. He sat up, the pain in his body nowhere near the level it was two days ago. As he sat up, Eric realized for the first time that a man was sitting in his room. It was an older man dressed in the uniform of a police officer. He was watching Eric with a gentle gaze, as if he had been waiting for him to wake up for hours.

“Good morning Eric, how are you feeling.” A thousand thoughts leapt into Eric’s head at once. The only one that came out was:

“I want to go home.” The police officer chuckled. He began to stand up, which caused Eric to press further back into

his bed.

“Don’t worry, bud,” the officer said. “You’ll get to go home soon. I just need you to answer a few questions first. Who did this to you?” He gestured to the wounds on Eric’s face. Eric didn’t answer at first; he kept his eyes on the police officer and then lowered them down to where he was looking at his feet.

“My father, he...hit me...a lot...” The police officer nodded. He already knew the answer to his question, but he needed to hear Eric say it.

“And your father chained you up in the barn after, is that right?” Eric only nodded. He couldn’t speak. He kept his

head hanging down to his chest, refusing to look at the officer.

“Well, how about your mother? Does she hit you?” Eric shook his head. “Does your father do the same thing to her?”

“He hits her, but he doesn’t lock her in the barn. I’m the only one he does that too.” The officer nodded. He made a few notes in his little notebook before flipping it closed.

“Alright Eric, I can take you home now,” the officer said. He pointed to a fresh pair of clothes lying on the table next to him. “But you need to get dressed first.”

Neither Eric nor the police officer said anything the entire car ride. Eric spent the whole time looking out the window at all the fields that raced by. As the police cruiser neared his house, Eric began to get nervous. When they pulled into his driveway, Eric could barely remain seated. As the drove down the driveway, Eric noticed there were a lot of cars in front of his house. There were a few police cars too.

When they pulled up as close as they could get to the house, Eric saw a large group of people gathered around. He saw a lot of people from town, most of his neighbors, and even Jane’s parents. As Eric began to

approach them, he heard yelling coming from his front door.

Eric’s father was being led out from the house by two police officers. His hands were handcuffed behind his back and he was fighting the whole way. He began yelling about how he had done nothing wrong and how both Eric and his mother had deserved everything they got. His yells were silenced as the door to the police cruiser closed behind him.

The officer that had drove Eric stepped forward and began shouting, “Ok people! It’s time to get moving! Nothing to see here!” The crowd began to disperse. A few of them saw Eric and tried to talk to him, but he didn’t pay any attention to them. His mom had come out onto the front porch to watch her husband be taken away.

Suddenly, Eric did not care about anything happening around him. He ran as fast as he could through the crowd towards his house. When his mother saw him, she too began to run towards him. They met together and hugged each other tightly. Eric didn’t care how much pain it caused him; he knew that he never wanted to be anywhere else for the rest of his life.

THE PACER

by Grant Kraemer

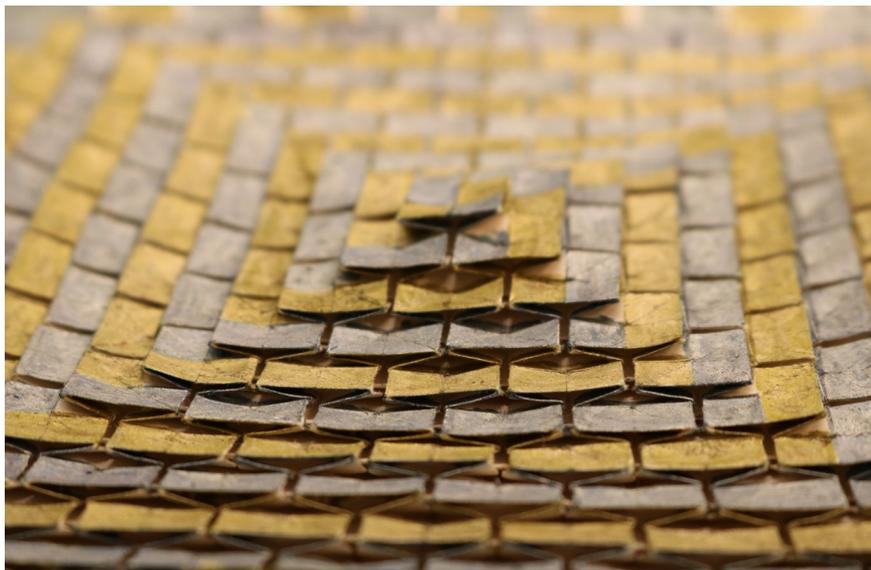
Mrs. Wetland's fifth grade class walked in a single file line, boy girl, from their classroom to the gym. Andrew was third in line so he was one of the first to realize what was going on that day. As the class walked into the gym, they saw no kick balls. The basketball hoops weren't lowered. There was no stack of finger crushing sit scooters for the kids to ride. There were only two long lines of blue tape running across the wood gym floor. One line lay on the end of the gym closest to the doors the students entered from and the other lay way down at the other side of the gym about five feet from the grey cinderblock wall. In between lay a long gap of barren gym floor. Maybe it was his feeling of foreboding or maybe it was an attempt at mercy by the gym teacher, but Andrew felt especially cold walking into the gym that day. Most of the kids didn't realize what was in store, but some, like Andrew, noticed the tape and others noticed the sound system just peeking out from the ball closet watching the students enter the gym. Either

way the news quickly spread throughout the fifth grade line that today the class would be running the pacer.

Every year for a week all the students at St. Mary's are subjected to the presidential fitness test, a fitness test consisting of pull ups, a mile run, toe touch, and the dreaded pacer. The pacer was a test that brought dread into the hearts of every grade school and middle school child ever subjected to it. As Mrs. Weland's class realized that they would be running the pacer in gym class today some complained, others were angry, but most accepted that that day's gym class would be nothing but utter torcher. The kids sat on the wood gym floor in five rows of five forming a perfect dotted cube. Their gym teacher Ms. Force stood in front of the rows of blue bleachers looking at the lines of kids in front of her.

"Alright class today we will be running the pacer." Ms. Force cried out in her overly enthusiastic screech.

"Do we have to do it?" Jimmy said from the back of his



artwork by Matt Wemhoener

line.

“My foot really hurts!” Jessica cried out from the front.

“Why do we have to do this every year?” Tony mumbles as he rolled back to lie on the gym floor.

“Alright class, calm down. You’ll all be fine. The presidential fitness test is a great time to see how well you’ve been taking care of yourself physically. We will split into two groups.”

The fifth graders mumbled curses on Mrs. Force as they split into two groups and went to the line or the bleachers respectively. Andrew took the line to run in the first group. He stood next to his best friend Mike. Mike was thicker than Andrew who was rather lanky

for a fifth grader. Half the class towed the line about a foot of space in between each student. Each student looked at one another. All wearing the same blue shorts and maroon shirt. All with their all white tennis shoes. They fidgeted back and forth on the line looking over to the half of the class still on the bleachers who stared back at them. Andrew turned to Mike who was on his knee tying his shoes.

“Why do we do this man? It’s not even for a grade.” Andrew said taking a knee next to Mike and running his hand through his short hair.

“It’s a form of torcher they use to keep us in line” Mike grumbled back.

“How long you think your

gonna go for?”

“I don’t even care about lasting a long time. I just cannot be out before the first girl out.”

“You think you can outlast Sarah?” Andrew asked looking down the line of fifth graders to the girl at the end with a long blond ponytail who was actually on the ground stretching.

“Are you kidding me Sarah does this sorta thing for fun. She’s a volleyball player, soccer player, basketball player, and a cheer leader. She’ll be the last one of all of us standing. Also she’s the pretties girl in our grade and”.

Mike was cut off by Ms. Force pushing one of those carts that have two tables and wheels squeak like a dyeing animal. On the top was a large grey karaoke machine connected to a set of speakers on the bottom. The students watched as she pushed the cart to the side of the gym and inserted a CD into the machine. The shrill overly cheery voice of a woman echoed through the gym.

“Today you will all be participating in the pacer fitness test. The pacer will test your endurance and running speed. In this test you will be given the signal to begin running and you must make it to the other

side before the next signal. As the test progresses the signals will come at shorter and shorter intervals. The test will continue until no one is able to make it to the other side before the signal. Prepare for the first level of the pacer test.”

The fifth graders towed the line and looked from Mrs. Force and her sound system, to the bleachers with half the class, to the line on the ground at the far side of the gym. The half of the class watching from the bleachers gave a halfhearted cheer knowing the torture the kids were about to be endure and knowing they would have to go through it right after. The other half of the class stood at the line awkwardly posturing for the run. The shrill voice of the women cut back into the gym.

“We will now begin stage one of the pacer test,” the women on the tape screeched out right before a loud BING sounded throughout the gym resounding off the walls and filling the ears of the students.

They all began at different paces. Some started at a light run, others jogged off the line, but others just walked quickly from one side to the other. The first few rounds no one really knew exactly how long it would be before the next bing so they

all tested how slow they could go while still making it to the other side. They ran from one side to the other, weighted for a few seconds then turned and ran back. Once the class had made it down and back twice a very overweight boy with a buzz cut and tight white high socks named Louis crossed the line with his hands raised in mock celebration walking directly off the line to the other half of the class where he sat down on the bleachers and grinned across the room at the scowling Mrs. Force. The students on the bleachers welcomed him with cheers and the students running laughed for a second before the next bing sounded and they were off again running to the other side. Andrew was feeling good and Mike was just behind him both still finding their pace. As he ran he noticed a boy named Steven running out in front of the pack.

“Hey Mike, what is Steven doing? He’s running way faster than he needs to be.”

“Maybe... Maybe he’s just trying to show off,” Mick said in between breaths.

“He doesn’t seem like he would do that. Plus you can’t show off in the pacer.”

“No, no I just remember... remembered Steven came from

a school in Arizona this year... maybe he doesn’t get how bad this is going to get.”

“Crud man, you’re right. This is probably his first pacer. The poor guy will never last.”

The class continued to run. Steven slowly was overtaken by the main group of runners then he started lagging behind more and more each time they ran. Most students still managed about a second in between the final bing and the bing signaling them to run again but Steven was barely tagging the line before having to turn and run back. After a few more runs the bings were even closer now and Steven wasn’t the only one struggling to make it to the other side. The first to not to make it was a girl names Sally. Sally had pigtails and glasses and when she didn’t make it her last run she hung her head and took in long deep rattling breaths. With her head down she walked to the bleachers and joined the students there. After her getting out, a number of students began to drop. In the next five turns four more kids dropped. Most didn’t make it to the line in time but others just walked to the bleachers having already pushed themselves as far as they could go. The children of this group were not the athletes

of the class. They were the other kids, the ones that never enjoyed gym class and sat and talked at recess. Everyone knew they went going to last long.

“Hey Mike, this isn’t that bad” Andrew said in as he turned on the line and watched Mike running behind him.

“You... You must not remember well. This... This is

do was turn then run again. Mike was now the last of the runners to hit the line each turn. Each time they ran he barely reached it before the bing to run.

“Andrew, Andrew this is... last one... I’m out” Mike was barely able to form words through his heavy breathing.

“Try to... keep going... as



artwork by Joe Wotawa

still the easy part.”

The kids continued to run. The intervals of time continued to shorten. Andrew started to feel the fatigue. Now as the kids ran they struggled to make it to between each beep. The few seconds of rest turned into a short time where all you could

far as you can.”

“I’m done.”

After Mike dropped out three more kids dropped one after another in the next three consecutive rounds. Andrew looked around at the people still running. The pack of fifteen had been whittled down to just five.

Andrew was shocked he was still running with these kids. The kids still running were the best of the best. They were the athlete kids. The select soccer players and the basketball stars. Andrew was clearly the one struggling the most, but he kept pushing himself. As he ran his legs started to burn. His lungs felt as if they were about to burst. Andrew looked up slightly and saw Sarah was running just in front to the right of him. He would learn later in his middle school years to covet the position of running behind a volleyball player in gym shorts but during the pacer all he could think about is surviving.

Andrew felt himself going slower and slower, was just barely making it between beeps. Right when he felt his lungs were about to burst in his chest he heard the bing. He had missed the line by about half a foot. As the other four kids turned and ran back for the next lap Andrew stood and stared at the wall. He tuned slowly and walked to the other kids on the bleachers.

“How you feeling Andrew?” Mike said patting him on his back as he sat down on the front

row of bleachers.

“Meh”

The class sat and watched as the final four kids run back and forth. These kids were the heroes. Though the pacer wasn't for a grade and you couldn't win these kids gained some other sort of glory for still running. Andrew was close to them but not quite there. He wasn't mad though everyone understood only a select few can last that long in the pacer. They continued to run past one hundred laps up to one hundred and twenty. Eventuality Sarah was to slow and missed the bing. By the time she had made it over to the bleachers two more had dropped off. Then there was one last kid running. He lasted four laps alone then missed the bing by half a second. Mrs. Force ended the tape and fidgeted around with the controls on the karaoke machine. Then she turned and addressed the class.

“Fantastic job to most of you guys. Now it's time for the next group to run.”

Once again she started the tape and the woman's voice started up again. The next group stood and walked to the line to once again run the pacer.



artwork by Joe Wotawa

DRIVE

by Kameron Ziercher

We are all lost,
Gone in our thoughts.
Everybody thinks,
Still no one minds.

TEEN ANGST

by Doug Dolan

The Oldsmobile seemed to shake at the exertion.

Maybe if I had a car from this millennium, the car wouldn't shake whenever I went above 40 MPH.

Mom said, "If you get enough points on your chart, we will discuss getting you a better car. Until then, use the Oldsmobile; driving a less than stellar car will teach you humility and respect."

Dad added, "It builds character."

The Oldsmobile was mostly painted sky blue, but had a thick blood red strip of paint running from the hood to the trunk. The inside was black leather seats, and in between the driver's seat and shotgun seat was my console. The three seats in the back had been worn out from constant use. The leather was scratched in most places and covered up with duct tape. The car sometimes smelled like it needed an oil change. The steering wheel felt like power in my hands, power I had barely had before. The radio had six presets, but I only really listened to one: NPR. I double-

checked to make sure I didn't forget anything at Stephen's house: my car charger for my phone, my phone, a book titled 5 Ways to Get a Five in AP US History, my backpack, computer, random discarded analysis sheets from English due tomorrow, my aux cord, and a listing of all the new plays coming to The Muny and the Fox. On the radio, NPR hosted a segment about the reconstruction of Le Guardia airport.

I have deep bags under my eyes, almost deathly skinny and crooked glasses. I am an only child and my parents obsess over me constantly. I have been dubbed "One of the whitest kids ever". My hair is blonde and I mostly wear collared shirts and khakis. Both my parents always seem to have a frown on their faces, glaring at me with disapproval at everything I do. My mom is a petite lady, hair that is always trimmed nicely; she always seems worried about the littlest things and is extremely intelligent. Her hair was dyed blonde every other week. She always wears pantsuits and sits with her back as straight as

possible. I once asked her why she never wore skirts or high heels like some of the other moms I knew. She scoffed and responded,

“Do you see your father ever in high heels or anything other than a suit? Only women have to wear clothes that are not functional to impress the men or look better.”

That was my mom, always the feminist. She was the head of Psychology at Rice University down the road from our house.

My father always had either a frown or straight face. After serving in the Vietnam War,

he came back to a country in chaos. To hear him tell it, the hippies were doing drugs and having sex with whoever they wanted and the Southern whites were still pushing back against the anti-Segregation laws and race riots broke out all over the country, the moral backbone of the country was gone. The liberals were bankrupting the government running after pipe dreams of the War on Poverty and hippies were giving regular law-abiding citizens a bad name. He embraced order in every facet of his life from then on. He became a successful no-nonsense lawyer for the disad-



artwork by Matt Wemhoener

vantaged.

“This is how you help people, Son. Not by smoking weed and merely *talking* about helping people like the hippies do. No this is actual help and from me to my clients. Actions speak louder than words, Kevin,”

He was full of pithy sayings like that. I was scared of what he would say when I get home.

Man, that psychology project took forever! It's 10 PM! My mom's gonna kill me! At least no one's on the highway. No one around to yell at me to pick up my clothes, or sit with my back straight, or to berate me for getting a B+ in Religion.

Looking around, with still no one on the highway, I smiled and put the pedal to the metal.

Damn, look at that moon! It's all red! It looks just like Mars! I remember hearing about the super blood moon, but my parents said that it came out too late at night.

I rolled down the windows and felt the wind against my face.

What else am I missing out on? Who needs seat belts? Not me! What else is on the radio besides NPR?

“Running through the six with my woes! You know how that should go. You know how that should go. You know how

that should go. You know how that should go,” the radio said.

Yeah, no. I don't know how that should go, and he “raps” like a dying giraffe.

“Wooooah (timber), wooooah (timber), (hey), wooooah (it's going down) (Pitbull) Wooooah (timber), wooooah (timber), wooooah (it's going down),”

Is this a game to see how often they can repeat the same words? No thanks.

“Baby you a song/You make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise/Down a back road blowin' stop signs through the middle Every little farm town with you/ Baby you a song/ You make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise/ Down a back road blowin' stop signs through the middle Every little farm town with you/

It's exactly the same as Pop, just with a Southern twang and Southern ideas of romance.

“[Backwards:] I'm just like you... you don't need to hide... For I am just like you. BWAN BWANNA BWAA, BWA BWA BWA BAWANNNA BWA BAABAA!”

Hmm, well that was, uh, different. Not my type, though.

“TEACHER, LEAVE THOSE KIDS ALONE!”

Yeah, all right! Sounds like

my type of music!

Man, it's getting cold. Good thing Mom reminded me to bring a jacket!

I had been just about to grab the jacket, then shook my head and slammed on the gas pedal.

Let's see how far I can push this baby. Hah! Look at that car on the side of the road, that's too bad. Man, there's nothing like the wind in your face and the feel of the steering wheel speeding down the highway.

"BWEEP bip bip BWEEP BWEEP bip bip BWEEP!!!"
My entire car became awash with the sparkling and flashing red and blue lights.

Just my fucking luck. I finally try to cut back a bit and be a normal teenager, and I get pulled over for it! Some of my friends go 90 and have never gotten pulled over and here I am, just trying to branch out a bit, and I get pulled over!! GOD DAMNIT! I'VE NEVER BEEN PULLED OVER BEFORE! DAMN DAMN DAMN DAMN. Maybe I went a little overboard with the whole "teen angst" thing. What if the police officer calls my parents??!! Oh, my God; that would be the worst!! Oh, God, please help me. Better get my driver's license out.

I took out my duct taped wallet. I remember how my parents coerced me into making my own wallet.

"Making your own wallet will have more value than if Mom or I just went to the store and bought a random wallet. This exercise will also help you with your problem solving skills and get you 10 extra points on your chart," my Dad told me.

Yeah, whatever Dad. Wait, where is it??!! It's not in my wallet, maybe it's in my console.

I desperately searched through the console, hoping against hope that it might be somewhere.

Let's see what I got. The audiobook of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens, some Kids Bop 19-25, some candy wrappers, my auto insurance card, my health insurance card, an old pager to use if I was ever in a serious accident, and some gum. Where could I have left my license? It's probably in my backpack. In the trunk. Just great. I can hear my Dad now,

"Failing to prepare is preparing to fail."

The high-beams continued and had no intention of ever stopping; the officer stepped out. He had the build of a man who spends time in the gym many times per week. He wore

an Aruba blue police shirt and black pants. Even though it was under a thick pad of police armor, his upper body was obviously chiseled. His arms were at least three times bigger than my legs and his hands were as big as some of my baseball gloves. He walked with his shoulders back and a strut in his

on his left he had an iPhone Velcro strapped on. Over his chest, everything was midnight black except for the taser. The taser was as bright as the Oregon Ducks' football uniforms, if not brighter. Especially on such a dark night, the taser distinguished itself from everything else he wore. Around his black



artwork by Joe Wotawa

step; over his shirt, he wore a midnight black armor that had many pouches for his various gadgets to be used against criminals. On his right shoulder was a square black walkie-talkie worn down from frequent use,

belt he had his clipped on polar silver handcuffs, and the item that made me nervous the most, his handgun. The gun was holstered on his left hip, somehow even blacker than the rest of his uniform. I could not make out

any distinguishable features, but it was definitely a gun. He sauntered over and I could hear his walkie-talkie buzzing about with random code words. I wondered what type of police officer he was.

Is he the type who is strictly business? Is he the type of cop who jokes around with the people he pulls over? What if he calls my parents?! What if he gives me a ticket?! How many points will I lose on my chart?! Calm down. Calm down.

I popped the trunk and got out of the car.

“SIR, GET BACK IN YOUR CAR! I AM NOT AFRAID TO USE FORCE IF NECESSARY!”

Oh, shit! He pulled his fucking gun out!

I could see the barrel of the gun pointed at me. He had already pulled the safety back and had his hand on the trigger and I froze. The gun had either been recently washed or never used because it shone in the light of the police car. The safety was pulled back and I realized he might actually shoot me. My heart started pounding so loud that I began to fear the officer would hear it. My stomach instantly became nauseous. Every possible muscle in my body clenched and my eyes were as

wide as saucers. I could feel the sweat pouring down my face as if it was a NASCAR race.

It was so quiet all I could hear was the engine running and the calm, controlled breaths of the officer. The officer’s eyes were stone cold, trained, and rational. He had done this before and was not afraid to do it again. I scrambled back into the car.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. He’s gonna kill me! I cannot believe I was so stupid to go out of the car and pop the trunk! God Damn it, honestly, what kind of stupid fucking dumbass thinks “Hey, I was just pulled over by a cop and I think I’ll pop the trunk all un-suspicious like and grab my license.” No! Any rational and sane person would have simply told the officer that his driver’s license might be in his backpack and he would like to check that! Oh my god I am so stupid! Fuck!

The police officer walked over and leaned down in front of my window. He smelled like cigarette smoke and coffee.

“Now son, that was not a smart thing to do. I pulled you over in the middle of the night, and before I even see your face, you pop the trunk. Now, what does a police officer think when you do that?”

“He thinks that I have a gun in my trunk.”

“Yeah. Now, license and registration please.”

“Well, I think my license is in my backpack, could you check for me?”

He took a deep breath and muttered, “God, give me patience.”

“Alright, kid. Do you give me consent to look for your license in your bag?”

“Yes.”

He scavenged through my bag, looking for my driver’s license.

Please, oh please oh please, God, please have my license be in there. I’ll give you whatever you want if you do this for me.

“Kid, I’m not gonna root through your backpack anymore, your license is not in there. Just give me your name and I’ll try to put it in the system.”

“Uh, ok. My name is, Kevin Thomass.”

I could hear his footsteps getting quieter and quieter as he moved to his car. He leaned in through the window and typed some things in.

“Kid, your name’s not coming up! How do you spell your name?”

“Use two ‘S’.”

“Alright.”

I could feel myself beginning to cry.

Don’t be a pussy, Kevin. There’s no crying in baseball or getting a ticket!

Finally, I couldn’t hold it in anymore and started bawling. I cried because someone had pointed a gun at me and then I cried because I still had some homework to finish and then I cried because my parents will kill me when they see the tickets I got and then I cried because of the unrealistic expectations of my parents had finally broken me and then I cried because the cop probably thinks I’m a fucking retard right now who just wants to get out of a ticket. But, I mostly cried at the unfairness of it all.

“Kid, what’s wrong?”

“I’m, sorry officer it’s just I’ve never ever gone that fast before and I have some homework due tomorrow and my parents will kill me if they see their son got a ticket and they never let me stay up late to do my homework and you probably think I’m some sort of weirdo and--”

“Jesus Christ, kid. Calm down. Listen, I found you in the system. You have not gotten a ticket before, so I’ll let you off with a warning this time. But, listen don’t ever ever ever

do this to another police officer again, ok? This is what you should do when you get pulled over. Calmly get your license and registration out, keep your hands at ten and two and answer any questions the officer has.”

Now, have a good night, and go easy on your parents. They’re trying to find their place in the world just like you.”

“Thank you, officer.”

I pulled into the driveway in front of my house, turned off the engine, and sat in the car for a few minutes. We lived inside our own subdivision entitled “Opsequium Lane”. Opsequium Lane was set up in a grid style. There were six streets that run north and south, and six streets that run east and west. Each road has 10 houses on each side; every house is painted white and in pristine condition, and all the grasses cut perfectly. Every house has a picket fence around it. Every single car is in its driveway and every bike in its garage. The sidewalks were regularly manicured and never looked out of place. The annual neighborhood meeting happened every other Monday, and any inconsistencies were hammered out there. Even in the middle of the night I could

still smell the seemingly fresh cut grass. There was a cop car parked in front of the house.

Oh, boy.

I parked on the left side of the road and walked into my house.

Boy, can't wait to go inside and get chewed out for an hour by my stuck up parents who don't let me do anything and called the cops because I wasn't home!

I had a one story house that had a hallway run through all of it. When you first enter through the front door, you enter into the kitchen. Take a left and follow the hallway and you will arrive at our family room, go a little bit father and you will reach our sole bathroom and our two bedrooms. I entered the house and there were my parents, talking to a cop.

I could smell the cold chili they made for me, and could hear the gentle creaking of the wood under my feet. The common area has a counter in the back, and behind that a stove and a microwave. The chili was on the counter, beginning to rot. On our fridge were my past report cards, and the ones and all of the “B’s” were circled in Sharpie with the comment, “You can do better.” Dad was in a jet black suit and a solid

black tie. Mom wore a pure white pantsuit. They seemed worried. Dad sat on his Great Mission Style Leather recliner chair. He took his glasses off and rubbed his brow.

“We have been texting him all night and--- and we love him so much and, and-- Kevin! There you are! Where have you been?” Mom said.

“Uhh, I was at Stephen’s house,” I said.

“Ma’am, it seems your son has been found. Have a good night.”

The cop muttered something under his breath and walked out. The clomp, clomp, clomp of his boots reverberated throughout the entire house.

“Kevin! Oh thank God. Why didn’t you check your texts????!”

“What texts?”

“Check your phone!”

5:00 PM Mom: Kevin, dinner starts at 6, please be home by then.

5:03 PM Me: Mom, the project is taking a little longer than expected. I should be home by 8.

5:05 PM: Alright, Kevin, but no later than that.

8:00 PM: Your father has gotten back from work. You said you would be home by now. Are you on your way home?

8:02 PM: No, Mom. I am going to be out until at least 10 PM.

8:10 PM: Kevin, I am not happy at all. Please call me. We need to discuss this.

8:10 PM Mom: 7 Missed Calls.

8:30 PM Dad: Son, please call you mother or I back. We are worried.

9:00 PM Mom: Kevin, pick up your phone. Are you okay? I tracked your phone online and it said you were still at Stephen’s house. Please respond.

9:15 PM Dad: Kevin, pick up your damn phone. This is a big disrespect to your mother and me. This isn’t like you, please call back.

9:30 PM Dad: 4 Missed Calls.

10:00 PM Mom: Really starting to worry. Please call back.

10:40 PM Mom: About to call the police. Call back.

“Uh, sorry Mother. I got a little distracted and--,” I said.

“No more excuses! I told you to be home by 8 *at the very latest* and it is now 11PM! Where have you been?” Mom asked.

“This is a *huge* sign of disrespect to me and your mother Kevin. We don’t ask for much, where have you been?” Dad asked.

“Um, well” I stammered.

“Spit it out Kevin!” Dad yelled;

“I was pulled over by a cop okay?”

My parents reeled back in disgust and gave each other looks of horror.

“What happened?”

I took a deep breath and recounted the story, flaws and all, to my parents. With each segment of the story, their faces changed from interest to pride to confusion.

“Son, I’m sorry you got pulled over by a cop, I really am; but this is what happens when you try to break the rules. Rules are there to protect us, and since you broke them you will not go over to any friends’ houses for a month,” Dad said.

“WHAT,” I said.

“I’m not finished, Kevin!

Interrupt me again and it is *two* months! Your hour of electronic time is cut into 30 minutes and all of your points on your graph will be taken away.”

“THAT’S NOT FAIR!”

“Life isn’t fair Kevin. Now go to your room, we will discuss this in the morning.”

“This is some bullshit!”

“Kevin, control yourself!”

“No Father! For 16 years I have followed your every rule without question. I didn’t get an Xbox until 7th grade; I didn’t

get an iPhone until this year; I only have an hour of electronic time, I am home by 8 PM on the weekdays and 10 PM on weekends. I HAVE NOT BROKEN ANY RULES IN A WHILE! Don’t you get it?! When I go to college, you cannot fucking follow me, I can barely do anything by myself! How am I supposed to function without someone constantly telling me what to do????!! All of these rules are killing me! I still have a goddamn chart, like I’m in kindergarten! I am a junior in high school! I can legally drive! You’re pushing me away! I am scared whenever I see you because I’m scared of making you mad or disappointing you! A child should not fear his parents! They should be there for him!”

“Kevin, we are always here for you. We just expect you to follow a few rules.”

“Yeah, right a *few* rules.”

“Kevin, go to your room.”

Dad started turning around to walk back into his room when I said.

“No.”

“What did you say to me?”

“No, Father. I will not go into my room.”

“You will listen to me!”

“Why?”

“Because I am your father,

that's why!"

"Alright, Dad. I'll handle this. Go to bed." Mom said. Dad mumbled something about kids not having respect for their elders and walked back to his room.

"Kevin, can we talk about this in the morning? It's late and I don't want to be late for my meeting tomorrow. Love you Kevin." Mom said as she gave me a kiss goodnight.

"Yeah, whatever," I mumbled.

I walked into my room and scowled at the orderliness of it. The bedspread was neatly made with no wrinkles whatsoever and the desk was clear of any clutter I left there the night before. It was only big enough for the desk in the back corner and bed. There were inspirational posters along my tan wallpaper so that when I woke up and saw the posters, I would be motivated for the next day, in theory at least. The mahogany desk was hand crafted by my father when I was younger, but now it gave me splinters if I left my hands on there for too long. There was enough space on the desk for my computer, my notebook and my textbook side by side. The bed was as fluffy as a cloud and felt warm on a cold day and cold on a warm day. As I pulled

back the Batman bedspread and took my football blanket, I settled into bed. I turned out the lights and listened to the night. I could hear the crickets chirping, I could hear the heater huff puffing away, and the snores of my parents. I was always jealous at how fast they were able to fall asleep.

When I heard their snores, I instantly ran down the solid blue rug until I reached my backpack. My backpack was leprechaun green and it could hold so many books that I have fallen down a few times trying to test its strength. I pulled out my midnight black L.L. Bean Insulated Lunchbox and threw that on the counter. I took out all of my homework for the night and ran back into my room.

I'll do this during homework tomorrow, no sweat.

I stacked my folders and notebooks neatly on my desk. I was about to crawl into my bed, then turned around and took some of English worksheets and threw them into my desk, took some Math worksheets and put them into my English folder, and covered up my entire desk with papers. I took the sheets and untucked them and put my blanket on the wrong way. I haven't slept that well in a while.

