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Tourist Attraction

Growing up, the Las Vegas Strip was my front yard. Timidly, the small presence of my apartment complex sat between the Stratosphere and a luxury condo complex, the two looming over with height so commanding in it’s presence it seemed to make my apartment apologetic for it’s existence. The direct split between grandiose and unassertive houses made up my neighbourhood dubbed Naked City.

The neighbourhood isn’t scandalous for the hedonism expected from the city but rather for the tales of crime. It is the area locals warn the foreign about: Don’t go further down the back-end of the Stratosphere and you’ll be fine. Don’t stray away from the lights of the Strip and you’ll be fine. Naked City was once the center of the ideal Vegas daydream, the title being drawn from the neighbourhood being once preoccupied by industry workers such as dancers, waitresses, and showgirls, who would sunbathe in the pool courtyards nude for an ideal tan. Now, the neighbourhood sits half-dead to the prior liveliness of opulence and carefree living. There were many lessons I learned living there in my elementary school years.

Lesson one: The more hardened you are, the less geometrically you think. Triangles, squares, rectangles: the quintessential shapes used to draw the perfect house. Looking down at my paper I noticed the contrast between my blob of a building to the carefully constructed houses, drawn perfectly symmetrical and geometric. The directions in my art class were simple: all you had to do was draw your house, and yet, somehow, it felt as though I had managed to fail. I had drawn my apartment complex in an unintentionally honest manner: it was ugly and messy and realistic and yet the crooked lines brought a sense of innocence. Do people really live in houses like these? Square, neat, clean-lined houses?

Lesson two: The smell of chain-smoke still carries into your hair. Learning to periodically hold my breath was a skill I acquired as I walked through the Stratosphere, passing stoic figures burning through cigarettes the same rate they burned through their coins sat at slot machines. It seemed useless, though, as the smoke would cling to me all the way through reaching the casino’s arcade. This was one of the many ways the city would impose itself onto me. It was things like my bus stop being a street on casino property and my nearest grocery store having slot machines integrated into them that would continue to prove the city’s confidence in demanding it’s presence be known, this confidence being somewhat admirable to someone like me who was as self-effacing as my apartment building.

Lesson three: I am both the tourist and the local. Daughter to an immigrant and daughter to a refugee, my family and I are wide-eyed tourists, allured to the great American Dream that is just as promising as the slot machines whispering the temptation of riches to the blinking signs guaranteeing fun and excitement. Although the Stratosphere and the condos loomed over just enough to hide my neighbourhood almost shamefully, the occasional taxi would drive by with an aura of apprehension, the wide-eyed tourists peering out the windows to view the most interesting attraction of them all: poor people. On the very top of the Stratosphere people lined up to bungee jump off as I watched apprehensively through the view of my apartment window, watching with intrigue to the most interesting attraction of them all: the rich and the reckless. There is camaraderie in this strange vacuum of difference.

Living in (quite literally) the shadows of the luxuries expected from the ambitions of Vegas seen through the looming condo, the Stratosphere, and the Strip, I carry these lessons today integral to my identity. Though my neighbourhood is touted as the place to repel from, the compact apartment where I learned many little lessons from acts as a blood vessel to the heart of the city.
**Reborn**

Rebirth is a concept in Hinduism that allows an individual to be born again until they reach Nirvana. I haven’t obtained Nirvana yet, but I have been reborn. With two drunkards as my companions at the young age of 15, I had no constants in my life. We would riot, gamble and were “dancing and dicing day and night, and bold/ To eat and drink far more” than any one of us could hold (Chaucer 43-46). No meaningful attachments, no family to go home to, no desire for anything greater than what was right in front of me. My only instinct was to survive and to take pleasure in ordinary comforts I rarely had.

Two adult alcoholics that were the closest thing I had to a family tried and failed to take care of me. They led me on a hunt to find fame and fortune at the expense of my well being when they “started in their drunken rage” (Chaucer 97). They took my money, pride, and goals with them when they left my bleeding body on the street after the eldest put his dagger through my back (Chaucer 222). They tried to kill me.

My broken body was recovered by paramedics and I made a slow recovery with the help of Child Protective Services. I was placed into a foster home and was finally given shelter, food, and an opportunity. In my new home, I learned to despise the quest for fortune that led me to nothingness. From there I decided to go on a journey of my own that would result in a better life than the one I had been living with the drunkards.

I turned my back on my troubled past, took the lessons I learned from personal hardships and went to school. I studied theories of happiness, philosophy, and history of human greed throughout high school. As I began to believe in myself and all I learned, I started setting goals for myself. My first goal was to get into advanced classes that analyzed humanity rather than memorizing facts. Then I wanted to understand the neurochemical pathways that assisted the release of serotonin in the brain to understand the physiological aspect of my being, then I investigated the theory that happiness is not an end goal, but merely a collection of moments and pride in accomplishments. I directed myself away from gratifying my lusts and fill in favor of gratifying my curiosity (Chaucer 227).

As my goals became more abstract, I had fewer guides in my school who could answer questions on my journey to self understanding. Then my religious philosophy teacher asked me the most important question of my young life: “What college are you applying to?”

Merely 2 years ago nobody in my town could see me going anywhere except prison for misconduct with the drunkard parental figures in my life that made “oaths so damnable in blasphemy” (Chaucer 50). But now I had a real chance at a meaningful life after receiving support from my foster family. My teachers see me as a student who has potential. Using Mrs. Gray, my religious philosophy teacher, as my inspiration I began looking at colleges that would give me a quality education while staying home with the people who have given me the support and unconditional love I have desired my entire life.

This local search has led me to UNLV, I can work during the day and attend one or two night classes per semester. I finally have a way to accomplish my goal to become fulfilled through my intellect and not dwell on the monetary aspirations that leave the soul unfulfilled. I strive for excellence that UNLV provides for people in all walks of life so that we can find more productive means of continuing on our way (Chaucer 332).
The hunger. The want. Is what drove me on this day, even though my bones and muscles ached, and fingers were bleeding and cut. My heart was 100% in it, if only my body could have finished. If only I had more. If only I didn’t reach the end.

As a girl who is known for taking her highschool team further into playoffs than they have ever been, who is known for pitching no hitters, shutouts, and game winning hits. The wins don’t drive me, the losses do. One day that drives me to push my body a little harder each day is August 15th.

It was a hot Saturday in Cedar City, Utah. We are coming off of a losing streak from the day before. We were there at 6:30 for our 8 am game and the sun was already having a toll on us. Our warm ups were half hearted and our attitudes were horrible. We were pissed off and in our own heads. When it was gametime we dragged out stuff to the field and waited in the dugout. By the 2nd inning we were tied. I took the lead, started chatting and getting the girls pumped again. Our attitudes changed and so did our game. I came in to keep control of the other team and shut them out. Game one, 4-2. We won.

Game two was against the Aztecs and by the first inning we were already down by two. My Coach had faith that I could get the team going so he put me into pitch again. I shut them out the rest of the game. The dynamic in the dugout began to change. My team slowly but surely realized that we have a shot to stay in this tournament. Game two, 13-4. We won.

Game three we played the worst team of the tourney. Their record was 1-6. We came in cocky and pitched our 4th string pitcher and barely tried. Before we knew it we were in an international tie breaker with the game on the line. That's when we realized we made a huge mistake. With my coaches feeling the pressure they brought me into pitch. 1,2,3 strikeouts and it was our turn to hit. I was up to bat. My hands shaking, sweat dripping down my neck. With runners in scoring position, I ripped one in between 2nd and 1st. The run scores. Game three, 5-4. We won.

Game Four was next. After playing back to back games since 8 am, and the sun sucking the energy out of us, our girls were done. One pitcher had a jammed finger, another had a blown shoulder, and the other had heat exhaustion. Our catchers could barely move without being in pain, and me on the other hand, I had a sprained wrist, bloody fingers from pitching and a toe that was black and blue. So you could only imagine how I felt when the coach came up to me before the game and told me I was our only hope to get through this game and onto the championship. Talk about no pressure. The first inning was a breeze, the rush of the adrenaline got me through 3 strikeouts no problem. But as soon as that adrenaline left I was left with a weak body that was on the edge of breaking. My dad came up to the dugout and with the intent to motivate me said “You got this kid, till the wheels fall off”, laughing knowing damn well they fell off 4 innings ago I ran back onto the field. Of course I would never back out on my team no matter how much pain I was in. So I kept pitching, and pitching and pitching. Until my body just couldn't anymore. All I can think of is “My team isn't hitting, the score 2-5, and there is only so much I can do!”. As the minutes go on it feels like the sun is hugging me and my muscles are melting. My coach saw I was done and shouted out to me “just give me whatever you have left!”'. We had played 15 innings that day and I pitched 11 of them. I brought my team here, this far. But I couldn't go any longer. Game four, 2-5. We lost.
I think about this day a lot. Not the success I had this day but the last game. The feeling of gassing out and my body giving its all. So now I run that extra mile, I pitch another 100 pitches after practice, I stay for extra conditioning. Why? So next time we are 4 games deep in 103 degree weather, I can take my team to the championship when they need me to.

I never lost the hunger, or the want. It only got stronger, and so did I.
My Quest for Answers

Death: not a very mysterious thing; it happens to everyone. A far more mysterious thing is what happens after death. Being raised Catholic, I have been taught that everyone goes to Heaven or Hell. I am blessed enough to have received a Catholic education since Kindergarten, and while the existence of Heaven seems to be a repetitive teaching within my education, it never touches on exactly what Heaven contains. The repetition of this description-lacking teaching is what brought my quest for answers into being.

Perhaps this shortage of details makes sense, considering the most reliable resurrection stories come from the Bible, and even those are often left open for interpretation by the reader. However, this has not hindered my determination to seek answers throughout my high school journey. Backed by my Catholic education, I have had many resources available; specifically, theologians. I have heard many riveting views regarding this topic, and I respect all opinions; however, the educated opinion of theology teachers has proven to make the most sense. When I have asked my theology teachers about Heaven, the answer I usually get is some variation of: “Heaven is what you want it to be.” While some may say this answer is quite broad, I felt as though, at last, a void inside me had been filled.

Although I cannot verify that this theory is true, it is logical. It gives room for my imagination and creativity to run free. My theology teacher’s words were reassuring, especially when this question had gone unanswered for so long. There have been times where I have been hesitant to voice my curiosity about the afterlife, afraid that my beliefs would be against the Catholic Church. For example, believing in some form of rebirth or reincarnation—not necessarily a Catholic belief—felt wrong. Even though I had such passionate feelings and beliefs about this idea that was so convincing in my head, I felt guilty even bringing it up to my own parents! Upon reaching a more personal relationship with my sophomore year theology teacher, however, I finally felt comfortable engaging in a discussion with him about this. Although I got a satisfying answer from him, but my quest did not end there.

With time, I realized that it was likely impossible to get a 100% verifiable answer to my question without going to Heaven myself. This solution would be a little over the top; even for someone like myself who enjoys solving problems. With that being said, I found the next best thing to satisfy my curiosity: hearing what other people think. Hearing the thoughts of professionals, friends, or even complete strangers—of any religion—not only gives me additional knowledge and perspective on this topic, but helps me learn a lot about the person I am talking to. For example, upon asking a close friend what her idea of Heaven is, she mentioned going to Purgatory to “be purified for however long it takes” before even describing her very vivid idea of Heaven. Right off the bat, mentioning purgatory showed me what a humble person she is by recognizing her flaws. It even made me question my own imagination of the afterlife. Therefore, I have found my curiosity to be used more as a tool, than just simply looking for an answer.

Needless to say, I enjoy exploring my own imagination, creativity, and most notably, the many possibilities of what could await us in the afterlife. Yes, at times it can be very frustrating to not have a clear answer of what to expect, but perhaps that would ruin all the fun. Listening to other people’s ideas and sharing my own has proven to be an engaging conversation piece for both parties, and it is something that I never intend to give up on.
The King’s Struggles

As much as I regret the decisions I have made in the past, there is nothing I can do to fix them now. Now, I must focus on leading the great country of Denmark. I must confront myself every day with the fact that I killed my brother and married his wife. It is extremely difficult to lead a country when I have this guilt weighing upon me. In a perfect world, I would be able to come to terms with what I did and atone for my sins. But I am not in a normal situation. If I were to confess this, the state of Denmark would fall into chaos. How can I continue as a strong leader when I can’t even come to terms with the mistakes I have made?

With King Hamlet’s death, people seem intrigued by the situation in Denmark. Now is not the time for me to confess my sins. The people of Denmark need a strong leader at this time. Surely the enemies of Denmark have been waiting for a moment of weakness like this. I have been alerted to the actions of Fortinbras and my guesses were correct. I tell my subjects of how Fortinbras has demanded the surrender of the lands his father lost. Clearly, he is, “Holding a weak supposal of our worth or thinking by our late dear brother’s death” (1.2.18-19). While I am vexed by my actions, I have a responsibility to protect my people and serve them the best I can. If I admit to my wrongdoings now, I will fail my people by creating more turmoil in Denmark.

My allegiance to Denmark is of utmost importance right now. But what about the allegiance to my family? I have already wronged my brother. How can I continue to keep this farce alive while I see my nephew Prince Hamlet suffering? Every day I struggle knowing that I am the cause of his pain. Internally, I experience turmoil about how I will fix this situation. My actions are irreversible, so what can I do now? Must I step down from the throne and answer for my crimes? My ambition says no. Even though I recognize that “my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t”, I can’t let go of the throne. Power has consumed me and it keeps me from fixing the disaster that I have caused. As long as “I am still possessed of those effects for which I did the murder”, I cannot reveal the truth (3.3.57-58). Will I ever be able to break free from the lust for power and liberate myself from the intense guilt I feel?

Not only must I fight with myself, but I must also keep Hamlet from finding out. He threatens my rule, and I am not ready to give up the throne yet. Although I need him gone, I cannot be the one to get rid of him. This will only raise more suspicions, and I need the trust of the people to rule. Finally, I tell Hamlet, “everything is bent for England” because if I send him to England I will not directly be responsible for his death. (4.3.49-50) Hopefully, this will be the end of my troubles.

Over the past few days, I have been faced with many troubling dilemmas. All of them have been brought about by my own actions. Now, I must make a decision. Unfortunately, I am in a bad situation no matter what I do. I know what is right but I don’t know if I can break free from my own selfish desires to fix what I have done. I hope I can solve this internal, ethical dilemma by having an introspective attitude and realizing what is most important to me.
Go Knights Go

Go Knights Go
I never knew real tragedy in my city. Sure, crime happened, like it happens everywhere. Some armed robberies. Gang shootings. But Vegas never had any truly shocking events like other cities such as New York or Los Angeles. It was a good town to live in. Large, but not metropolitan. Famous, but the tourists stayed just downtown. The city never slept and this city was the place of dreams, or so everyone outside of the city said.

We never had a sports team, either. The Rebels were rowdy enough for us to have fun, but they were college-level, and were overshadowed by the Ivy Leagues. The Wranglers were our first real big team, but again, they were just minor. Then, in 2017, they announced that an expansion team for the NHL was being established in Las Vegas. The Vegas Golden Knights. They would call the new T-Mobile Arena home, just as they finished building it. That was all fine and dandy, except I had no idea how to play hockey or what it was like. I mean, we live in a desert. How good could a hockey team from the desert be? I was excited that we were getting a major team, I absolutely was. But in the back of my mind I couldn’t forget how the NFL, MLB, and NBA were right there in front of us (this was before the raiders announced their move, mind you). So I nodded my head, planned on buying a few hats or posters, and went on with my life, hoping we would get a real, real team soon.

You can never really tell when tragedy is about to happen. I still don’t really remember what happened the night of October 1st, 2017. All I know is that I went to bed, not really expecting anything exciting. The Knights were playing their first game the next weekend, but you know how I felt about the matter. My family didn’t bother to buy tickets. I slept that night, thinking about any homework I had forgotten to do.

The next morning I woke up to a different world. 6 am, I wake up and head downstairs. Turn on the news and relax for an hour before I have to get ready for school. Immediately I knew something was wrong. The bright and peppy music of FOX 5 News is silent. The words BREAKING NEWS continue to flash across the screen. On the night of October 1st, 2017, a madman opened fire on the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival, killing 58 and injuring over 500 more. The worst mass shooting in American history so far.

I had read about the September 11th Attacks. I had seen the Boston Bombing on the news. They were tragic and my heart ached for the victims. But those events were so far away, and I felt so detached from them. I never expected for this city, my city, to end up on the list of major American tragedies. And how do we come back from that? A city dependent on tourism just having a major mass shooting at a festival? Who would want to come now? For days, everyone in the city wondered what would happen next, and if we would ever recover from something so awful.

Nine days later, on October 10th, 2017, the Knights played their first game. It was bitter sweet. What should have been a glorious party had been turned into a somber memorial. I didn’t watch the opening ceremony; I was still convinced the team was going to be a dud. But my parents called me down just as they began to sing the National Anthem.

Very few things from sports stick with me. I follow sports lightly, but it’s never been a major part of my life. But when the singer reached the line Gave proof through the night, my life was legitimately changed. The entire crowd screamed “Knights” with the singer. Looking back, I’m still convinced the entire city shook as we all screamed the word together, a unified voice that someone had tried to silence nine days before. At that moment, I was a fan of the Las Vegas Golden Knights.

We won the game that night. We won a lot of games, actually. By the end of the regular season, we had had the strongest opening season of any NHL team. The Knights took the city by storm. There wasn’t a place you could go where you’d say “Go Knights Go” and not get a response. If we had lost during the playoffs, I would have been satisfied. No one expected them to make the Cup. And they made the Cup. We completely destroyed the Kings and took our division, one of three teams to do so in their opening season, ever. I had become convinced that we were
actually going to win the whole thing.
We didn’t, of course. The Capitals beat us in Game Five of the Cup. I don’t really know how I felt after it. I had always told myself that even if we lost, we did better than anyone thought we would. But as the timer counted down and I realized it was lost, I was pained. The city had been convinced that the Knights were serious, but what about everyone else? Would they know how the Knights changed my life?
It doesn’t matter, the more I think of it. Let the Capitals win. They deserve it. Let everyone else make jokes. Our next seasons weren’t as good, but how could they be? How could you ever beat going to the Stanley Cup during your inaugural season?
We’re going to win the Cup eventually, I’m certain of that. I seriously thought we were going to win last season, but we got kicked out during the playoffs and I had to rewrite this whole essay. But even if we never win the Cup, I’ll never forget how this team changed my life.
The Raiders showed up three years later. Allegiant Stadium is better than T-Mobile Arena, to be completely honest. But as many hats and signs and sweaters and flags I have of the Raiders, they will never come close to the Knights in my mind. My Knights flag will always be more dear to me than my Raiders flag. The Raiders are bringing Vegas to new levels, but the Knights made sure we didn’t stumble and fall.
I’ll never be a big sports guy. But no matter who’s the champion and who isn’t, the Golden Knights will always be on top for me. So, for Las Vegas, I got one last thing to say:

Go Knights Go
Wipeout 2.0
By Aaliyah Bey

After a long day of studies, one of my favorite amusements has been assembled by an entertaining display of extreme obstacles course, a striking number of crashes, and daring challenges with wipeouts along the way. On most evenings, my family and I gather around our living room in hopes of watching John Anderson and John Henson state, “The epic competition begins now to see who will emerge victorious and who will wipe out.” The biggest course of them all, known as the wipeout zone, one contestant winning a 50,000 prize.

Although a competition such as Wipeout is full of extraordinary obstacles, I wasn’t interested in the brutal face plants or the final course of the night. I found myself drawn to the participants’ eagerness to play through the pain and to conquer obstacles, which reminded me of my own series of obstacles filled with tragic falls, delirious spins, and unexpected twists and turns. These are primarily some of the most towering, wildest, heart-pumping, and thrilling rides on the planet! I instantly reminded myself that I manage mostly on rides such as Canyon Blaster or El Loco rather than the most intimidating roller coasters across the globe. And so, the adventures await me!

“There’s no way! Absolutely not! How do people put themselves in these positions to the point where there’s no going back?”

“I know it sounds pointless, right?”

Shortly afterwards I was a part of a lengthy line waiting to join the crowd. I had to stay within the imprisoned gray rope barrier suffused by roaring screams, while surrounded by riders everywhere, with uncertainty running through my consciousness. As the line maneuvers over time, the palms of my hands were clammy, and anxiety flooded my body. My adrenaline was undeniably heightened.

The time was near as the anonymous ride operator directed my erratic family and me to divide ourselves into two pairs. Luckily, I was paired up with my startled sister.

As I reached my assured seating and fastened the moist lap bar, the ride operator suspensefully announced, “Knock knock.”

The passengers and I replied questionably, “Who’s there?”

The ride operator swiftly responded, “Bye!”

I was launched into an unpredictable journey of a 160-foot loop upside down at the apex of the loop. The loop transitioned through a hastily high-speed with twists and turns, which then dropped through an old shadowy railway tunnel that gradually stopped for a moment.

Unexpectedly, a voice operator stated, “3,2,1. Enjoy the ride.”
There were piercing screams as the ride bombarded a second time backwards. From there, the gravity pulled us back into the ghostly tunnel for the third time. The riders and I increasingly stretched the composed edge of the ride's initial loop. Ultimately, there was another moment of anticipation before a quick downfall back to our final destination.

“Woohoo, that was unbelievable!” My first time on the Full Throttle ride was absolutely insane.

After the adventurous roller coaster ended, the blazing heat surrendered. Meanwhile, the amusement park was coming to an end, leaving me with an enticing treat. Perhaps a deep fried cake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, dusted with powdered sugar and luscious red berries on top. It was far too enjoyable.

Just like overcoming my fear of riding a roller coaster, I have had to conquer many difficult challenges throughout my school year: learning a new language, working on a class project, or being a team leader on the basketball court. Although life is a rollercoaster filled with ups and downs, I will try my best even if there’s a wipeout along the way.
Personal College Essay

“Hey Mr. Commissioner, do you believe different baseball personalities like Javier Baez - Chicago Cubs shortstop known for flashy plays like catching a ball in one hand while looking in the opposite direction - Tim Anderson - shortstop for the Chicago Whitesox who is famous for stealing bases - and Derek Dietrich - second baseman for the Texas Rangers who stares down the pitcher to demean him - help the game of baseball?” It was a crazy day when my friends and I had that conversation with the Commissioner of Major League Baseball, Rob Manfred. We told Commissioner Manfred how we had started a nonprofit organization called Vegas Baseball Buddies (VBB). The mission statement of the VBB was to provide free player instructional clinics, equipment, and funds to the underserved of the Las Vegas baseball community.

Developing and managing the VBB nonprofit while I was in high school taught me lifelong skills like how to run a business, social skills for effective communication and problem-solving, and a growth mindset, therefore preparing me for my future. The growth mindset and all of this culminated with a purpose for giving back to the community. The board reached out to many Major League Baseball (MLB) players, announcers, and even Commissioner Manfred. Furthermore, the MLB gave us their logo to use for free, whereas they make big named companies buy it for millions of dollars. Our first successful VBB event was held at the Las Vegas Ballpark, the newest minor league stadium. The field was donated for free and hundreds of Las Vegas youth were instructed by professional MLB players who volunteered their time. I personally received an honor of being asked to present the first event by appearing on local FOX news.

COVID-19 and its resulting quarantine threw me a curve ball. I was determined not to be discouraged or deterred in my dedication to Vegas Baseball Buddies. It was also in this time of quarantine that more and more people began using Zoom. The growth mindset I had developed so far with VBB resulted in marketing ideas - to reach out to big names in MLB and to ask them to participate in VBB Zoom. To participate through Zoom we reached out not only to players and staff and we contacted Dan O’Dowd, former Colorado Rockies manager and now a well-respected national talk show host. We contacted MLB Commissioner Manfred to talk to young athletes. A real coup was that we persuaded James Loney, a former Dodgers and Rays player, to join our effort. Not only did we get James Loney to speak to us, but he also joined the VBB board. He positively influenced us to be better every day. He talked about being imaginative. He encouraged us and made us feel like we could do anything - even planning events for everyone who was quarantined at home. For example, we created college scholarships.

Our VBB organization created a unique college scholarship program for high school seniors. In the midst of quarantine, high school baseball playing seniors could not show off their skills to college recruiters for scholarships. I reached out to multiple memorabilia associations to ask for donations. My idea was to raffle off items to raise scholarship money. The Las Vegas Golden Knights donated a hockey stick signed by their team. Moreover, I received a signed Los Angeles Angels Mike Trout baseball. Lastly, we received a donation of a dirt collage of MLB stadiums’ game used dirt. Senior applicants wrote essays explaining their situation for college and many were awarded scholarships.

As for my high school senior year and future plans I will continue to use all I have learned from the inception and development of Vegas Baseball Buddies. I am committed to continue expanding and improving the organization. I aspire to be one of those big names in Major League Baseball. Maybe even one day I will get the call, “Hey, Mr. Commissioner Noah Blut.”
The Grass Within

Tick, tick, tick. The sprinklers sound; my quiet footsteps hit the cold grass, and my socks porous, soaked up water. As I inhaled deeply, the scent of freshly cut grass filled my nostrils. Peaceful thoughts flood my head as I step onto the pitch: the whistle blows, the ball is kicked, and the game begins. Suddenly my face was in the grass, the soccer ball laying dormant next to my numb body. When my eyes opened, all I saw were the green blades dancing before my eyes; then the thoughts began to flood my head.

Grass, when well manicured, can be beautiful. Patterns can be created; it can provide a home to many; it is all the same. Grass is uniform; everything is by the books; it requires a certain amount of water and light to grow; when the resources are there, it flourishes. It is strong; the roots keep it grounded. The mightiest winds don’t affect it; it remains intact oftentimes adapting to its surroundings. Its mold fits its area, its space. Although consistent it changes; it takes to change and adapts. Adapting to surroundings is important, it shows flexibility and strength. Strength isn’t always how much power is put into something; it has to do with what happens. It’s what the person or it can take. Not only is it strong, it’s trustworthy. It’s always there, it’s dependable. However, when left untamed it spirals out of control, often turning into weeds. When left alone it grows and grows. It is unpredictable and strange. It is unknown which direction it will grow. The length is undetermined. The color is undetermined. Without the resources required, it will die, left lifeless and colorless. It turns brown, the color of the soil it originated from. Although it will return to its roots, the roots will be soiled or destroyed. When left alone, the length grows, it’s not properly manicured or tamed. Without consistency nothing is maintained, nothing is proper. No effort is there. Weeds grow and destroy the view, the surrounding, the health of the grass.

As I gazed toward the sky and began to sit up, I realized the grass was somewhat like me. Gathered and consistent, well manicured and taken care of. When proper care is applied, I flourish. My roots keep me grounded and strong. The strength in my mind keeps me persistent allowing me to adapt to my surroundings. No matter what occurs I know my faith and mentality will overcome my weaknesses. Consequently, I grow stronger. However, weaknesses are always present and they are my resources. I grow and flourish to overcome challenging tasks, making me a better person. But, weakness can break me down. I must be organized. Much like grass I have a routine; when out of control, I don’t function. I know it’s strange that grass provided me with this, and that evoked some complex thinking.

Bermuda grass never changes. It stays constant. It goes dormant in winter and becomes patchy in summer. There are gaps like my personality, but when unattended to, the gaps grow and then harm the well being of the grass. It doesn’t require much water and is low maintenance. Without concern, the grass grows. Its length grows. It dies. Bentgrass is different. It is often mowed down and cut short, but it always grows back. Again, much like my personality, I will consistently bounce back. Nothing will keep me on the ground. Maintenance is constantly required and it only makes it stronger, it makes me stronger. With water it doesn’t only grow strong, it flourishes and expands. When expanding it’s traits are passed on, it is infectious. Much like joy. Although costly, it is worth it. It’s worth, almost immeasurable. It’s surface hard, but the bottom, soft; like the skin of a boy transforming into a man. Everything comes and goes, but when tended to something beautiful always grows.
A Spoonful of Innocence

A familiar voice sings to me from the living room time and again. When I hear it, the opportunity to fill my senses with childhood innocence and valuable life lessons arises. Once again, I walk into my vacant living room to enjoy one of my favorite films of all time.

“Mary Poppins, practically perfect in every way.”

Mary Poppins exists as a professional and intelligent woman with a child-like heart. Every time I watch this film, I am reminded that life should not be taken too seriously. Like Mary Poppins says, “In every job that must be done there is an element of fun. You find the fun and snap, the job’s a game.” Due to her infectious advice, manners, and personality, I myself also choose to be a responsible, kind, and well-mannered woman while keeping my imaginative and light-hearted ways. Growing up or being an adult does not mean one has to come off as firm and mundane.

As I watch Jane, Michael, and Mary Poppins clean up the nursery, I discover a parallel with the Banks children’s chore to my own experiences passing out lunches and hygiene kits at a homeless shelter; I found great joy and satisfaction with my job. To make the job more efficient and enjoyable, my friends and I developed a game-like system; while one person was packaging all of the goods neatly in bags, I was handing them out to those in need. Our goal was to pass out fifteen packages every five minutes. This gave us both a challenge and a way to make our responsibilities thrive. In addition, witnessing the joy within people’s faces when I presented them with a gift and smile is priceless. This community service project was not only fulfilling and beneficial for the Las Vegas population of the homeless, but a lively activity I found the fun within a job.

A job. The word often scares people: hard labor, tedious, and strenuous. I used to associate jobs and tasks with this vocabulary. Fortunately, the comforting voice of that loving British nanny plays like a broken record in my mind. Find the fun and snap, the job’s a game.

Yes, life calls for acting professional, intuitive, and responsible, but who says that we can not also hold onto the fun? Therefore, with whatever task or challenge comes my way, I intend to go into it with enthusiasm. My very first paying job was being a dancer and float attendant in a Christmas parade at a local Las Vegas outdoor mall. Naturally, the dancing part of the job was extremely fun; however, putting together and operating the parade floats carried several responsibilities, such as assembling the floats correctly for safety purposes, making sure the float performers were safe, and maintaining the float on windy Vegas nights. Often, float attendants would become very agitated and overwhelmed with this job, but I refused to suffer this mentality. I saw an opportunity to learn, grow, collaborate and bring joy through our performance. I was successful with my job through work ethic and ability to see the good in a situation.

I continue with the thought of not allowing myself to become too harsh and serious as Mr. Banks once was. A child-like heart does not mean one is immature. That is simply a common stereotype, a misconception. Happiness does not make you unprofessional. The rest of the night, I sat at my desk doing my work for school. That was when it hit me. “A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down”. Mary Poppins was telling us all along that learning to enjoy oneself will allow the hardships of life go by like a breeze. I smirked about my realization and continued on with my work, keeping my “spoonful of sugar” close at hand.

Find the fun and snap, the job’s a game.
There I was at the ripe age of 3 years old, standing on nervous feet planted onto the colorful germ infested carpet of my local preschool. It was the big recital, and my mother and father were so excited to see their normally shy and quiet daughter sing with all of the other children—they even brought a camera. As the first note of “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” was being plucked out by my teacher, I made the bold decision to make a 180 degree turn and face the wall in terror as my classmates continued to sing. It was not that I had forgotten the lyrics or the movements that we learned in class; I practiced everyday at home. I was facing the wall for the sole reason that I was scared of failure. As soon as I saw my parents in the audience smiling up at me with their comically large video camera, I felt the insides of my face get as hot as the sun. I thought if I did not avoid this performance, my head would definitely explode out of sheer stage fright.

Fast forward ten years and I am getting ready to begin the next four years of my life in high school. During the time period between that catastrophic preschool performance and freshmen year, I had built up the courage to participate in numerous school plays and actually follow through with the performance instead of babbling incoherently or toddling my way over to the nearest wall. When I saw that my high school offered musical theatre as not only an elective but an extracurricular as well, my heart skyrocketed. I knew that joining this guild would change me not only in my performance ways, but it would influence my personal life tremendously and teach me impactful life lessons like how to be an effective team player. Performing on the stage was incredible, but that introverted part of me thought to also try my luck with the backstage side of the shows. I had signed up to be a crew member for our school’s production of The Wizard Of Oz, and soon enough everyday after school I was spending around five hours in rehearsals. Immense joy took over me while being a stagehand because I realized my importance to the production no matter how small the task. I would run through my ques before each show, organize the prop table, sweep and mop the stage, and I would look over at the seniors who were at the stage management table discussing and in my head thought about how professional they looked. That production really gave me the bug for not only theatre in general but also stage crew.

As I enter my senior year of high school I can proudly state that I have been involved in every production done since my freshman year. I am on the stage management team, and it has made me believe that time is not real—everything happens too fast. Growing into my own personality in such a supportive environment has helped me become the person I always aspired to be. I have come a long way from the cold dry wall at my old preschool, but I also realized how pivotal that moment was for me. I do not think that without that performance, or should I say lack of performance, I would become more outgoing. I used to be so afraid of failure and letting my loved ones down, but now I realize that you have to think positively in situations or else fears will become reality. Taking in life’s opportunities and obstacles head on and becoming confident is the goal. Attending college means having the ability to embark on a new journey and enhance my knowledge which will allow me to prepare for the real world.
I pass the stack of copies of my poem to the right, and as each person slides one paper off of the pile, I hear a gentle swoosh. I fumble with my copy, nervous for the overwhelming amount of critiques. I hear the turning of pages and the sounds of my course instructor beginning the writer’s workshop discussion. Mindlessly, I take note of every direction, and, soon, I am instructed to read my poem. “Across the skies, / Riding on a cloud of hope, / Finding my destiny to rise, / This is my story to cope.” (Poem: Hidden Secrets).

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Writing poetry allows me to share unique perspectives through storytelling. At the age of 12, I scribbled down my first few stanzas, transforming the mighty “Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market” by Pablo Neruda, to my very own “Ode to the Minion!” Crossing my t’s and dotting my i’s, I grinned at my first and final draft; it was a masterpiece. As I flew through the pages of my crimson journal, I discovered ways to incorporate the symbolism in my poetry and followed the message on the front cover of my journal—carpe diem or seizing the moment. In my mind, poetry was an art; I imagined my poem forming on a blank canvas with immigrant parents, familial values, and cultural roots representing the primary hues that colored my experiences. These hues poured heavily into my poetry, revealing society’s fears for the life of a young girl. “It was as though the gift my mother nurtured into this world was not the child of perfection, of dreams, of beliefs I believe.” (Poem: God’s Gift). As I dabbled with revealing personal experiences through my poetry, I felt the need to be a certain kind of poet and, hence, was afraid to open my poetry to criticism.

The opportunity to attend the Summer Writing Residency at the University of Iowa, in the summer after my freshman year of high school, allowed me to listen to the feedback of other poets during the writer’s workshop discussions, as I unleashed my creative side and expressed vulnerability through my writing. Sharing my poetry instilled confidence within me, as I pushed myself over that last hurdle—an attempt to truly kindle an open-book personality.

I dusted the bottles of oil pastels. Hard-to-wash lumps, dried flakes, and hues that had seeped into the crevices were a testimony to the many perspectives that I brought to life through poetry. Colors gleamed from the skin under my damp nails as I mixed the paints on my palette. Poetry has not only allowed me to find a place to pour out my thoughts and feelings, but it has also allowed me to build and unveil a fearless persona. Today, I added a new color for my canvas—a fresh new perspective to share with the world.

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“Rest in peace my dear friend, / I enclose these very secrets, / We are one and we blend, / This is my shadow of uniqueness.” (Poem: Hidden Secrets). As I close out the poem, I am bombarded with positive remarks as well as critiques to help me improve. At the end of my 10 minutes for the workshopping process, I gather all of my peer annotations, and the ruffling of papers now excites me. Eagerly, I seize the opportunity to be accepted in a community of writers that, like myself, are carving their identities through their writing. Workshopping my poetry extends itself as a tool to sculpt my unapologetic personality. For me, my workshop never ends.
“as kids we learned to crawl and then walk and then just go. / but i wish i could just go.” (Poem: dreaming in the distance). I long to take flight with my newfound identity and use it as a tool to pen my outlook on colorful stories and truly paint the canvas of life.
From Fear to Perseverance

Little did I know what was in store for me the morning of August 9th. It appeared sultry outside with a slight ocean breeze in southern California. The water was freezing, but the sticky wetsuit that covered everything but my toes blinded me from the unnerving sensation. I was seated directly in the center of my surfboard with my legs dangling in the water. The current began to roll in, and I saw the perfect opportunity to catch a final wave before I went back to my hotel. I began paddling, my arms were aching and my body felt sore, but I used all of the power I had left. I pushed and pushed until I found myself standing, body facing right, knees bent with my left arm in front of me and my right touching the water. I was inside the perfect wave. Everything felt so ideal, and I thought that life couldn’t get any better. I wish this moment would have lasted forever, but all righteous things must eventually come to an end.

Our world is like a jellyfish; at some point everyone will unfortunately get stung by the bitter and spiteful reality of life. After reaching the shore with a big smile engraved on my face, I hopped off my board into what I thought would be loose and powdery sand. Instead, I felt a prickling, unnerving sensation that sent shockwaves down my foot, feeling as if 1,000 needles were stabbing me all at once. This sensation immediately wiped off that ecstatic smile. This debilitating pain caused me to develop a form of Thalassophobia. Unfortunately for me, this fear is more than just being afraid of the ocean; this fear also affected my day to day life. I’ve always had a deep love and passion for oceanography. I could discuss my fascination with the ocean for days straight, but after this incident I no longer found myself intrigued. I wasn’t getting lost in the discussion of the oceanic zones, especially not the euphotic zone (home to the culprit of my sting). This caused me to start slacking in marine biology, no longer finding interest in the class activities. I also believed that I would never surf again, since in order to do so I’d have to enter the dark depths of the unknown, everlasting water. Keep in mind that surfing has been a vocation of mine since the age of 10; yet a trifling, insignificant creature was somehow able to take that away from me. I knew there was something I had to do to stop this terror, but what?

The ocean has always been a part of my life, and that’s when I realized that I can’t let something as minuscule as a Cnidaria take away something that I cherish and treasure so deeply. Giving up on my passions like this was not my character. I’ve always been fearless and tenacious, not timorous and diffident. I discovered that the only way to overcome this jellyfish-induced setback was to make myself step into the sea once again, this time shuffling my feet to avoid another predicament.

After overcoming this fear, I learned that perseverance over reluctance is a winning strategy in life. With a positive mindset, bravery and determination can overcome anything. Even after the most-torrential of storms, the end result will inevitably be soothing, relaxing waves that glisten in the beaming sun. In life we may feel as if our world is crashing down on us, but there’s always a light at the end of the tunnel. Embrace the “storms” of life because those too shall pass, and you will end up coming out wiser and more sagacious on the other side. The penetrating sting of the jellyfish doesn’t have to be an entirely negative experience, instead; that unexpected prick can bestow a paramount opportunity to reflect, grow, and ultimately persevere.
I want to become King. All my life, it has never been an issue for me to realize my worth, yet I still struggled with achieving what I most desired: power. I am willing to do anything it takes to achieve what I want, at the cost of any. No matter what gets in my way, my determination will prosper.

Although seemingly positive, if unable to find a balance, these attributes may come at a cost. From the day I discovered my brother’s royal appearance over me, I knew I had to be better. I despised my brother. In ways unthinkable, I wanted to feel greater than him for once in my life. Yet, his belittling actions formed a genuine charm to spark inside, as I worked to gain my worth. Waking up every day below my brother was a battle I had to overcome. My obstacles turned to strengths that could no longer be matched by my brother. I did what I felt had to be done, as I took the throne over his dead body.

Thinking all was said and done, the kingdom itself was not my only worry. Continuing the legacy of his father by name, my nephew, Hamlet, was another hindrance I was not as prepared for as expected. Putting all the blame onto him, I had hoped he would be exactly like his father. The second generation Hamlet was far worse. He seemed insane, yet he was right all along. His unpredictable outlashes and poignant moods made me feel as if I still had my desired power over him. Thus far, I still got caught in the mousetrap. Still in denial at first, time away from Hamlet still did me no good. Too many people suffered, as it all could have been prevented if I took action on myself, rather than protruding onto others. It was time to take responsibility.

Once believing I could push away anything that got in my way, I soon discovered what the true problem was: myself. My own deceitfulness was my greatest downfall, and I had a lot of work to do to build myself back up. I needed to be humbled. Two generations of Hamlet royalty seemingly put me in my place, yet I was the only one who could truly face my impediments.

Through constant trials and tribulations, it is hard for anyone to admit they are wrong. Failure is something that only people of true strength can accept. We must learn to accept our fate, before time runs out. As I have grown in accepting my mistakes, it is clear to me that Southern Utah University is a place that can become my home. Cedar City, and the Shakespearean atmosphere it entails, is a place where a true tragic hero can continue to thrive. While self growth is my biggest accomplishment, my own detrimental mistakes can allow my fellow Thunderbirds to do as I say, not as I do. All these considered, no matter how tough the journey may be, Learning Lives Forever.
IKEA Furniture

I was confused. I wanted to give up, but I knew if I admitted defeat, I would be forced to sleep on the floor. How could something that seemed simple cause so many problems? I just could not figure out how to build this bed.

Earlier that day, my family and I went to Ikea in hopes of finding me a new bed. After deciding on which bed to get and indulging in Ikea’s fine dining, we finished making our way through the maze-like establishment. I thought that when we got home, I would unbox the bed, follow two or three steps, and then my bed would be completely assembled. However, I was mistaken. At around 11:30 a.m., we started unboxing, and it turned out that the instruction manual contained over seventy steps, and I didn’t even know the names of half the parts. What was a Hillmangroup-160564Grade-5Hex-cam-lock Nut? My dad and I started to build, and we completed the first few steps within a reasonable amount of time. However, at around 12:30 p.m., a piercing ring from my dad’s phone caused a major disruption in our building. He was summoned by his boss and now I had to build this bed alone.

I swiftly completed the following few steps, but my success fleeted, as I could not conquer the next step. I read and reread the instructions, yet the bed frame I had so far failed to resemble the picture within the instructions. I relooked at and redid previous steps in order to ensure correct completion, nevertheless, I ended up in the same predicament. I was confused. I glanced over and saw the time 2:00 p.m. splashed across the face of my digital clock. Hit by the realization that I spent over an hour on this single step, I became frustrated and every minute that passed only fueled my anger.

Eventually, I took a break. Returning to the task with a fresh and clear mind, I relooked at the instructions, instantly realized my mistake, and finally moved on to the next step. However, each new step that brought me closer to achieving my goal, simultaneously brought me more problems. At around 4:00 p.m., I reached step fifty-two, only to discover I made a mistake back in step forty-four. Consequently, I deconstructed what I originally built in order to correctly reconstruct it. An hour later, I patiently reorganized all the parts and made them easy to find and access, since I began to spend more time looking for parts and less time actually building. At one point, I chose to ignore the instructions altogether and tried to build the bed in a way that made sense to me, considering certain instructions appeared incomprehensible. I proceeded through a couple steps via common sense, but eventually hit a roadblock and returned to the instructions. At about 9:30 p.m., I finished. Celebration ensued and I vowed to never try to build something from Ikea alone again. However, my vow didn’t last long, as I learned my dad appointed me to build my brother’s desk chair.

The more I built, the more I enjoyed each step of the process, and the better I became. Building furniture requires problem solving and thinking critically and creatively when approaching an obstacle. It rarely goes as expected, which highlights the importance of adapting and working to overcome every challenging step. Although life doesn’t come with a step-by-step instruction manual on how to reach my goals and fulfill my aspirations, I know I possess all the tools and parts needed to be successful. I’m filled with excitement as I take on each new step in life and will continue to build and rebuild myself as I grow and learn. Within building and life, confusion is simply a part of the process and can be overcome through perseverance.
**Philotimo**

"Philotimo to the Greek is like breathing. A Greek is not Greek without it." - Thales

My grandparents immigrated from Greece to America when they were my age, escaping the fear and damage from World War II. Their journey of sacrifice and hard work to provide a better life for their children and eventual grandchildren inspires me every day. As the recipient of my grandparent’s wisdom, I have learned so many important lessons from them in my life. The most important of these values can be encompassed in the word “philotimo.”

Philotimo, to me, is like a badge of honor that I carry with me every day. My decisions and how I live my life is based upon this idea. The word philotimo means “love of honor,” but it means much more than just that. It is to put others before yourself and expect nothing in return. Because of the sacrifices that my family has made to give me a better life, I try to do everything I can in order to honor their sacrifice.

My education is something that I value a lot in my life. In the Greek culture, education is a very high virtue. My grandparents didn't have access to a higher education, which is one of the reasons why they came to America. At a young age they taught me that to be educated is a blessing, and that it is important to work as hard as I can to achieve my goals. I know that I have opportunities that many others around the world do not, simply because I have access to a better education. I think that this sets me apart from others my age. Many students take for granted their ability to learn. They do not share the same value of education as I do. I am thankful for my education every day, and I take pride in always doing my best work.

To me, helping others is another one of the most important things that a person can do. The word “philo” in Greek has many meanings, one being “friend.” To value philotimo is to value everyone that you cross paths with in life, and do whatever you can to help them as a friend. This is another thing that my family has taught me throughout my life. At my church, we hold an annual Greek Food Festival where parishioners volunteer their time working the booths to help raise money for the church and other charities. My parents have chaired the bar booth ever since I was born, and I have worked as a cashier for the last six years. Watching them work so hard every year has taught me the importance of community service. Again, to live by philotimo is to do everything you can to help your community and others.

Though I have always tried my best in all aspects of my life, I have definitely made mistakes. With a family that has high standards for my success, I thought that they would be disappointed in my failures. However, I have realized as I have gotten older that this isn't the case. In Greek culture, perseverance is another important virtue. Philotimo encompasses love, and in my life I know that I still have love even when I fail. My heritage has taught me that it is now how you fall, but how you get back up. I think this is another thing that sets me apart from my peers; I know that failure is just another step to success.

I live by philotimo in every aspect of my life, and I know that it has set me on the path for success.
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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Wicked Witch of Brazil

The witch was coming to town, at least that’s what we nick-named her.

Starting from the beginning, my mom met my stepdad in 2007 when I was a small sun-kissed two year old living in Brazil. In 2008 they started dating and three months later they got married. My brother (technically half-brother) was born in 2009 and we’ve been inseparable since. My mother and stepfather have been happily married for twelve years now.

My stepfather and I got along easily and became very close. However, his family was a much different story. We joke that his mother, my step grandmother, resembles a two faced witch giving insults disguised as compliments, pretending to be nice while she plots to make you feel bad and therefore nicknaming her ‘the witch’ or more specifically, the wicked witch of Brazil. None of us really liked her including her own sons. She was, what people would call, fake, and racist. But, we couldn’t deny her visiting her own son and grandchildren.

On a typical gloomy, rainy day in Seattle, WA, my family had all cramped inside our little white car for our drive to the airport. As we drove, I would watch the raindrops race each other on the car window, betting on which one would win. My brother was entranced by his iphone screen, watching netflix as he raised the sound too loud that we wondered if he was going deaf.

When we got to the airport, we parked the car in the dark grey parking lot. The walls seemed to be worn out which made the space feel uncertain, as if something would jump out at us. The parking lot was moderately full of cars. Occasionally we would see people in a tux or business attire running with their suitcase tripping behind their legs, there were a lot of people like that and I remember thinking, they always seem to be in a hurry.

After we walked through the entrance of the airport, we headed towards the baggage claim to wait for the person we dreaded to see again. I stepped onto the moving escalator heading downstairs and watched as the passengers, flight attendants and even pilots walked down below.

We found four seats by the baggage claim of my step-grandma’s flight. We all sat down on the cold black leather seats and my brother, as usual, pulled out his phone and his eyes became glued onto the screen. We could’ve left without him and he wouldn’t have noticed till the next day.

My stepdad’s phone seemed to buzz in the right pocket of his jeans, a call from the witch. She had arrived. The four of us stood up and walked closer to the escalator across the hall in which she would be coming down. We patiently waited, and dreaded her arrival. We still had hopes that she had changed, that she had become a better person, we were about to see.

“Are you ready for this?” My mom looked around anxiously, I doubted she was ready for this, but neither was I. There she was, the blue-eyed, blonde haired, thin and wrinkly old woman. Despite having been on a plane for almost twenty hours, she had a full face of makeup, glossy pink lipstick, dark eyeshadow and even mascara. It’s amazing how none of it was smudged, it was probably one of her spells.

She didn’t speak a word of English, it was a wonder how she managed to fly to another country only speaking portuguese. Her eyes wandered over the many faces below as they watched the escalator go down, waiting for a loved one to arrive. She spots us and smiles. She waves at us, shaking her arm rapidly which jingles her bracelets and the wrinkles on her arms.

She stepped off the escalator and came to greet us, “Ola! Que saudade!” Hi! How I’ve missed you! She looked only to my stepdad as she said that, not acknowledging the rest of the family, yet. She hugs my stepdad first, then my brother, then she hugged me, squeezing my arms so tight I wondered how a skinny old woman had that much strength in her. She hugged my mother last, but at least she pretended to like her, giving my mom the fakest smile you’ve ever seen and barely hugging her for two seconds.

When my mom and stepdad got married, my step-grandma was to help with decorations. My mother’s only
eyes were fighting to stay open after falling asleep at midnight last night. I lazily walked down the cold metal ladder
over with, two more to go on how long she's lasted restraining from conflict with her. As much as my mom hated the witch, I was impressed
groceries or go to a restaurant, my grandmother insisted on walking beside my stepdad, holding hands, while my
sitting bomb. My mom is an extrovert, she loved talking to anyone and everyone, but when it came to her mother in
law, she barely spoke.

At that moment we all knew, she hadn’t changed, “Mãe!” Mom! my stepdad exclaimed frantically, while still maintaining a low voice as people still stood around us. I knew he could tell she hadn’t changed either. His eyes were wide, his eyebrows lifted in disappointment as he walked behind his mom, trailing her luggage behind.

“My step-grandma had three sons, my step dad, his older brother and younger brother. All three of them were married, two of them living in the US (my stepdad and his older brother) while the youngest brother still lived in Brazil. His two brothers had completely banned their mother from visiting them, they were fed up with her comments and being awful to their wives. My mother wanted to give her a second chance, maybe she was a new person after all these years, so my stepdad agreed to let her come visit.

My step-grandma’s original plan of staying at our house for 3-weeks turned into barely a 1-week vacation, if you could even call it a vacation. The first three days with her were like trying to swallow all the thoughts and arguments I had started with her in my head. My mother had it worse, everything my mother would say, my step-grandma would do the opposite.

My mom is allergic to many things and her skin is very sensitive. My step-grandma decided it would be a good idea to use the strongest cleaning product, which was meant to get stains of hardwood floors, and she cleaned our entire white couch with it. My mom broke out in allergic fits and rashes over her arms, she couldn’t even sit on her own couch anymore. Our house had become a subtle, warring state of the witch against everyone else.

The only person my step grandma would listen to is her son, my step-father, as if giving birth to him would get rid of all her wrongdoings, and that she would immediately be forgiven by him. My stepdad had none of that, he gave his own mother a warning, as if he was a kindergarten teacher warning his students not to misbehave, if he got to three warning, they would surely get the time out corner, or in the witch’s case, an early flight back to her own house.

We all thought she would surely be better after my step dad talked to her. But, on the third day after her arrival, my mother and step grandma were in the kitchen. My mom was preparing dinner with my step grandma. Instead of asking my mother, who was preparing the food alongside her, she decided to wait till my stepdad appeared downstairs to ask him a question, “Filho, devo fazer todo o frango ou metade dele?” “Son, should I make all of the chicken or half of it?” My mother was clearly the one helping her make chicken, but instead she asked her son, as if since he was a man, he made all the decisions in the house, as if it was her duty to impress him and challenge his own wife. I felt as if we had taken a step back in time, back to a patriarchal society the witch thought we lived in.

“Mãe não sei, perguntar a ela, ela que está cozinhando com você.” “Mom I don’t know, ask her, she is the one cooking with you.” Only after my stepfather’s request did she turn to my mom and ask her the question, in which my mother replied, “Metade.” “Half,” she had said respectfully but in a demanding voice. Just to spite her, my step-grandma said, “Você fazer tudo.” “I’ll make all of it.” After she said that, it was if the rest of us had our tongues stolen from us because a quiet fell throughout the house. No one said a word but in our minds I surely thought we were all thinking the same thing, *If you were going to do that anyway then why ask?!!*

None of us could stand it anymore, I didn’t know how long my mom would last before she exploded, like a sitting bomb. My mom is an extrovert, she loved talking to anyone and everyone, but when it came to her mother in law, she barely spoke.

Sometimes even I felt as if my step-grandma had been trying to take my mother’s spot. When we would go do groceries or go to a restaurant, my grandmother insisted on walking beside my stepdad, holding hands, while my mother stayed behind with the two of us, still not intervening. As much as my mom hated the witch, I was impressed on how long she’s lasted restraining from conflict with her.

On the last day of the first week she had resided in our home, I woke up with a feeling of relief, *one week over with, two more to go.* I heard chatter coming from downstairs, everyone must already be eating breakfast. My eyes were fighting to stay open after falling asleep at midnight last night. I lazily walked down the cold metal ladder.
of my loft bed and turned towards my white desk facing the window, the light from the morning sun was pouring in, making it worse to try and keep my eyes and body attentive.

As soon as I started to leave my room, heading downstairs to enjoy some breakfast, I heard a sudden shout. My eyes, ears, and body were fully attentive now as I raced back into my room and gently closed the door halfway, so I could still hear what the commotion was about.

Although I couldn’t exactly hear what they were saying I could understand what the fight was about. My Mother started screaming. Standing up to the witch about all the vulgar comments and all of her backhanded doings. I could tell my step-grandma was in shock that my mother actually came out to tell her all these things, but she made it worse when she told my mother, “Pare de gritar! Você está sendo estúpida, olhe para o exemplo que você está dando para seus filhos” Stop screaming! You’re being stupid, look at the example you are setting for your children. If I were in my mother’s shoes, I would’ve been furious.

Still shouting, I heard my mom angrily walk up the stairs. The house had a balcony at the top of the stairs that overlooked the living room and kitchen. I heard her stopping there to look down at the witch as they fought. I could picture this in a movie scene, a telenovela even. Two Brazilian women, a mother and her mother-in-law screaming in portuguese at each other as the mother towered over her above the staircase.

If this was truly a reality TV show I would’ve expected my mother to dramatically fall off the balcony, which she didn’t, to my relief, she instead stomped her way to her bedroom. She slammed the door shut so hard the whole house shook. A portrait that hung on the wall outside her bedroom door fell and broke into small pieces of glass after the impact of the slamming door.

My bedroom was next to my mother and step dad’s bedroom. I could hear the angry shuffling of steps back and forth in the room next door. If I were her, I would be relieved to have finally come clean to all the feelings she was holding back, that everyone was holding back.

My brother had been sitting next to my step-grandma when all the jousting started. He was eating his breakfast but I’m pretty sure he was unfazed because after glancing downstairs at the aftermath of the fight, he was playing a game on his phone, completely unbothered as if it were another typical day. Sometimes I wished I didn’t care about things as much, like he doesn’t care.

After ten minutes of hiding in my bedroom I heard footsteps heading my way, “Let’s go” was all she told me before heading to the garage. I didn’t want to anger her so I put on the first pieces of clothing I could find in my closet, grabbed my phone, and worriedly headed downstairs.

As I arrived downstairs no one was talking except for my stepdad whispered, pleading for my mother not to leave, I reckon he was thinking the worst, thinking my mother would leave him or something of the sort. My mother did not blame him, he never wished for any of this to happen as well. My stepdad had even taken a whole day off from work before the fight had happened to talk to his mother and make sure she would behave better.

I could see my grandmother in front of the corner of my eyes but I did not dare turn to look at her. She sat silent on the couch, her eyes followed me as I walked towards the garage. I hurried to turn the door leading to the garage. I passed my step-father and gave him a pity look before I entered the passenger seat of the car but his attention was on my mother. I used my hand to pull the cold car door handle. As soon as I closed the car door beside me, my mother took off.

She ended up taking me to a breakfast restaurant and apologized to me about the commotion. She said she just needed to get out of the house, and she knew I hadn’t had breakfast yet. I asked her why she didn’t take my brother too, she replied, “He was still eating breakfast, he already had trouble eating. I didn’t want to distract him even more.”

She explained to me why the argument started. She had come to my mother to apologize for her behavior, but her way of apologizing couldn’t be considered an apology. My step-grandma had said, “Estou aqui para me desculpar, mas não sei pelo que estou me desculpando porque não fiz nada de errado, você só tem que me aceitar como eu sou.” I’m here to apologize but I’m not sure what I’m apologizing for because I did nothing wrong, you just have to accept me for who I am. I understood why my mother got so angry, the ticking bomb inside her head finally exploded after my step grandma uttered flames, igniting the bomb.

My mom refused to return home until the witch was gone. The only reason she didn’t throw her out of our house was that she was older in age, and it would be impolite to kick out an older person. We stayed at a hotel that night, my mother, brother and I. My step dad bought my step grandma a flight back to Brazil the next day and dropped his mother off at the airport. The worst thing about it is that the witch had won. Before she left she got the whole house to herself and her son, and she pretended nothing had happened and that she was forgiven.

It was safe to say none of us wanted to see her again. She was finally banned from visiting all three of her children. I don’t pity her, she had been given more than enough chances to change and she decided not too. A huge weight lifted off of everyone’s shoulder when she left. She had almost broken apart our family but we were stronger than that. I learned an important lesson that day. It doesn’t matter if your family or the best of friends, if
someone is wrong you justify for what is right.
“What are you waiting for?” asked my father, wondering why I was taking so long. Imagine someone sitting thirty yards away from absolute redemption, and I can verify that someone was me. I knew how painstakingly close to achieving my goal, closing the deal, and knocking it out of the park, that I could feel it deep within my very soul.

Let’s back up to when I was a foot shorter and missing a few teeth. The Great Eastern tom stood there, just a mere fifteen yards away, beating up the jake decoy like it owed him money and ruining its brand new, pristine look; all while staring me down with his cold, piercing eyes. Taking a big breath in and gaining control over my lungs, I steadied my hand and aimed for the base of his long, bearded neck.

“Shoot! Nicholas: shoot him already!” said my dad, his voice filled with excitement.

In the heat of this life-changing, important moment, my naive, easily-distracted, prone-to-bad-ideas brain asked me: Nick, if you pull away from the stock and open both eyes, then you will be able to see the show, better. Right?

The worst part is, I thought it was a great idea. On the verge of completing my first turkey hunt, I ruined all of the time and effort spent that morning in two motions; I not only pulled my head up from the cheek pad, but I also spastically jerked the trigger. I completely and utterly missed. I had never missed before that day. Unready and rattled, I was bewildered.

“Whoa! Was that a breeze?” was the question seemingly posed to me by the mighty fowl as he chucked, mockingly. I breathed heavily as I tried to reload the Beneli twenty gauge, which was already preloaded with three shells. The problem was that I never knew that the shotgun was semi-automatic, and I never had to rely or even think of taking a second shot. A startled yet calm, quiet voice interrupted my rushed chain of thought.

“Nick, it’s a semi! Calm down, aim at the base of the neck, and squeeze slowly. You have all the time in the world,” my father said. As he instructed, I re-aimed and steadied the crosshairs but it did not matter because I had no control over my breathing. Firing my second shot, I jerked the trigger and missed again. At this point, I was very flustered and embarrassed and as the beast started to strut away and I tried to shoot it again but I completely missed.

The hunt ended, for the turkey. For me, I had to endure a year of ridicule, advice, and comparisons: I earned a C on an Algebra quiz: Nick! Slow down in math and breathe. I broke a bowl as I washed the dishes: Don’t rush, son. The bowl won’t run away. I didn’t catch a ball: Why didn’t you catch that? Did it “gobble” at you? Slowly, I realize that patience, precision, practice, and self-awareness mattered beyond hunting.

When I returned the next year I was a little taller, but more importantly, I knew which way the autumn wind was blowing. Hunting is not just about pulling the trigger. It is about communing with nature, being patient, feeling the earth, and pondering philosophical, scientific, and economic conundrums. Hunting is not a Man vs. Nature story. It’s about Man vs. Self. Missing that turkey not only sharpened my mental spear, but also carved humility into my character. What missing also did for me was that it drove me to go out to the range and give one hundred and ten percent of my effort every single weekend for the next year. So when the time finally came again, I settled my breathing, looked at the turkey, and relaxed. Before I had even pulled the trigger, I realized that I had nothing to wait for anymore.
Earthly Dreams

It was a sight I thought I would never see, a human cause that seemed not to have been rallied for since WWII.
After living through years of political debates, protests, and little action, it seemed fitting that things were finally
being done. As if a light flickered in the minds of the politicians that the issue at hand had no place in politics. This
was a moral issue for society to fix, not for politicians to debate over. After one-hundred and twenty years of the
callous treatment of Earth, international laws had been signed and passed all across Earth. The people united against
one enemy, not one with borders or political sides, but ourselves.

Earth has nurtured us, ever since our first ancestor walked 3.2 million years ago to now in the 21st century.
Together, man and Earth have seen countless wars, famines, and disease while humanity found its balance. During
those times, Earth seemed to forgive humanity for everything. The carelessness of humanity with wars and exploits
desecrated nature. However, the vigilance of Earth has no boundaries. Where oil spilled seventy years ago, fish now
swim and coral grows. A resilient Earth, inhabited by a blind resident, who thought they were above all else.

So, seemingly to any alien not from Earth, they would ponder at how we could take advantage of a planet so
kind. Of course for a human, they could tell you why. The greed for resources and the materialistic mindsets are
sewn into the minds of all who are born in the consumer world. We learn in school that Earth is the most important
thing to us, that Earth is the mother of nature. However, we learn in our capitalist society that Earth is a thing. A
thing which we should feast upon in order to feed our never-ending greed.

However, Earth is much more forgiving than any human. It seemed people finally realized that the thing that has
nourished them, was Earth all along. As Earth neared the two degree mark on climate change, humanity pulled
together. The fracking had stopped, oil fields ceased operations, smoke stacks smoked no more. Planes now flew on
electric and so did all the cars. Companies old and new had to switch their profit margins for the new era that we
now lived in, for they too were no longer blinded by greed. With the clear air and land, animals grazed in areas
where refineries once stood, now covered with grassy hillsides where the windmills blow. A world like a dream
before time.

This could all happen. But now, it’s only a dream. Wildfires burn across California, creating scenes from
apocalyptic movies with orange skies of smoke. More herculean hurricanes than ever seen batter coastal cities year
after year with more intensity. Each year brings a new record breaker for heat. This year marked the hottest and
longest summer in my life. And with all the signs for help from the world, we still debate in courts over the simplest
moral decision. Human philosophy has taught us so much in the realm of people, but not enough on the morals for
everything that is not human. My only hope is that the dream of Earth will come true. A dream where humans do not
just take, but return the favor to our Earth.
Lemonade

As I watch the condensation travel slowly down the glass, I imagine the taste of sugar and lemons on my tongue. I see the crystal clear cubes floating and bobbing around on the surface of the liquid, promising a cool, refreshing sensation if I take a sip. The pale yellow drink is swirling in the jar, tempting me. It beckons. “Come, have a drink,” it says, “all of your worries and sorrows will be forgotten if you would just take one swallow.” Panting in the heat of the day, I almost agree.

The sun is blistering, and I can feel the tickle of sweat running down my back. The air is dry as a breeze that feels like a blow dryer winds its way around me. My throat is parched, my lips are chapped, and my mouth tastes like cotton. I desperately need something to drink. Even a single drop of rain would do. But sadly, it is not meant to be. Lemonade is the only one for me.

I remember warm spring seasons from childhood days. Everyone walking around, having fun, and drinking that sweet beverage. The scent of hot dogs and hamburgers promising that blissful nectar to wash it down. The clinking of ice against glass and the feel of soft grass between toes. Oh, how I wish to go back to those carefree times. To drink that wonderful liquid that I shamelessly love and adore. I wish.

The sound of laughter and dreamy feeling of summertime joy are some of my favorite things, next to lemonade. Paradise in one of its truest forms is sitting outside on a warm midsummer’s night watching the fireflies blink in and out of existence, like stars that came down to show us their brilliance before fading back into the sky to wait for tomorrow. Just breathing in the clean air that follows the rain, and being content with life. Lemonade for me is that feeling in a single cup. It is marvelous.

Paradise in another form is lying in my bed and staring at the ceiling. Watching the fan rotate slowly. Listening to music that makes me feel like I am small but significant. My cat curled up and purring on my stomach as I stroke her soft fur. Lavender in the air that is coming from my sheets. Closing my eyes as I take a sip of deliciously sweetened lemon juice. Thinking about everything and nothing at once. Feeling whole, rather than the familiar emptiness. Lemonade helps bring me there.

It is an adoration, a type of love, some may even call it an obsession. All I know is that lemonade is tied to so much delight and hopefulness to me, that I can never give it up. If only so that I can use it to try and pull myself out of the melancholy that life sometimes delivers. Its taste is exquisite, its beauty, undefined. The magnificent drink that is lemonade. The tartness of the lemons, softened by the sweetness of the sugar, tied together with a bit of water and ice. Lemonade.
I gasped for air as the crowd’s deafening cheers echoed in my head. My heart raced, my legs shook, and white, tiny, dancing stars overwhelmed my vision. The clock was agonizingly sluggish on its countdown to zero. Ten seconds ago would qualify as ancient history. In anticipation, I anxiously checked the scoreboard only to realize that I was trailing behind the competition. He was older and substantially more experienced in the world of Just Dance than I was, but my mind was made up. I was determined to win.

“Victory is mine...take THAT!” my brother rejoiced.
“Whatever...I don’t care,” I exclaimed — mostly trying to convince myself.

The next day I marched into my brother’s room with an attitude unbefitting for my four foot five inch, eight year-old self and demanded a rematch. Quickly and without pity, my brother embarrassed me again. And again. And again. This depressing cycle continued for a week. Then, with the fifth soul-crushing defeat, I snapped.

I had had enough.

There was nothing, and I mean nothing, I hated more than losing to him, I had to cheat. The Unwritten Sibling Agreement of the Glaser Household stated that Just Dance was a game to be played together. When my brother would head off to baseball practice, I would play Just Dance by myself. For hours. For days. For his entire baseball season. Dance after dance. Song after song. I was determined to win.

Months had passed and with the first heat wave in the Las Vegas Valley, the long, drawn-out baseball season had finally concluded. The time had arrived. I strutted into my brother’s room and demanded a rematch. He rose from his bed, convinced this would be a repeat of the last few times. He was wrong.

“HA, HA TAKE THAT!” I shrieked while doing “the sprinkler” on top of the couch. My ego swelled so astronomically that he could see it as he stormed out the door. Yes, I am well aware that my behavior was distasteful, but the euphoria I experienced in that moment has been the foundation for my motivation throughout my life.

Although I am older now, and no longer get into petty sibling entanglements regarding video games, I will forever be the competitive little girl who cheated to win. To this day I continue to cheat. Whether it’s showing up twenty minutes early to volleyball practice to get extra reps passing, going in after school for extra assistance on evaluating limits in calculus class, or arriving before school to clarify a question on a socratic seminar in English. I cheat.

According to Merriam Webster, the first two denotations of cheating describe fraud, deceit, and trickery. That’s not me. The third definition, and lesser known one, states that to cheat is to outwit. Cheating means being resourceful. It is taking every opportunity to grow so that I can continually exceed expectations. It is who I am. It is the standard I held myself to throughout my academic career. Most importantly, it is the mindset I aspire to carry with me as I embark on this new path. College is a new dance, and I intend to master it, even if I have to cheat.
As I remove myself from the fabric that swaddles me, I become frantic. Eagerness fills my drowsy body as I fathom the time: it’s 6:59am. Concerned with the ruckus I have created, my mother rushes into my bedroom. “Are you okay? Why are you up so early on a Saturday?” Tears stream down my face as I turn to my alarm clock and watch the time slip away. “Mom! I’m late! Mickey Mouse ClubHouse just started playing!”

With her guidance, my body is now free. I scurry down the stairs and plop unto my sofa. “C’mon Mom! Help me find the remote! I’m late!” She hands me the remote with an abrupt eye roll and silently walks back upstairs. Nonchalantly, I ignore her annoyance and turn on the television to channel twenty-eight. I am now at peace; Mickey Mouse is on.

Fast forward twelve years and I am now a daycare employee and The Learning Jungle. Joyously, I hold the remote in my hand, gathering the kids into one large circle and placing them in front of the television screen. The clock strikes 5 p.m. and we’re winding down for the day. Evidently, we begin to engage into the world of a mouse and his loved ones, as they strive for the betterment of their own society. It’s Mickey time. I can only hope that they are as inspired by the children’s television show as I am.

For as long as I can remember, my favorite childhood pastime was evaluating the different tools and resources composed within Mickey’s preeminent “Mousekatool”. Throughout each episode, it was not the animated characters and vivacious voices that I had fallen in love with, but rather the intent to problem solve, to use surrounding resources, and to lend a helping hand to those in need.

As a veteran Mickey Mouse watcher, I have adapted to the realizations of the world. Though fictional, the merry mouse that was part of my childhood, left behind concrete messages. Not everyone has the resources to help themselves. Not everyone can solve their problems alone. Not everyone is surrounded by love, friendships, and family. Not everyone has a mother to snap at in moments of frustration. Not everyone is welcome to a house that’s “fun inside”.

Perhaps the simplistic act of watching a Disney show has inspired my future career path as a social worker. From a young age, the messages I had interpreted through watching Mickey Mouse, stuck with me throughout my adulting years. I continue to contemplate how fortunate I truly am and cannot help but feel gratitude for those who view my world as obscure. As intractable as life may become sometimes I have learned to appreciate the blessings around me. It can always be better, but it can always be worse. Life goes on.

As I reckon my thoughts on the harsh realities of our world, I hear my moms voice. Flashbacks from my tantrum struck and knew what I had to do. “Mom”, I said, “I have a twelve year old apology I want to make to you. I love you”. Lost in confusion, she laughs and walks away with yet again, her infamous eye roll. “I love you too.”

Just as the Mousekatool guides Mickey throughout his endeavors and hardships, I aspire to be that same aid in another child’s life. I strive to find success in the practice of social work in order to shine a light on those who lack the joys seen on television. I want to be a tool in bettering society. The Kateskatool.
It Feels Like Home

Seated at the dinner table in the midst of a political, or athletic, or possibly academic discussion, all I can think is how wonderful it is to be home. Not only is my mind full of new ideas, but my plate is full of nutritious and delicious food. These family dinners are a staple for my family and something that I can count on to happen at least a few times a week. Although the food varies with the meal, there is a basic structure: protein, vegetable, and carbohydrate. When you look closer and think about the food, you can learn about life.

Starting with the star of the plate, the protein gives substantial long-term nourishment for both mind and body. One of my favorites, chicken, also has drawbacks: bones, fat, and cartilage. It is difficult to go through life without any challenges, but how you handle both the meat and the tough structural components show your true character. When I tore my Lateral Collateral Ligament playing soccer, I encountered the worst position of my life. Not only was I physically injured, but I was also mentally anguished. I struggled with the inability to participate in activities, like goofing around with my brother or hanging out with friends, that I had enjoyed so much without thought. At that moment, I decided to face the obstacle head on. I convinced myself that I had to change my life. Once I finally was healed, I modified my diet, exercise, and mental disposition. I tirelessly work to become the best version of myself. I am beyond grateful that I made the necessary changes. I made a classic pairing: personal goal and hard work.

Speaking of great syntheses, a classic combination is meat and potatoes. Although protein contains negative surprises (like cartilage) that come with the sustenance, mashed potatoes possess positive surprises mixed throughout that add texture. Mashed potatoes are generally smooth, but they also have chunks of potato and pieces of skin. These extra elements in mashed potatoes are like the positive surprises of life. For example, I discovered Speech and Debate while looking for an interesting extracurricular activity. Not only did I enjoy the events and competition, but I also created new friendships and was adept at competing. In my first speech and debate tournament, I placed second, which is a tremendous accomplishment. I reached a balance between hard work and reward. Similarly, in order to round out a delicious meal of protein and carbohydrates, vegetables are needed. Many people do not like the taste of vegetables, but they provide valuable nutrients that you need for a balanced diet. The vegetables of life are not necessarily the most enjoyable activities, but working hard on them will provide long term benefits. One example is school. Working hard and getting good grades is what I must do to move forward in life. I do not mind the required hard work: so to speak, eating my vegetables to round out the meal of life.

Chicken, mashed potatoes, and vegetables appear to be strange topics for an essay, but I am proud of my individuality and I work on it everyday. When you attempt to learn from everything around you, anything can present itself and teach valuable lessons. Take family dinner, for example, which is a staple in my life. The food on my plate parallels life experiences: problem solving, character building, positive and negative surprises, and personal control. In taking the good with the bad, enjoy the good and overcome the bad. When you accomplish this, you are nourished and living life to the fullest.
The High Horse

The burning afternoon sun glared through the window as a highschool freshman hunkered over a black folding table, his make-shift desk, struggling to fill out an application for an ambassador position at his school. The questions were personal and made him reflect on his inner self. He skipped the ‘hard’ questions, as any reasonable person would, and found the easiest one.

“6. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself?”

“Ah, bingo,” he thought to himself. His pencil hovered over the paper, and he wiggled his thumb back and forth, causing the other end of his pencil to circle in the air as he pondered. Stretching across the page, the pencil left leaving chicken-scratch handwriting: intelligent, popular, funny, athletic, charismatic. The pink eraser pressed against his temple. He thought to himself, “Is that too much?” Chuckling, he replied aloud to his own question: “No.”

Once again, the pencil met the paper and continued on its journey. Trustworthy, affectionate, natural-leader, brave, dependable, optimistic. The list contained fifteen adjectives, all of them advantageous, but he forgot one that made up the very essence of his personality: cocky.

I was that freshman sitting at my desk composing a list of positive descriptors so my persona to the reader would only appear in a favorable light. Not only the way I acted exuded hints of narcissism but also the way I carried myself. My shoulders and head were always held high and I raised my hand whenever possible which exuded my pedantic lifestyle. I sacrificed my own enjoyment of certain activities to ridicule my peers' performance, either laughing at them or rattling on about 'how I could do so much better.' The cockiness was written on my forehead; New people never stayed long after their realization of my flaw. Yet, I couldn’t seem to figure out what was wrong with my professed perfect personality.

In the following weeks I noticed a trend: my friends stopped laughing at my supposedly hilarious jokes. “How could they? I’m funny, right?” I had thought to myself, while simultaneously repeating the joke in my head to double check that it was, indeed, funny. Their presumed ignorance to not laugh at my jokes quickly turned into discourtesy since, all of the sudden, my friends refused to spend time with me. However, I believed it was their loss because they just missed out on my friendship. Nonetheless, I didn’t care: another friend would be made through the vice of my seemingly incredible personality. I formed a false reality and felt I could do no wrong. Whatever the situation might have been, I was never at fault due to my belief that I was so popular, funny, and smart. The person I thought myself to be exuded my arrogance unconsciously.

The perfect reputation that I had began to fade. It didn’t phase me when my peers told me to ‘step off of my high horse’, however I despised it when adults called me out on my egotism. The difference was that honestly, I did not care when teenagers who I thought had little experience in life felt the need to correct my behavior.

As my friendships began to dwindle exponentially, the few friends that I had retained started to drop subtle hints at my vanity. Friends became a symbol of my status, but many were not actually friends—they were my followers, just a number on my Instagram account. The mirror soon became my best friend, helping me correct my “flaws,” and standing beside him never failed to increase my ego. He became a black hole, consuming me into his abyss of vanity. He showed me how flawless my hair looked, accentuated my muscles, and listened as I reassured my greatness.

Although the mirror reinforced my self-confidence, he was a bad friend, for he allowed me to grow into an arrogant person. He never told me how to fix my character or how to be a better person—he simply bolstered my ego.

Later that month, after finishing my homework one evening, I closed my laptop and flicked my phone from my pocket. First, the homepage, swipe, Face ID Unlocked, tap, Instagram icon, scroll.

“Don’t your eyes hurt?” Mother frequently questioned. My mother and grandmother often chided me on how fast I scrolled through apps. Their comments were usually dismissed by an eye roll or the ever-so-often, “Really?”, filled with teenage angst.
As I scrolled, a post by National Geographic caught my eye, and my finger levitated over the photo. The photo enthralled me: there was a line of yellow beetle-looking taxis zipping through the middle of a teeming Indian market. Locals walked in front of the taxis with an almost scary assumption that the taxis would wait for them. I’m not sure why, but the photo made me realize how small I actually am. There must have been nearly two thousand people crammed into a bustling market the size of a hallway at my school, yet this was only one street located in a country across the world. The unnamed street put into perspective how large the cosmos are while simultaneously giving me an understanding of how small I truly am.

The task at hand became apparent: I needed to make a change in how I conducted myself. Moreover, I had to dismount the horse I had ridden for the entirety of my teenage life. While it took some time, I was slowly able to swing myself off the high horse. As it rode away, it carried with it the arrogance with which I had been riddled. I welcomed the character change, and as the high horse sped away, its tail began to swish in the wind, revealing the letter ‘C’ branded on its hind leg.
Living in the Land of the Uncomfortable

Picture this, you wake up on a Saturday morning feeling refreshed and in good spirits after a terrific night of sleep. You go downstairs to enjoy some breakfast with your family only to find someone missing. “Where did dad go?” I asked my mom the question having just barely walked downstairs despite the fact that I had a pretty good idea of where he would probably be. “He’s in the garage working, you should probably go help him.” “You should probably go help him.” This was definitely not how I wanted my Saturday morning to start, despite this I remembered what my dad had told me that if you do something with enthusiasm then you will do it to the best of your ability. So I ran upstairs trying to be as positive as possible and got ready to put in some hard work. I crossed the threshold that separated our kitchen and garage and there he was, standing next to our water heater with his signature one arm up against the wall and one leg on the step that the water heater was resting upon. Dressed in the same old work jeans with a neatly tucked in collared shirt. He had a 9-5 job like most people but when the weekend hit, that was when the real work would start. As I made way in his general direction we made eye contact and held it for a few seconds without saying a word. Every project was different with him, I either had to put myself in his shoes and think one step ahead or I had to communicate with him on what he wanted me to do. I proceeded to the other garage with all the tools, sifting through that cluttered mess was not an easy task. It took me longer than I had expected to find a hammer but my relentlessness was rewarded as I eventually found it. “Why are we changing the water heater in the first place, it works perfectly fine.” I asked annoyingly. “That’s not important, it just needs to be done.” He replied stubbornly After some unscrewing and unplugging, we had successfully taken out the old water heater without too much of a hassle. We then continued to drag this monster of a tank down the driveway until we reached the bed of my truck with intentions to put it in there and throw it away later. It was that moment when we had reached a roadblock. A year earlier my dad had ripped the tendon that connected his bicep to the bone in his right arm so his strength was very limited. I looked at him and said, “There’s no possible way I’m lifting this thing up that high by myself, it’s way too heavy.” He looked at me, chuckled, and said, “With that mentality you aren’t going to get anything done, It’s just like sports, you have to focus on the solutions and not the problem.” With a little bit of elbow grease and some help from my dad we surprisingly got the beast in the bed of the truck. Amazed at the feat we had accomplished, that small triumph boosted my spirits and gave me the energy that was needed to finish installing the new tankless water heater.

Looking back upon this experience it was different from some of the other home improvement projects with my dad. There were multiple obstacles in our way that normally had not been there before. Just like how life will throw you multiple obstacles and sometimes those obstacles won’t be very fair. My dad was completely right, “focus on solutions and not the problem.” because whether it’s the baseball field, the classroom, or changing a water heater, it is important to learn to live in the land of the uncomfortable.
Taking Flight

I’m not going to lie: I was terrified. I knew I was fully prepared. I’d spent even more than the required number of hours in the cockpit flying under the supervision of my instructor. Our last few times in the air, I’d basically done everything by myself. My teacher had been present, sure, but he hadn’t had to do anything. He was there only in case something went wrong. But this time, there would be no one else with me in the plane. This time, I’d be all alone, thousands of feet in the air. As I looked up, all I could see for miles was the bright blue Las Vegas sky.

I walked across the tarmac to the Cessna 172 used by all the student pilots at my flight school. The airport was alive with activity: mechanics worked on planes, pilots headed to the fueling station, and I gazed up at the intimidating control tower, thinking about how the flight controllers oversaw every complex function of this airport. In my cockpit, I began my pre-flight check, remembering what I’d heard countless times in training videos: “Flying a plane is not like driving a car! If something goes wrong in the air, there’s no pulling over to the side of the road.”

Carefully, I progressed through my checklist. I checked the tires and brakes, the wings and flaps, the fuel and oil. All systems were go. I strapped myself in, received my weather and flight pattern information, and started the engine. Slowly, I pressed in the throttle and began taxiing to the runway.

Way too soon, I found myself parked in front of the runway, ready for takeoff. I received my clearance and pushed the throttle all the way forward. The engine roared, and I started zooming down the runway. Looking at the speedometer, I saw 30, then 40, then 50, then I hit the magic number of 55. I pulled up on the controls, and the wheels left the ground. I was airborne.

Lifting off the ground into the air that day was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Before taking flight, I felt stuck on the ground, the weight of the world on my shoulders, the gravity of the situation keeping me somber. But as soon as I took off I was as light as a feather. I climbed and climbed until the big city where I’ve lived my entire life didn’t seem quite so big anymore. Gliding through the air at 3,000 feet, I felt free.

That was until I heard the voice in my ear, initiating the landing protocol. The voice came all the way up from the control tower, the tower that had once seemed so big and intimidating. From up here, though, it looked microscopic and unimportant. Yet I knew how important these next steps would be. One might think that taking off is the scariest part of flying, but a pilot’s true fear only arrives when plummeting out of the sky toward a surface of hard, unforgiving asphalt.

With the runway in sight, I reduced my speed, raised my flaps, and was cleared to land. As the ground neared, filling my line of sight, I shut out the images of potential disaster that sprang to mind. I simply stayed focused on what came next. Then I pulled my throttle all the way out and, almost miraculously, my wheels softly touched the ground. I’d done it! I’d completed my first solo voyage.

As I consider the next stages of my flight path, I look forward to taking longer journeys, adding greater responsibilities, and broadening my experiences. But these journeys won’t just be up in the air; they’ll also be journeys of the intellect, reading great books and learning from great minds. I will continue to step out of my comfort zone, accomplish things I never dreamt I could, and—quite literally—defying both gravity and expectations.
The Power of Choice

Motivation is a feeling. Discipline is a decision. Choose wisely. Throughout my life, I have learned that every aspect of your life begins and ends with a choice. Feelings are fluid and ever changing. Interest rises and falls, it is lost and regained. Things such as talent, success, happiness, and love; they are all choices we make. But I didn’t always see things that way.

Chapter 1. School has never been a walk in the park, but is it for anyone? Doing my homework and forgetting to turn it in was a talent that my parents strangely never appreciated. The constant blaming and lying about it didn’t help my case either. Luckily, over the years I shaped up along with my grades. “What changed?” my mother asked. “Was it your new school? New friends? New environment?” It was me. My decisions, and my choice. I had changed for the better. Instead of blaming others for my mistakes, I decided to own up to my decisions and actively changed them. I turned my school life around, now I just had to fix the rest of my life.

Chapter 2. Looking around my friend group, I noticed that everyone had their own thing that made them special. Their own talents and quirks. I thought they were so lucky to have natural talents, and I resented them for it. I made excuses for myself and undermined their hard work to make myself feel better. I got a reality check sooner or later, and realized that their talents were individual decisions to better themselves, for themselves. When I realized that, my own talents started to shine because I wasn’t comparing myself to others or working to impress anyone. I made the decision to hone my talents for me. Putting in the time and effort was a conscious decision made by the people around me, that inspired me to better myself and lift people up rather than put them down.

Chapter 3. My first job taught me a lot about myself. Mainly how to keep going, even when I felt that things were impossible. Looking back at the sleepless nights and countless tears, it would have been much easier to quit while I was ahead. But I would have never gotten to the level I am today. Not giving up was an active decision that my past self constantly made, and everyday I thank her for that. I now try to make those decisions daily in order to guide my future self. My first job has taught me that the decisions I made today affect my experiences tomorrow, so giving up is never an option.

Writing my own story. I find that when presented with life’s challenges, the easiest thing to do is wallow in your suffering and blame it on the world. But that will get you absolutely nowhere. Pulling yourself out of a hole is one of the hardest things to do, but life lessons and the power of choice give you strength to do so. The most important lesson I have learned the hard way, is that everything in life is a choice. It’s time to choose wisely.
"The Trainwreck of December"

The Trainwreck of December

The year of 2016 was chaotic. The introduction to puberty, 8th grade, interest in the opposite sex, experimentation with an overload of things, and most of all - a clear introduction into the people that we were growing into. Never in a million years would you think that you, as a 13 year old child would experience the death of a friend - a death that shattered lives and classroom environments into a million shards.

Throughout middle school, it wasn’t unusual for students to walk themselves to and from school; some kids even saw it as a rite of passage - a graduation into social independence. Much like all of the other groups of kids that walked to school, I had my group or “clique” of friends that I would regularly walk with; and we’d “pick each other up” as we passed by each person’s house. After my immigration to Las Vegas from Los Angeles in the 7th grade, I found it crucial to find a group of friends because everyone seemed to have already been established in their social lives.

I remember vividly on an ice cold Monday morning in the early days of December, the entire school shook with despair. I woke up from a deep sleep after enjoying my otherwise normal weekend, to begin my usual routine that would prepare me for the school day that was to follow - except on this morning, as I opened social media, I was bombarded with an overload of negative information. The news that was spreading like wildfire was that a member of my social group of friends had been shot and killed that past Friday. A child - so young taken from us. The walk to school was full of confusion and cold conversations because my usual group of friends that would lead me to school was far from usual. None of us knew if this entire situation was true or not. On our walk to school we eagerly sent messages to our late friend, ranging from “Hey, are you ok?” to “Bro, wake the heck up! We know you’re joking!” Upon arrival at school, the despair truly hit.

Walking into school that morning was like walking into a dark abyss. The atmosphere of the campus matched the cold and dark weather. I walked through the front entrance doors and stood there, watching the people pass through the halls. Tears flowed from administrators, students, custodial staff - it seemed as though the Earth shattered into a million pieces and everything was mourning my friend’s death; that’s when I knew it was true. I consider myself to be an emotionally disabled person, which withheld me from allowing my tear ducts to express themselves. I gathered myself and continued to walk to my homeroom class. In all of the homeroom classes throughout the entire school, they had a recorded snippet of the news broadcast from my friend’s death playing. Every student in the entire school quietly sank in their seats and watched the mayhem unfold. The bright young man that I was proud to call my buddy had attempted to rob a nearby smoke shop with a few other friends, all 3 of them were caught - only 2 of them made it out alive.

For every traumatic experience, follows corresponding rumors. It was rumored that the other two boys that were with my friend on the night of his death, ran out of the smoke shop and pushed the doors in so that he was unable to leave. Of course, this statement angered many of the grief-stricken pre-teens of the school. To maintain my emotional disability, I didn’t acknowledge anything that happened that day - the entire day went by in a blink to me. One moment I was staring at the sobbing students at the front office, the next I was watching security footage on YouTube of my friend being shot in the back of his head. Of the chaos that unfolded that day, the one moment that stuck with me was his locker memorial. All of the students that knew him stood around his locked and wrote post-it notes to him. By the end of the day, his locker stuck out like a sore thumb full of rainbow confetti.
On December 2, 2016, my childhood friend was shot multiple times in his back and the back of his head - leaving him unable to blossom into the young man that he deserved to be, or the opportunity to continue his childhood. This situation will forever stick with me, as a reminder to never take life for granted because in an instant, I too can be in a coffin of my own.
Matthew Keys personal essay

Waiting, it was one of the hardest things for me when I was younger. Sitting on a dock in Maine for two hours and not one bite. It was the middle of June and the heat was killing me, I wanted nothing more than to pack everything up and head back to my grandparents house. My father was next to me, sitting in his foldable chair drinking bud light in one hand and his rod in the other, he seemed unfazed by the fact that neither one of us hadn’t gotten a bite in the past hour. He was just enjoying the quiet. I on the other hand wasn’t content with just sitting around in my foldable chair watching the ducks swim around in circles for three more hours. “Can we try somewhere else” I asked my dad. He looked at me with a smirk and asked “why, so we can wait for an hour somewhere else, no the best fish are here:” Realizing I was now stuck here I decided the only thing I could do was be patient so I waited, Patiently.

The sun began to get lower and lower in the sky as I continued to watch ducks swim in the same circle. Eventually the air started to get much cooler as I slumped deeper into my chair as I was getting more and more tired, eventually deciding to close my eyes for a few moments. Those few moments ended up lasting a much longer time than I had originally planned though as I finally opened my eyes to the sound and sight of my dad yelling at me as he got up to grab my rod, I quickly jumped out of my chair and ran to my rod but it was too late. I lost the one bite we had. My father calmly recasted my rod as I walked back to my chair and sat back down heart broken. As my father stuck my rod back in the dirt he glanced at me and told me that I needed to pay attention to my rod at all times. Now staring at the tiny bobber I thought to myself about how I not only needed to be patient to catch the fish but focused as well. I needed to fix my eyes on that tiny little red and white bobber, bouncing up and down as the light breeze creates small waves. I was no longer upset and annoyed but instead relaxed, I had come to terms with the waiting and found it relaxing.

Another hour had passed since the last bite and I was still patiently waiting, I was now determined to catch a fish and wanted nothing more than to do so. I waited and waited to see that bobber drop below the small waves. My rod was no longer stuck in the dirt by instead firmly in my right hand so I could immediately react to any bite. Instead of leaning back in my seat I was now fully leaning forward in my seat patiently waiting, focused on the bobber, and determined to catch a fish that day. Finally after hours of waiting I watched the white top of the bobber disappear beneath the blue. Immediately I sprung out of my seat and into action, I was young and didn’t understand the techniques of fishing so I just ended up reeling it in as fast as possible. Despite my lack of skill I still managed to reel in the fish with pure strength. It was a small fish, but I was still proud of the fact that all my waiting and focus had paid off.
Trevor Kovacs  
Age: 18, Grade: 12  
School Name: Bishop Gorman High School, Las Vegas, NV  
Educator: Caprice Houston-Bey  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  

The V.W. Bug  

As I shifted through the gears of my small, simple, candy red, VW Bug, the engine roared up the mountain grade hill.  

“I remember building this together,” my great grandfather said to me as we drove up the mountain side. With the bright sun beating down upon the back of the tiny car, I reminisce about all the times my grandfather and I spent in that weathered two car garage. I remembered how we would constantly sift through all of the loose car parts with so much precision, that everything we accomplished seemed perfect. I loved every second of it.  

The first time I saw her was when she was just a rusted old pile of metal on the floor of my grandfather's garage. We started working on her that day. At the beginning I knew nothing, but the fact that all of these intricate little parts could make a vehicle go genuinely intrigued me. As we began to build, my grandfather asked me for tools that I had never even heard of. With the help of my grandfather, I gradually began to learn and remember all of the names and uses of each and every tool in that garage like the nitrogen torch and the cherry picker. However, there was still so much to learn. As I progressed, I began to learn more and more complicated mechanical tasks. I learned how to replace engines and rebuild carburetors. My grandfather taught me everything he knew. After years of hardwork and dedication, we had successfully built the VW Bug. My grandfather and I made a perfect team.  

Because of my VW Bug, I was determined and driven to learn as much as I could about the world around me. My new passion for learning helped me to discover my love for biology. I loved the mechanics of subjects such as this. I thought that building the actual car was going to be the most difficult part of the process, but to my surprise the most I struggled with was learning how to drive it. The daunting task now lay ahead of me: learning how to drive a manual car. The warm summer day started, and my grandmother and I attempted a lesson with the bug. As I sat there in the tiny cockpit of the car looking out into the narrow dirt road that seemed to never end, I placed my hand on the shifter and my foot on the clutch. The car began to slowly chug. I began to gain momentum, but then I heard a bone shaking grind come from the undercarriage of the car. I had stalled. However, I wasn't going to give up yet. I had to at least putter down the street at a measly five miles per-hour. It took many hours, but after all the trial and error, I finally was able to fluidly shift into second gear. I was jubilant. Whatever it was I wanted to learn. I realized that learning different skills and failing was a major part in life after this project.  

With my grandmother’s constant encouragement throughout the years, I was finally able to master driving a manual car. There were many important lessons I learned from the Bug project, but the biggest lesson was to never give up and to keep on learning. The Bug became an inspiration for me in all of my past, present, and future endeavors in whatever I do.  

Now, I shift confidently through life’s challenges and trials just as I learned from my small, simple, candy red, V.W. Bug.
Growing up, there was a big African Sumac tree in my backyard. This specific tree wasn’t a typical climbing tree. It was beyond ugly; it had a splotched color and thin, skinny branches. The bark was sharp and when I would attempt to climb the tree, the bark often tore my hands open due to my curiosity. I was determined to climb the tree, no matter how much it beat me up. Repeatedly, the outcome of the climbs were not as amazing as I sought it out to be, but something about nature always fascinated me, the fact that there is so much out there to be discovered.

Ever since I was young, I’ve related the climb of the ugly tree to the connection I have with my parents. Both traveling in the same direction, but pursuing two different paths. Repeatedly in life, I try to reclimb the tree, but the physical and emotional damages nature has on our society applies to my human nature and the specific relationships I experience within it. We will never know the ideologies, ideas, and motivations of nature in this world; while we do our best, most of it is up for interpretation. From human relations to the interactions between animal species, the only way for me to achieve knowledge about the world is through those difficult experiences and living life as it is presented to me. Through that, like a tree, I grow and adapt by using my surroundings to thrive and be the best version of myself, I believe that being open-minded is my best trait. I choose to open myself to people and their backgrounds because I pursue the truth. It doesn’t matter what your political background, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, it doesn’t change the fact that I LOVE YOU. As a human being, I was put on this Earth for a specific reason, to pursue goodness and grow with the nature around me. Growing up in a household with differentiating philosophical viewpoints, I was never the favorite. While I worked hard physically and academically, it was never enough solely based on the fact that I had a different viewpoint on life and loving those around me.

“Pack up your things, you’re leaving!” The words that were branded in my mind as my mom finally hit her peak. Similar to the tree, my hands were mangled, my heart was damaged. While physically the bark of the tree tore through my hands, my Mom was constantly tearing through my heart. My hands hurt, my heart hurt. Today I’ve come to the conclusion that it was none of those things. That day was the day where I realized, the things that you love the most can hurt you the most.

From the bottom of a cave to the top of the mountain, I feel like my journey of life and finding myself through my identity is best described in a way only nature itself can portray. My love for nature has had such an impact on my life and similar to plants, the more I care for my plants, the bigger they grow. Today I have learned that self-growth and care are the only ways to thrive in a society that is often at odds with itself. Nature has become such a love of mine that I decided to work in a plant nursery. A year of my life dedicated not only to helping nature thrive but immersing myself in a diverse work environment where I truly learned the surrealness of life and the nature that surrounds it. Not only did this give me the opportunity to engage in nature, but to help the community have the opportunity to engage as well. Like a plant, I grew, even after the storm hit; spreading love, light, and positivity to myself and those around me.
My Opportunity to Grow, Evolve, and Bloom

“Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently,” a quote by Henry Ford. Throughout my time as the new king of Denmark, I have learned a lot of what it means to be a leader, not only what it means for myself but what it means for the kingdom with the decisions that I make. I am grateful for the position that the kingdom has given me for taking my brother’s spot as king, especially after the tragedy with the snake in the garden. I couldn’t bear to lose a brother, but the kingdom must stay running. I gave a speech to the kingdom while Gertrude and I were getting married in order to restore the happiness and joy that was lost when King Hamlet had died. The people rejoiced, even though I was grieving from the inside, I couldn’t let the public know that I wasn’t fit to rule a kingdom especially after my own brother’s death. It was time to restore order. My biggest setback would have to be dealing with the travesty of my own brother, but the kingdom must move forward. Rather than having a physical setback that I wanted to talk about, I think it’s more important to talk about the emotional setbacks that we as humans face due to the fact that those are harder to recover from than physical ones. Mostly because emotional setbacks tend to be a battle that we all as humans fight on our own. Emotional setbacks also tend to be constant, but it’s a battle that we can develop in as time passes and we learn more about ourselves.

The relationship between my brother and I was very close but I always envied him because he was always superior to me in any activity that we did. Especially after finding out that he was to be next in line for the throne. But as time moved on and we grew up, I didn't appreciate the actual times that we had together growing up because my envy was always in the way. Envy is an emotional battle that I’ve always struggled with. Yet, it’s something that I still continue to work on. Just as everyone else, I am not perfect; I only strive to become a better person everyday. I tend to have the passion to evolve, to grow, to bloom. I only want what’s best for my joy, and for other people’s joy.

As I saw my sister-in-law and my nephew in grief with the loss of a husband and a father, I chose to step in and do what I felt was right. Especially since I was also grieving and fighting my own internal battles with my emotions. Feeling left behind, the feeling that even though he is in a better place; it tore me to shreds that such a King had left us in this destroyed and imperfect world. But I chose to grow and move on. I chose to help out his family. I chose to do what I felt was best for everybody and help everyone to move on because we can only be grieving for so long. We must grow and embrace the fact that he is in a better and perfect place watching over us from where he is. This is how I chose to grow, this is how I chose to bloom.

Believing that with my abilities to make power moves, be quick on my feet, put other people first, and be able to use my head rather than my heart; I could be a perfect placement anywhere. All people have to do is give me a chance. Give me my chance to grow, bloom, evolve, and flourish where I am meant to do these things. All I need is my opportunity.
"Really?! You don’t need more! Stop buying them,” my sister said.

I turned onto Fort Apache from Blue Diamond. My seat is bumping up and down as cold air blasts on my face. I look over at my mom as she presses her imaginary brake while we turn left. My mom always told me I go too fast when I’m turning in the car.

“Slow down! Geez…”

“Sorry,” I knew she stopped listening.

“So, what are you going to get?”

I told her I had two choices to pick from, a mystery and a romance.

As soon as we pulled up I got out of the car, put my mask on, and started running. These are the things that make me happiest in life. “Mom, I will call you when I’m done then we can leave,”. She nodded and I was off.

The rustic smell of a bookstore is almost heavenly. There’s always a mysterious but pleasant aura lingering in the air at Barnes and Noble. I ran my fingers over the spines in the mystery section while looking at the last names. Margot Livesey… Attica Locke… ahh E. Lockhart. The cover is a gorgeous light green color with the image of water on it. Longingly, I stroked my fingers across it to get a feel of the author’s image. It makes me think about how the author comes up with stories that are so similarly to life stories but so different at the same time. It makes me wonder what the characters go through on a daily basis. I wonder how their lives are compared to ours. Everyone lives the same life in so many ways; its fascinating. I always love how different characters have such different stories. Every story has its own meaning.

I grabbed the book off the shelf and headed straight for the next one. As I was scrolling through the beauties that sat in front of me I found the exact one I was looking for. Exactly five feet in front of me. Ironically, the book title is *Five Feet Apart*. It has a beautiful picture of lungs with a luscious garden growing out of them representing life. In the book, Stella has a chance at living but she doesn’t want to take it because of someone she loves. Wow. In *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, the main character is ashamed of his appearance while we, the readers, absolutely adore him. Character-reader connections make sparks fly. Magic is created between fictional characters and human beings because our brains can’t fully comprehend that they aren’t real. It leaves us with hope. It leaves us with a new understanding of the world. They allow us to forget our biggest fears and live in a completely different world. They break out hearts with no warning at all. Hearts are broken over certain stories and that creates empathy. It creates life within ourselves. Stories can change lives. But before we try to fantasize someone else’s life, we have to fantasize our own.
London Bridge is Falling Down

Most Americans watch the news almost every day. Through newscasts, online news reports, and social media, we are exposed to horrible events like murders, bombings, or terrorist attacks all of the time. These events often seem so far removed from our reality that it can be difficult to even fathom that sort of thing happening to us. As I processed world news events and, in particular, terrorist attacks, I used to think that something like that could never happen to me or near me. Unfortunately, I later found out that this was untrue.

In June of 2017, my dad and I were preparing to travel to London, England. I was so excited, as I had wanted to go there my whole life. I was also scared to go, as just a few weeks earlier, a massive terror attack happened in Manchester, England. A suicide bomber killed 22 people at an Ariana Grande concert at Manchester Arena. The whole world was a bit on edge, and the UK raised its terror threat level to the highest level, “critical.” Everyone was scared for us to go, but we’d booked the trip so far in advance that it would be awkward to cancel it so last minute.

We flew to London from Los Angeles on June 2nd. The flight was fine, however, I had never experienced a flight like that before. The longest flight I had been on was about five hours long, and this would be an eight and a half hour long flight. My dad and I got off the plane, and he suddenly became sick. He started violently vomiting and I became extremely fearful. I started thinking about how my dad was the only person with me at the airport in a foreign country, and I freaked out. I realized that if something happened to him, it would just be my little 14-year-old self stranded in London. I called my mom and told her what was happening, and she told me to stay calm and relax because everything was going to be okay. I didn’t believe any of the stuff she was telling me, but I went along with it, as it was the only thing keeping me calm at that moment.

After my dad came out of the bathroom at London Heathrow Airport, I felt a sense of relief flowing through my body. He didn’t look great, but honestly, I didn’t care. I was just happy he was alive. We picked up our baggage and called an Uber to pick us up from the airport in order to take us to the apartment we rented. Yes, my dad decided to rent an apartment instead of staying at a hotel. I was wary of this, as I felt a hotel would be safer because they have front desk attendants, but I digress. In the Uber on the way to the apartment, my dad suddenly felt sick again. We were right next to 10 Downing Street, the UK government headquarters, and he threw up again. It was something I will never forget; I have never seen my dad that sick.

After sitting in what seemed like an endless flow of London traffic, we finally arrived at the apartment. It was near the London Bridge, which just seemed so surreal. I felt like I was dreaming, which sounds cliché, but it’s the truth. I was so happy to finally see a bed and a shower. We walked to the corner shop, bought a few things, and made our way back to the apartment. My dad took some medication, as he still wasn’t feeling well, and went to bed. I decided to make myself dinner. I was so worried about my dad that I went to check on him about every twenty minutes. I ate dinner, watched TV, called my mom, and got ready for bed. I was so tired that I went to bed at about 9 o’clock. Little did I know that a few hours after I went to sleep, everything would be different.

At 9:58 p.m. on Saturday, June 3rd, a van drove back and forth a few times on London Bridge. The van hit multiple pedestrians on the bridge, killing two. The van then crashed on London’s Borough High Street, a street near London’s famous Borough Market. Everyone in the van then abandoned the vehicle, armed with knives. They went on to kill five people using those knives at Boro Bistro Pub. Police attempted to intervene, however, they were stabbed. People in other restaurants were attacked as well. The attackers were shot dead eight minutes after the first emergency call was made. Underground stations were closed, and buildings near the bridge were evacuated. In total, eight people were killed.

My dad woke me up at about 2 a.m. I was confused as to why we were up so early. He told me to get up and get out of bed as soon as I could. I was tense, so I rushed out of bed, and he told me about what had happened a few hours earlier. I finally looked at my phone and realized that I’d had a sudden influx of phone calls, text messages, and emails from my family and friends worried about us. My family also tried calling the front desk at the apartment...
building we were staying at; however, nobody answered the phone. This is another reason why everyone was extremely nervous and trying to get a hold of me and my dad as soon as possible. I finally called everyone and let them know that my dad and I were okay, so most of the commotion seemed to calm down. However, I then realized that my family members were posting on Facebook, saying, “Pray for my family in London!” or “I hope my niece and brother are okay!” This angered me, as I felt that they were posting our personal business on their Facebook pages. My sister was practically in hysterics as she was at home and didn’t know if we were okay or not. These events were genuinely traumatic because it made me realize that anything can happen.

The next day, June 4th, I did not want to go out and do anything. However, I knew that we were on a trip, and it might be the last time I would be in London for a while, so I decided to carry on. My dad and I visited the iconic London department store, Harrods, but all I could think about was another attack happening. I was paralyzed with fear for the whole day. The attack had honestly cast a shadow over our entire trip. After a few days in London, my dad and I traveled to Paris, France. I knew there were sometimes attacks in Paris. I wasn’t that nervous about going, but after what happened in London, I was struck with fear while traveling to and arriving in Paris. Even little things would strike a nerve of fear, like when we were at the train station, and I waited by myself while my dad was in the bathroom. Situations like that truly scared me.

Honestly, up until now, I have never talked about my feelings about what happened during this trip. I felt that if I talked about it, people would think I was attention-seeking because nothing explicitly happened to us. However, this experience has affected me and the way I travel. I was and still am, anxious to travel anywhere, even in the U.S.—after what happened in London. I feel like that night left me with post-traumatic stress. Every time I travel, I get scared of going to bed or going sightseeing. In November of 2019, I traveled back to London and Paris with my sister, mother, and father. I was anxious, as so much had happened from the time I visited last. The events of June 3, 2017 will stay with me forever and have affected me mentally ever since.
College Essay

I was six years old, and I was crying so much that my dad had to bribe me with a Snickers bar. Driving as slow as a snail with tears in my eyes, over and over again I told myself that I was going to get a Snickers when I finished. Little did I know that day that racing was going to be my life for the next 7 years. I would go on to win rookie of the year and become the first female driver to win a race in my division. I eventually moved up from go-carts to miniature stock cars and won rookie of the year again and became the top ranked female in the United States. This gave me a lot of drive and confidence which I continue to build off to this day. Taking up golf a few years later was a very drastic change. Going from speeding everything up to slowing everything down was a difficult transition at first, but there were a lot of things that I could use that I had learned from racing such as positive self-talk. Whether the prize at the end is a Snickers bar, a trophy, or simply a personal best, from my very first race to my most recent round on the golf course, I have learned to talk to myself throughout, telling myself to never give up.

Because of racing, I started playing golf a little late compared to most of the other girls that I compete against, both locally and internationally. This made competition a little difficult in the beginning, but after years and hours upon hours of hard practice my game has finally reached the point where I am a front runner and now able to confidently reach out to colleges about my future with golf included. The life of a student athlete is a very different life than the average college student would experience. Getting to travel across the country, meet new people and play the game I love will make my college experience unforgettable. Golf even has a unique tie with my field of interest in that it is a great game for business and connecting with people. I have heard endless stories of how women who play golf have gotten amazing opportunities just because many people are impressed by how well they play the game. I am eager to see what opportunities college will offer me in the future.

Though I will be the first person in my family to graduate college, my personal drive is an inherited trait. I come from a long line of hard workers, starting with my grandparents. They came from Italy when they were teenagers, and making a life for themselves from scratch was nothing easy to accomplish. Again my father came from an immigrated Italian family that did not have much and he worked his way up to the top, twice. Seeing what my mother’s parents and my father have done without going to college makes me excited to see what I may be able to accomplish after I complete four years or more.

Playing division one college golf is not only a dream, but one of many goals I am seeking to accomplish as I complete my college degree in business. I feel that combining division one golf with a business degree will swing open many doors that are typically closed to the average woman in a male-dominated business. I have learned that my size and my sex have no bearing on what I am capable of doing. I recently played in a tournament where one of my best rounds ever and one of my worst rounds ever were less than 24 hours apart. I enjoyed my Snickers after my worst round, but after the best round of my life I realized what I am truly capable of, and I am laser focused and determined to graduate from a D1 college, not only with a business degree but with the experience of being a student athlete.
Botany Lies

“Eat your fruits and veggies”! The classic automated message courtesy of a western medicine doctor who was on the edge of his spinning stool to tell me so. Yet, somehow I never fell short of hearing this classic slogan whenever I went to a dreaded pediatrician visit that involved sitting in a quiet, depressing room filled with cold metal, wacky medical tools and tacky childish stickers on the walls. Not to mention that I am already in that uncanny position of feeling too grown for this room but not quite ready to be thrown in the mix with tax paying adults. As per routine, I dismissed their meaningless, emotionless words as fast as a child with a lack of taste dismisses broccoli. But are these so-called doctors truly informing the general population of what edible objects are considered a fruit or vegetable?

At my ripe age of seventeen, absolutely not one soul had laid it out to me that a blazing sun colored oval with a pH level of 2 was considered a fruit. As if the world was not chaotic enough, they decided to categorize a beyond sour mustard colored object as a fruit. The buffoonery. How dare they think it is acceptable to place a citrus packed lemon into the same category as a sweeter than life tangerine. Is this what the doctors are prescribing nowadays, a jam packed sour smoothie? Are these doctors implying that I ingest a practically battery acidic fruit as a healthy snack alternative? Are they telling me this so that I may return to their vaccinations for them to fix the acidic born hole in my stomach!

As if my teenage brain was not jumbled enough with radical equations, American literature, and the worries of the current events; I had to discover that the higher power above wanted a lemon to be considered a fruit in this world. Maybe it wanted to just sprinkle onto the chaos. It’s unfathomable how often I have been blinded to trust fall straight into the arms of science and religion. Influenced by the beliefs of trusted individuals and required curriculum. The textbooks say the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, and I run to the hills with it!

Sure botany claims that because one little thing has seeds in it then it should be categorized as a fruit. Have these botanists considered the fact that when me and the general consensus think of the word fruit, our taste palates are salivating at the thought of a sweet refreshing watermelon. The thought of a sour, bitter flash of reality that comes from a lemon is most definitely not what I am dreaming of when it is time for a midnight snack. Why are we categorizing based on the insides and not the explosion of flavor that comes from within, like how so many have done so to the culinary cuisines. So now that botany claims that because one has this, it is without a doubt that, does that make me a marathon fanatic? The answer lies within my apparel. I may have a vast collection of athletic apparel but by no means do I find joy in running, absolutely none, at all. I just like the looks of running shoes. Therefore it would be blatantly wrong to place me into a category full of protein powder pumped athletes.

Now that I have come to terms with the process of how lemon classification works, how do I go on knowing that when I am offered a fruit, I could be given a lemon. This could quite possibly be a sign to make lemonade out of all the lemon information that has been thrown upon me. If anything that has arisen from this palate shattering discovery is that I have learned to now continue to live my life in this chaotic heavenly world with my vitamin C in hand, prepared for it all.
The First Time I Cleaned My Grandparent’s Home

The First Time I Cleaned My Grandparent’s Home

After months of anticipation, I passed my driver’s test in early August. Outlining the last few weeks of summer with eager ambitions concerning my newly gained freedom, I knew I would spend an exceedingly greater amount of time with friends away from my house compared to my previously monotonous summer days. However, the abundance of outings meant that I had to hastily establish boundaries with my parents, limiting my spending money so as to not take advantage of their copious generosity. With the narrow allowance in mind, my mother suggested I offer to clean my grandparent’s house on the weekends, enabling me to not only earn extra spending money, but also to visit the people who have endlessly provided for my family. My grandparents, two lifelong sweethearts aging at a worryingly quicker pace in recent years, welcomed the additional help with grateful, gentle smiles. The first time I cleaned my grandparent’s home, I arrived oblivious to the new perspective I would gain, an insight to someone’s livelihood.

The house itself appeared surfcace clean without glaring messes in dire need of tidying, perfectly suppressing the reality I would later discover. An extraordinarily meticulous woman, my grandmother handed me a list naming the locations where the most dust lay and dirt often surfaced. Wiping away the water marks that remained on the mirror and dusting the kitchen cabinets, I could only think about completing each task; the rush to finish continued until I began to sweep the floors. Amidst the medley of crumbs and small flecks of trash, short hairs collected in the corners of the floor, thin and gray, where the walls meet the cold tile and as I swept the same area multiple times to make certain nothing remained, I realized the extent to which the hair covered. Hair loss often presents itself as a side effect of cancer treatment. Diagnosed a few months prior, my grandfather’s lung cancer had been a rarely discussed topic; I could plainly recognize his discomfort. It seemed as though I had helped to rid my grandmother of the constant reminder that her husband was sick, discarding the pieces of him that fell away so effortlessly. Once I completed my tasks, my grandmother paid me, fed me, and thanked me for “making [her] feel clean again”, a statement that often entertains my thoughts amid the most unsuspecting of moments.

When I hear about the struggles of others, it is impossible to fully comprehend the extent to which those pains influence even the most miniscule details of one’s life. By cleaning my grandparent’s home, I fully inserted myself into their lives, appreciating the byproducts of their routines. I clearly analyzed their lives from an entirely different perspective, helping me to acknowledge a reality outside my own. Processing this experience, I wondered what the discarded mess left behind by my life might indicate. Would my trail whisper to others the struggles I have endured, confessing my burdens, or might it reveal my lost hopes, aspirations I can no longer hold onto? And yet, I come back to my grandmother’s words, “feel clean again,” for her age and recent health concerns prevented her from fully escaping the impurities in her home that overwhelmed her, impurities I was initially blind to. The first time I cleaned my grandparent’s home I had unknowingly exposed myself to their vulnerabilities and that kind of intimacy led me to question not only my own future, but the lives of others as well. Suddenly, I found myself actively seeking the parts of themselves that some people choose to suppress while I attempt to paint a picture of another’s life in its genuine form.

Now clearly established, my role within their household is one that resets their desires and cleanses their consciousness so that they may continue each coming week without the burden of feeling dirty. I continue to visit every weekend, cleaning with a greater respect for them than I had prior to my first visit. Although I often leave feeling a somewhat melancholy shadow following behind me, I know that the simple gesture makes a considerable difference in my grandparent’s lives. Often I reflect on this day for an additional moment, grasping new meaning from the thin hair floating to the ground, unveiling a reality to which I can only gaze upon, leaving me with a single question- when might I feel clean again?
We walked in and the smell of butter and salt reeked within the same air that carried childish laughter which seemed to beckon out of every corridor and hallway. Excitement gleamed within every eye for as far as they could see. After selecting our spot and buying a few snacks, the buildup of excitement had come to an all time high, we sat down and heard that amazing score from composer John Williams; the crowd went wild. Savory snacks went flying through the air, loud cheers seemed to break through the ceiling, and then the crowd fell silent as we waited for what J.J. Abrahams had in store for the future of Star Wars. To say that the cinema was vivacious would be an understatement.

While enjoying what was controversially a masterpiece of a film and the revival of a mega-franchise, I pondered many things. Firstly, the sales of this film coupled with the copious amounts of other theaters across America all experiencing a pulsating boom of moviegoers, franchise lovers, and thrill seekers alike. By this, I mean the ticket sales that come with a film this grandiose in size. Secondly, I questioned revenue from ticket sales and ad placement made by Disney which never ceases to amaze me. All of these are important aspects in really selling a movie and my admiration for film and business does not only come from my ventures to the cinema, but instead has deep roots that come from the simple act of storytelling. When I was much younger, my parents would read me bedtime stories in Hungarian, my native language. These stories not only served the purpose of easing me into sleep but actually gave me something important to think about, that being the “building blocks” for storytelling. It was important to see at such a young age that the way a story is constructed allows for its audience to see the tale in a completely different light. For example, if the story is shown to an audience from the first person perspective or the third, then the perspective of the reader is completely transformed. With this, I mean perspective can entirely alter a person’s mindset, for example, the insight Star Wars character, Darth Vader, gained from his shift in perspective allowed him to bear witness to everything in life he had been taking for granted, altering the fate of the galaxy. This reflects my struggles as an early adolescent, dealing with new friends, a brand new high school environment, and new list of responsibilities that at first appeared to me as an obstacle but through a shift in perspective became a welcomed new addition to my life. Moreover, being the second generation of my family to be born in the United States; English was not my first language. Instead, my parents chose to teach me Hungarian and have me learn English from school. This affected me in my early ages as speaking to my classmates or making friends became more of a challenge, as my ability to communicate to them was completely halted. However, I stayed persistent and kept great courage as I slowly learned English from television programs or movies; for instance the “Back to The Future” series sparked my interest in the English language almost immediately and allowed me to study and learn the basic fundamentals of the English language through multiple re-runs of these movies. The cinema has always held a special place in my heart as I was able to meet my first friends, make long lasting memories and continue to share my love for the motion picture extending even into my teen years and hopefully into the years to come. The movies gave me purpose. For years, I had wondered where I was headed in life, it was through film that my path had been finally revealed to me.
Only a few weeks into my freshman year and I was miserable. I hadn’t mentally prepared myself for the course load and intensity that comes with High School. I hadn’t maintained the perfect grades my parents expected. I knew the conditions. It was part of the deal to go to a private school; I had to take all honors and have all As or else it wasn’t worth it. All my friends shopped for dresses for homecoming. To my bad luck, my parents had made it clear I wouldn’t be going because of my grades. It didn’t help that me struggling in school had caused my relationship with my parents to wedge.

One day I heard angry steps, stomping towards my room. “Uh oh…I’m dead” I suddenly felt my throat close and my forehead perspire. From the weight the steps made I could tell it was my mom. If it was my dad I wouldn’t be scared for my life. My mom is Mexican and my dad is Greek so they handle punishment in very different ways. I tried to prepare myself for whatever she had in store for me.

She entered the room at full speed. Her face red, with a vein popping out of her forehead. She stood there for a little while waiting for me to speak. I remember her expression: fury, pain and disappointment mixed in one. Her glare pierced my soul, which prevented myself from moving. It was the look that all moms do to destroy their opponent. In this case, that opponent was me, and she destroyed me from the inside out. I was paralyzed.

“I just looked at your grades…why do you have 2 Bs?” She yelled. “I expect better from you” she said “I know you are smart and you’re not trying hard enough!!”

She lectured me about how I’m not living up to my full potential. I tried to fire back with “I am doing my best” but there was no way out. As she went on, I started to question the validity of her statement. Was I really just not putting in my best effort?

The intimidation by my parent’s high expectations taught me to steer away from difficult classes. The idea of failing scared me because if I did, I would be a disappointment to my family. I did synchronized swimming for 7 years and I quit in 7th grade. My parents still wanted me to play a sport so I tried waterpolo. They reminded me of my teammates from synchro that started waterpolo and succeeded. I tried my best to be a good player, but I just couldn’t get it. After practice they looked at me like I had failed. This was a problem that couldn’t be fixed because honestly I just didn’t like waterpolo.

Something about that day made me learn to never doubt myself and never be afraid to try something new, even if it seems impossible. I realized that I was in full control of my grades. Since then, I worked to fix my grades before the end of the semester. I stopped blaming my parents for forcing me to take difficult classes, and thanked them for caring about my education. They wanted what was best for me.

I didn’t end the semester with all As, but I raised them to the best I could. Next semester was going to be different. I encouraged myself to not slack off and work independently. I learned from my mistakes. In a way, I think like my parents now and challenged myself for the rest of my highschool years. I’m very lucky to be surrounded by people that care about me and want to see me achieve amazing things. It’s a real motivation. I always think back to when my mom and I had that discussion, and I inspire myself to do better.

I reach for the stars.
Adam Miller  
Age: 17, Grade: 12  
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Educator: Christi Thomas-McEachern  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  

**Without A Doubt**  

The same faces filled the Church every Sunday. Life consisted of repetitive daily actions with little to no meaning behind them. As a Cradle Catholic, my faith-filled life seemed ordinary and mundane. My idea of the Catholic faith was contained within my reach, from Catholic School to Catholic Church. Even upon switching parishes with my family my idea of faith remained consistent and monotonous. When it came to everything personal about my religion I had 20/20 vision: I appreciated the homily and understood the verses.

My Confirmandi, we will call ‘Thomas’, presented the question “Is that the real body of Christ?” Although I could see the answer to the question, how I would answer was not in sight.

Being a year younger than my Confirmandi, I had to step up and fill a role necessary for his faith development. This was no small task as I would forever be a mentor to ‘Thomas’ and always extended an outward hand. After accepting the offer I felt as if I was always being watched with a set of binoculars. I discovered myself becoming more involved in the Church, actively seeking out service opportunities and ways to contribute back to the community. For my Confirmandi, his faith life was completely distinct from mine; he was new to the Church and only perceiving the faith from the outside.

What seemed like a completely reasonable question in ‘Thomas’s’ perspective was an elementary and foolish question to me. My initial reaction was to laugh; however, I quickly realized how significant the question actually was.

What the Body of Christ to me was nothing more than a vanilla wafer to him. I had to question fundamentals about the faith that I thought I already had figured out. This question made me search for new ways to approach the faith, enabling me to get closer with my Confirmandi. I knew I had to change the way I thought about the Church if I wanted to fulfill my role as a sponsor so I could grow in faith just like ‘Thomas’.

My Confirmandi previously viewed the Church with farsighted vision. He only perceived his faith to be something distant and impersonal. This made me realize how nearsighted I was about my faith. I only knew and believed in ideas that were instilled within me. Although those ideas were not invalid, they did not portray the entire picture.

I recognized my faith was special when my best friend asked me to be his Confirmation Sponsor. Growing in my faith meant that I had to see things a new way. I could not be blindsided to the traditions that I held on to for so long. My Confirmandi was a role model for me because I learned that it is okay to ask ridiculous questions and to open up a vulnerable side of yourself. Whether I am in school, tutoring a friend or simply spending time with my brothers, I come up with creative ways to connect myself to others, to see a new perspective. I discovered how having this 20/20 vision is never complete or perfect. You have to work and engage with others around you to gain more perspectives in life. Now, I see more emotions on those familiar faces on Sunday, and those repetitive daily actions define my purpose in life. With my new bifocal perspective my faith life and the Catholic Church all came into focus.
The Hand-Me-Down

The dusty, old piece of clothing landed gracefully on my comforter.

“Here, this is for you,” my mom said in a nostalgic tone, “I used to wear this when I was in college.”

I glanced at the beaten-up 90’s fashion item that was lying on my bed.

“Thanks,” I told my mom smiling, “I love it.”

I really did love it, but as I continued to stare at the new addition to my closet, I wondered what I was going to do with it. I had never seen someone wear anything like it and I did not want to be the first one. I hung the outfit in my closet. Every day, the clothing taunted me from its throne in my closet kingdom. Every time I glanced at it, my mind would race with fears of judgment. The societal norm, that I had to wear whatever was trending on Instagram to get a “like” from a follower, constantly nagged at me. For some reason, I allowed my insecurities to control me.

I would never fit in if I wore that.

So, the frayed, decrepit apparel remained in my closet. It would stay there for two years.

Fifteen year-old me--a little older, a little bolder--opened my closet door on an ordinary Sunday morning. There it was, my mom’s whitewashed overalls, staring back at me. Feeling curious, I laid them on my bed.

They’re just overalls anyways, right?

I gazed at the worn-down overalls. Their age showed through the loss of color on the legs and the hems that were on the brink of fraying. The silver buttons glared as the sunlight from my window bounced off of them. My room danced with their sparkles. They were beautiful. As I slipped the overalls over my legs and buckled them over my shoulders, I stood in front of my mirror. My reflection was smiling back at me.

Who cares about Instagram, or Snapchat.

I felt free. I felt happy. My overalls made me glow with confidence. I ran down the stairs, to model my overalls for my parents.

“It looks amazing on you!” my parents said.

I was radiating with joy.

Throughout the entirety of the day, I strutted in my mom’s overalls. I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. To my surprise, all of my friends that day complimented me on my style. My confidence even seemed to have a domino effect on all of my friends. Everyone seemed to be a little bit happier after seeing my famous overalls. It seemed as if my newly found confidence gave everyone else the little push they needed to realize that beauty comes in all different forms. From that day forward, my overalls became my new favorite addition in my closet. I felt as if it was a part of
my identity now and, because of my overalls, I loved myself again.

I learned a very important and memorable lesson that day: I should never let fear keep me from being myself. Thanks to my overalls, I no longer let society’s reins of perfection hold this cowgirl back. People’s opinions and thoughts of me should not change my values, my personality, or even my clothing choices. I am my own person. I do know that I am not perfect and I still have my days where my insecurities overcome me. On those days, I just remember what I felt when I wore those overalls: peace and joy. I felt true confidence. My confidence now glows everyday, just like those silver buttons do on my simple, hand-me-down overalls.
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_Befriending a Vacuum_

Refreshing, sodium-filled drops of sweat gently trickled down my face. My three-year-old legs rapidly accelerated at complete capacity and achieved their maximum velocity in a matter of seconds. I was not as fast as I thought. In a final attempt to preserve my life, I made an immediate, ninety degree left turn in the lengthy, narrow corridor and sought asylum in the master bedroom. However, it proved to be futile. The monster neared, screaming at me in a foreign language.

I thought to myself: _“Was it my mother scolding me in those Mexican idioms?”_

I quickly leaped onto the soft, empty bed and curled into a ball. I had accepted defeat. That tattered, navy blue Dirt Devil vacuum cleaner had won that fateful afternoon. During my Terrible Threes, there was truly nothing more horrifying and gut-wrenching than the sight of that mechanical monstrosity. Of the three residents in that household and infinite miscellaneous objects, I was its control group, intended to demonstrate its effectiveness at scaring little, innocent kids. Being the target was not fun.

I bawled upon observing how it viciously stretched out its long, mechanical arm, adhered to the picture of my Abuelita, and suctioned her young, delicate face. Utter terror and confusion overcame me as it exhibited the property of adhesion by clinging to the ceramic plate depicting _la Virgen de Guadalupe_. However, I did not comprehend that it was merely attempting to assist in purification by eliminating dust particles.

The vacuum was not a foe. It was our friend.

I grew irritated at living in fear. The thought of having fear of an inanimate object was genuinely emotionally exhausting and frustrating. I refused to allow a vessel intended to sanitize households take control of who I truly was. In light of that, I initiated an experiment, entitled the following: _Operation Make Vacuum a Friend_.

I consulted with my mother about my intention to overcome this “disease”. She just chuckled and said the following:

_Mijo_, why are you even scared of _la aspiradora_ (vacuum)?”

I answered, “Mamá, I thought it was trying to hurtAbuelita and me.”

She bursted into this laughter that infuriated me.

“Mamá, this is not funny! Necesito tu ayuda (I need your help).”

I commenced my transformation by exposing myself to the machine. In other words, I would cling to my mother’s arm while she maneuvered throughout the living room: it really annoyed her.

“Mijo, suéltame y déjameen paz (Let go).”

Like any efficient, well-conducted experiment, I repeated this step numerous times. What was once an ear-piercing scream, was now a harmonious sign of life. Witnessing how an electric current would animate this object was truly magnificent.

My parents took notice of my growing affinity for the vacuum. We were best friends-no longer enemies.

On my birthday, I took notice of an abnormally long box. Upon opening it, my eyes experienced a glorious site: a red Dirt Devil vacuum cleaner. I tore it from the box and started to play with it, completely ignoring the other presents that remained unopened.

When my mom would sanitize the house, I would sprint to my room, take out my own vacuum cleaner, and help establish order. She would chuckle and say, “Gracias, mijo.”

I had finally concluded my experiment, and what had antagonized me for so long would no longer cause me any more harm. I had conquered my fear.

I have to depart now. The time has come to do my favorite weekend chore: conduct a thorough cleaning with our crimson red and obsidian black Bisell vacuum cleaner.

This newly developed “passion” has taught me the importance of how a weakness can be the catalyst for...
improvement in my psychological infrastructure. The vacuum was my opportunity to foster a climate of innovation within myself. From vulnerability, strength can arise.
Leadership is for Everyone

As I sat in front of the television and tuned in to Monday Night Raw, I suddenly heard the audience already drowning out the commentators’ voices with their cheers. A man in a leather jacket, one of wrestling’s top stars, stood in the middle of the ring and proclaimed, “ Bálor Club is for everyone”. The way he could command a crowd’s attention without breaking a sweat was mesmerizing, and I knew that he was an ideal leader. Having the unparalleled ability to be the founder and leader of the long-lasting Bullet Club in Japan and possessing a combined twenty-four championship reigns with his cohorts, he was a perfect role model to learn from. Absorbing his knowledge and applying it to my own life, I had become a better leader than I believed I was.

His willingness to support his allies during their struggles resonated with me, and I seized his abilities. If they were risking losing their championships, he would step in and help them retain their titles. Although his tactics offended the referee’s rulings, his efforts often snagged success. His motives for providing assistance were the things I assimilated, not his methods. An example of this is how I helped my lab partners with completing a lab report when he was unable to. Because these reports made up a decent percentage of the overall grade in the class, it was not an assignment to take lightly. After class, I sauntered to the parking lot when I heard footsteps catching up to me. I turn and see one of my lab partners. He had a slight look of worry and something was not right.

“Hey man listen, my schedule is completely stacked tonight. I got long practice on top of all the tests I got.”

“Well what about the lab report? It’s due tomorrow.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think I can finish it tonight. I have no time and I don’t want to throw things together at the last minute. I can ask our other partner if he could-”

“No. I can take care of it.”

“You sure?” He said as a concerned expression formed on his face.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I got you.”

Concern quickly changed to relief as we found a solution to the problem. I admit that it withdrew convenience, but it was our only option. As the day progressed, I worked diligently to complete the unfinished lab report. Once it was finished, I looked it over twice. This lab report was important, and it had to be perfect. Two days after it was submitted, all of us received our grade. It was an A+, and our hard work had paid off. Our overall grades improved, and it gave us a reason to feel relaxed. Mimicking the wrestler’s inclination to aid his friends in achieving their goals worked for my dilemma.

If there’s one thing I learned from watching his career over several years, it’s what it means to truly be a good leader. Putting one’s self over others and treating them like inferiors doesn’t make a good leader. A group is only as strong as its weakest link, but elevating that link would result in a much stronger group. Just as the wrestler took matters into his own hands for the good of the club, I took charge and helped control a problem generated at a moment’s notice. However, I still have plenty more to learn about being a leader that even he may not know. By continuing my education at college, I can have the opportunity to acquire more knowledge.
Learning from Death

The shattered glass glittered on my dashboard after the car stopped its rollover. I was certain I had maintained the proper speed limit, but the car spun out of control. Miraculously, I exited the vehicle and stood there dumbfounded, observing the car’s mangled sides. My heart was pounding and I felt a fluttering sensation in my stomach from the overwhelming fear. I realized I had lost control.

Controlling all aspects of life is impossible; there will always be an uncontrollable element like an animal darting in front of your car.

The whirring hum of the oxygen machine stationed beside the hospital cot in my living room kept my mother up all night. She still managed to laugh as we reminisced about our last family road trip. Her laughter settled and she stared up at me, forcing a smile that I almost mistook for a grimace. Holding her frail hand and feeling her weak grip, I looked into her glassy eyes and sensed her acknowledgement. After six years of battling Stage IV ovarian cancer, she had accepted that she no longer had control.

I can’t control the thread of human fate—the way it’s spun or when it’s cut. It is infeasible to even attempt to control all aspects of life, yet we all grasp at the hope of finding those silver linings and small successes that these events provide us. In the grand scheme, no amount of preparation nor caution is ever enough to shield myself from life’s curveballs. Rather than wait for it to knock me out, I have to learn to accept what is within my control.

Little did I know, acknowledging these uncontrollable aspects in life would remind me what mattered most: family. My car accident, as well as the passing of my mother, made me see my life flash before my eyes. At the time of her death, the coronavirus had just made its way to the US, and I was frustrated that it had interrupted my life. However, I now see this situation was a mixed blessing. Even though the deadly pandemic abruptly halted life’s routines, it allowed me to step back from school work and fencing and instead treasure the little time I had left with my mom and the rest of our family. Family mattered. Approaching standardized tests and AP exams, grades, and fencing recruitment opportunities weren’t priorities.

Once my mom left us, I had to be there for my sisters and my dad: I had to be the glue that gelled everyone together. I stepped up at home on things that I used to take for granted because my dad returned to work and my older sister went back to college. Not only was I the middle child and only son, I took initiative as a parental figure: taking care of my younger sister and driving her to her activities, helping pay the household bills, shopping for groceries, and preparing healthy meals.

During my quiet time, I reflected back on my life and evaluated if I would do anything differently. My high school experience was dominated by fencing. While I’m proud of my accomplishments, it cut into my family time and COVID serendipitously corrected that. I also gained clarity on what I want to do within my control—supporting my family and friends, continuing to serve those in need, and juggling a healthy medium between a sport I love with my academic pursuits.

Ralph Ellison once said, “Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat.” If I ever have to experience future episodes where I see my life flashing before my eyes, I don’t want to have any regrets where I shoulda, woulda, coulda. I want to be happy with how I spend my time surrounded by my family and friends while balancing the things I love.
Who Am I?

As any teenager will tell you, the most confusing and overwhelming question that we encounter is: “who are you?” This question is constantly being asked through family members and friends, always asking “what do you want to do?”, even though this should be a simple answer, it makes every teenager question everything about their existence. It can be extremely overwhelming to even those that know exactly who they are and what they want to do in the future. Whenever I feel uncertain about my answer, I have a simple solution: go clean my room. I’m not talking about just making the bed or vacuuming, I’m talking about going through each drawer in my desk and all the boxes under my bed; re-ordering everything and revisiting my memories always manages to set me back on track and remind me of who I am and who I want to be.

I used to never understand why my mom was so persistent in keeping all my old notebooks and papers from my years in elementary school and junior high; however, now, those very same pages that I used to think insignificant are now the pages I use to reaffirm my identity. These notebooks that I keep under my bed are chalked full of memories: dreams of a younger Evan, architectural drawings of dream houses I wanted to construct since I was young, future plans, and the occasional nonsensical drawing that must have had some wild and extravagant story behind it that I have long since forgotten. Going back through these boxes, hundreds of memories flood back to me; the memories of playing soccer with my dad as I see the plaques with all my teams throughout the years, the moments I’ve have with my mom spending all day painting whatever comes into my mind, or the countless camping trips my entire family has gone on. All these memories rush back into my mind to remind me of my childhood and where I’ve come from. Despite this, the most useful memories for remembering the answer to this pressing question come from the notebooks of my junior high school math classes. These notebooks hold the key. In these memories I encounter my first time working with a new type of word problems and a need for complex problem solving. Throughout my life, I have always preferred math over the other subjects because of its specificity. It’s never up to interpretation. You are either right, or wrong. This means that every step of the problem has to be correct otherwise you will not get the right answer. As I got older and the problems became more complicated, the need for detailed step by step work grew. Even though it became more time-consuming and tedious, my passion for this type of problem solving never diminished, rather, it thrived and eventually I found myself excited to be stumped by a particularly difficult problem because I knew the more difficult the problem, the more satisfaction I would get from finally solving it. Retaining the memories from these notebooks is not the only thing about cleaning my room that reaffirms my resolve about who I am; the physical act of cleaning it does as well.

When cleaning my room, I never leave any crevice untouched. I must examine every inch of the room and explore every nook and cranny. Most of the time, I pass this off as just normal behavior when doing a task. However, after seeing all my notebooks and being reminded of why math is my favorite subject, I am able to make a connection between the specific nature of math and my perfectionist behavior in the tasks I am given. Both of these components combine to create my sense of self and furthermore, my dreams for the future.
Tap

My jiu jitsu instructor says, “Alright, so usually what we do before we roll is either a slap or fist-bump.” He glares at me, the newcomer, “Some shake hands.”
I shake hands, stuttering, “And should I start first or?...”
The instructor shrugged.
I approached my opponent on the mat, shuffling my feet, hands out, looking for grips on his kimono. I inch closer...closer —
He lunges at me.

Within seconds, I was on my back, his knee squashing into my belly, his forearm digging into my neck. I lay there, dazed.
As he transitions to his next move, he piques my curiosity: he leaps over me and slices his hand across my chest; his other hand slithers along my back. I feel his grip tightening, and my face turning a nice shade of purple.
I tap out: he rolls to his knees. Suddenly the blood rushes back into my face.
I sit up, mesmerized by what he just did. My heart pounds, adrenaline rushes through me. I say, “Hey, let’s go again.”

After I finish rolling with the instructor I pepper him with a thousand questions,
“How did you do that?”
“How can I put my arm here instead?”
“And should I put pressure here?”
The instructor gladly answered my questions with immense detail.

By the time I scurry home I’m already looking up new techniques and submissions, browsing through forums and YouTube tutorials. I’m not even sure what Jiu Jitsu is at this point, but I think I’m in love.

The next day I go back and I am tingling with excitement, ready to take on the entire gym with my newfound YouTube jiu jitsu powers. Once sparring begins I scan the gym for partners. Bingo, someone smaller than me and at the same belt level. I thought to myself, “Oh yeah, I can mop the floor with this guy.” We shake hands and begin our battle. Immediately I lunged at him and tried to employ my new tactics. Yet again, before I knew it he was mounted on top of me and was ready to tap me out. After getting tapped out by all my opponents, and not even winning a single match I realize, I am only a novice at this, and that there is much to learn.

Before I started jiu jitsu I was always intimidated by those who practiced it. Now I realize how ignorant I was. Going back to class, day by day, I meet more and more compassionate people who want to help me in my path through life and Jiu Jitsu. The most beautiful thing about Jiu Jitsu, is that there is no correct path; when rolling with someone there is always a new boundary to be reached, a new goal to be accomplished. I go back to class always looking forward to trying a new technique.

Patience, humility, and tenacity are all needed when rolling in jiu jitsu, much like any pursuit. I no longer shrink away from challenges, but rise to the occasion, understanding that any problem can be solved with determination. No longer overconfident and arrogant, I approach people with humility, knowing that there is something valuable to be learned from everybody. This sport has not only pushed my mental and physical boundaries, but has also taught me the beauty of exploration. I now shake hands with my next challenge, ready to learn and compete.
Life is seldom predictable and often comes with surprises that eventually prove who we are. What we initially consider as obstacles and adversity ultimately become the pillars and motivators that drive us to achieve what we once believed to reside only within the realm of impossibility. I, myself, am a living witness to this truth. I wake up every day, ready to learn new things, take demanding classes, and face every challenge with confidence and a smile. As president of Gael2Gael, a program that guides and assists transfer students with their needs throughout their first year, I have found that in order to help someone, you must be consistently present, aware, and empathize with their individual perspective. As a Junior Volunteer for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, I help terminally ill patients realize their once-in-a-lifetime dreams by creating, designing, and producing posters for their Wish reveals. For my efforts, I was nominated for the Junior Volunteer of the Year award. I have a personal philosophy: whenever I enter a situation, I do my utmost to leave it better than when I first arrived. As a member of the Medical Society club, I have been able to survey all of the various careers within the medical field, and it only reinforced within me the desire to become a part of it and actively assist others in overcoming their individual adversities.

It is the lessons we take away from the obstacles that beset us that prove to be beneficial in achieving latter success. On January 21, 2018, I found myself in a situation that no one should ever have to experience. Two boys, whom I once considered friends, changed my life for the worse. It was on this night that I became a survivor of Sexual Assault. Some parts of society have never rightfully respected women of the “#MeToo movement”, and likewise, my voice was not heard. Hopes of being listened to were short-lived as my case had closed only a few weeks later. The fear and anger from that night remained within me up until recent months; however, these overwhelming feelings engendered within me a strength: I am more than a victim; I am a survivor.

Being a survivor reminds me of my ability to emerge from the great adversity I had once faced. Although it altered my character, this life-changing event did not stop me from living my life. Accordingly, I had to make changes: my friends, the things I do for fun, my extracurricular activities. My mantra became: I am the one who will not let my voice be silenced. Community service has always been a major factor in my life as it was something that brought me solace. The joy I found while helping others allowed me to lose sight of my pain. As a result, a new, stronger person arose within me. My ultimate goal is to live a healthy life without being defined by assault, and when entering college, I would use my experience to create a safe space for others. Rather than allowing them to fall prey to depression, hopelessness and helplessness, I would encourage them to remain optimistic and pursue opportunities that serve as an outlet. In such, they, too, can realize their goals and dreams as survivors, not victims.
College Essay

Filipino-American Dream

Throughout life we grow to learn about hardships and success. In my life, I have understood the core values on why it is important to learn these types of lessons because this is what we use everyday. It may be easy for others to succeed in life without having to deal with any hardships, but for others they have to sacrifice so much to be able to succeed. We grow up to see people taking the easy way out, but we also learn that people sometimes do not even succeed in life even through their tough hard times. It may not look like a big deal for some people, but for others this might be the reason they strive for excellence.

I was born and raised a Filipina woman in Las Vegas, Nevada not knowing the difference between my race/nationality and other races/nationalities. I never knew the importance of where I stood in this society until I was five years old, and usually when you are five all you can think about is “What is on Disney Channel?” or “Who is your favorite Disney Princess?” Growing up I always thought that I was rich because of how my living state was and where I went to school; therefore, I never really paid attention to my surroundings. It was brought to my attention at the age of five and six that the world does not revolve around me, there was so much more. From then on I realized that I need to step up my game and help those around me.

When reality hit me, I finally understood where my parents came from and how they got here. My grandmother, who lived in poverty all her life and raised herself alongside her younger sister and younger brother, was the first person in her family to move from the Philippines to America. She came here having nothing and working two jobs to go to school to become a nurse. At the time she came here, she already gave birth to my mother, but had to sadly leave her with my grandpa in the Philippines because she needed to find a job and have a stable income before she could move her here. When my mother and grandpa finally arrived in America, my grandparents had to sacrifice so much to be able to give their daughter a happy, free, and successful life.

Fast forward to seven years, it was my mother’s turn to start working and finding a job so that she could give me a better life. Sadly, at the age of 24 and 16 days before my first birthday, she lost her battle to Acute Myeloid Leukemia and all her dreams for me disappeared. Everything turned out fine years later because my grandparents took me in when my dad left. My grandparents raised me to learn the hard ways in life, and that “when life brings you down, you just have to get back up again because that is a way you are going to succeed.” I have learned so much within the 17 years that I have been alive and I hope one day I can teach and raise my kids in a better society.

Though I do not have much, I learned that I can still help the world by doing little things. Every year I donate my clothes, canned goods, and old shoes to the Philippines because even though they are used, the people there can still use them because they are so valuable to them. Little by little I donate some money to my family there, even though it is not a lot, I can still provide for them food and a home. I try to volunteer at homeless areas so that it shows my mom that all her hard work was put into use. Even if I was not able to experience the dream my mom had for me, I get to experience the dream my grandparents had for her.
Surprise

"I have something to tell you." I woke up to the alluring birds outside of my window. The sunlight emerged through the blinds. God had blessed the world with another day and oh how grateful I was. I leisurely walked down the stairs. As I trudged down each step, I could smell a freshly, prepared breakfast. I strolled outside, my parents following, to the table to enjoy our ordinary breakfast on Sunday. I sat at the table tiresome. My mom looked at me intently and said “We need to talk.” My first instinct was to think about every word that could potentially come out of her mouth. I could have never predicted her to say what she did. Time stopped. I could not possibly begin to process what I had just been told. In that moment, I learned what it feels like to be utterly speechless. But I couldn’t be. Before I could respond, my dad began to speak,”I know it’s a lot to handle. Are you okay?” I responded, “I will be.” I had to remember in this moment that there is a time for everything and now was the time that this was supposed to happen. Change is never easy but it does not have to be a bad thing. During this transitional period of time, I learned a lot about myself that I would not have ever been able to learn if that day had never happened. Before, I knew what it meant to be a strong person but I did not necessarily know what it took to be one. I can confidently say as of right now that I am and now know what it takes to be a person that is capable of handling hardships and has become resilient. The words that I thought would destroy me only made me stronger in the end but this was not the end. Time went by and things became tranquil. I had transitioned into my new lifestyle. It has been a few months since our enduring conversation. I constantly have been undergoing extensive growth since that day. Little did I know that the strength that I have gained was going to be tested once again. It was a breezy, October day. The season of fall is a season of change, rightfully so. I went to lunch with my best friend and as we were at lunch a notification on my phone came up from my mom, “Meet me at Dad’s house after lunch.” So after lunch, I proceeded to my Dad’s house. I opened the rusty gate that led to the front door. I opened the door and the second I stepped foot into the house I could feel the tension surrounding me. I sat down on the cold hearth of the fireplace as my parents gazed at me with eyes of melancholy. I thought to myself I can handle and am prepared for anything they are about to say. My dad begins to speak those same words he had spoken to me once before “I know this is a lot to handle, are you okay?” Little did I know this challenge would be harder than anything I had ever faced before. I found out that time with my dad was maybe limited. It was in that moment that I realized I need to appreciate every moment. A word kept repeating in my head, Surprise. It was in that moment that I realized that everyday is full of surprises: good and bad. It was up to me how I looked and embraced this new obstacle and challenges that are unknown to me ahead. Because I have had time to grow, I know now that I would not be able to know and feel true happiness if I did not experience pain. It is all okay and so am I.
College Essay

The Battle on the Ice

Tears forming in my eyes slowly made their way down my cheek and to the tip of my chin. It was hard to breathe, and my words were cut up; like a baby trying to speak. My glass eyes stared into my dad’s, his eyes were glazed over by tears as well. The cause of our sadness wasn’t something that many people would cry over in the slightest. The five words that left my mouth made my dad’s heart explode inside of his stomach. “I want to quit hockey.” I look back at this moment and laugh about how much of a baby my dad was. Who bawls over the fact their 12 year old daughter quit a sport? When my dad asked me why I quit, I explained that I simply fell out of love with hockey. I lied to him. I continued by falsely sharing my dislike for skating, stickhandling, and traveling to play at tournaments. Unfortunately, nothing could be farther from the truth. My love of hockey still burns bright in me to this day. Saying that I didn’t like hockey anymore was a mask for the real reason I quit.

My passion for hockey is what woke me up everyday as I grew up. When I woke up knowing I was going to the ice rink, my excitement was uncontainable. The only downfall was that I didn't have many friends on my team. I was the only girl on an all boys team. Others would come and go but, I remained the only consistent girl. At first I had no issue with this because I was playing the sport I wanted to play for the rest of my life. I dreamt of playing for the Women's USA Hockey Team. I dreamt of bringing home a gold medal to make my dad proud.

As I got older, so did the boys. They got bigger, faster, and meaner. My excitement to go to practice was no longer a part of me. I would refuse to go into the co-ed locker rooms and I refused to talk to anyone on the ice. I learned the hard way to never enter those locker rooms again. What those boys did to me made me lose all respect for myself and my sport. If I talked to someone on the ice, the boys thought I was asking for it. I didn't want them to press up against me and make inappropriate noises again. I learned a lesson to never talk on the ice. In fear of what the boys would do to me. I was sexually assaulted. Trying to be “one of the boys” still didn't stop what was happening. With my passion for hockey hanging by a thread, I decided to cut it and quit hockey for good.

If you could ask me today what my biggest regret is, I would say not continuing my hockey career. At the same time, if you asked me what my biggest blessing was, I would also say, not continuing my hockey career. Actions that took place in those locker rooms and on the ice broke me into pieces. For so long, I struggled with my body image and felt like I was worthless. From those broken pieces grew a new woman. I’ve learned to no longer be ashamed of what has happened to me and learned how to stand up for myself, I continue to impress people with my knowledge of the game, which, in the long run, came in handy when we got our first NHL team. I still have close ties with my first love, but ultimately, My love of hockey stemmed me to my new passion, Lacrosse. Lacrosse has taken me places that would make my younger self proud. From traveling across the country to playing on different travel teams, to being a starter on varsity for all 4 years of highschool. Even though my life right now is lacrosse, hockey will always hold a reverent spot in my heart. It has taught me life long lessons and given me so many amazing opportunities. Although I can never forget, I forgive those immature boys who treated me poorly, they made me who I am today. Fearless.
No Different From You

True human equality is a vision we all share as a community of people bound together in this cycle of life. Might it be race, gender and even sexual orientation. We want others, as well as ourselves, to receive the same rights as others, all in fairness.

But in this day and age we may have the same rights but the treatment is different. Each person is born with the expectations of the parents and people around them and is groomed to have the same ideals. No matter what, it’s almost impossible to stray from those ideals that have been pushed unto you since the day you were born. This is why it makes complete sense why things like racism and sexism exist.

Religion can play a big part in this as well. People tend to use God as a shield for their own despicable actions, as a way to perhaps soften the blast. This leads to the main issues that are going to be discussed today, homophobia or LGBTQ+ treatment in general.

Pure discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community is not a very common thing in today’s society. It rests in less severe, yet still very hurtful actions instead. Might it be not accepting you child’s sexuality, making hurtful LGBTQ+ comments or jokes or singling someone out because of their sexuality.

What leaves me upset is that people are given reasons, or possible excuses to discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community. Both homophobia and transphobia still exist in today’s society. Transphobia especially puts an unneeded pressure on trans people to conform to society’s standards of birth gender.

Already having to deal with gender dysphoria and coping with their feelings, trans people shouldn’t have to deal with an undesired stress that could be completely avoidable if the other party was more accepting. They shouldn’t have to force themselves to conform.

Especially those claiming that there are only two genders. Scientifically yes, there are only two genders, but morally there are many more. Those who claim there are only two genders look from a different perspective than those who are more open-minded. They lean on science to determine their views on things rather than branching out themselves.

When children like Beau are trapped inside a closet, scared to come out because, “last time I told them and they threatened to kick me out of the house.” or how Lauren stays quiet because, “When I told them, mom thought something was wrong with me and threatened to take me to a psychologist.” When cutting your hair short causes more damage than smoking, that is when it’s gone too far.

I look forward for the day when being gay or trans won’t be unordinary thing. When parents and friends will open their hearts to their loved ones coming out. Maybe that day has already come and I’m writing this for nothing, who knows? But on my side of the spectrum I’m surrounded by those young children who just want people to accept them. Hoping that their loved ones would understand that their sexuality and or gender association doesn’t define them and that they haven’t changed in any way.
Crayola Markers

“What did you do to your face?” my mother exclaimed. I shrugged nonchalantly as I peered through the mirror, marker completely covering my skin.

As a six-year-old, I was not exactly aware that Crayola Markers did not belong on my face, regardless it looked like a masterpiece to me. At such a young age, I remember believing that these vibrant and vivacious colors enhanced the perception of my appearance. I felt like a superstar. My mother, of course, then forced me to scrub my skin clean, but the feeling of absolute bliss that occurred when applying those markers did not fade away as easily.

As the years went on, I sought more skin friendly products to apply to my face. As an alternative to possibly potent markers, I would steal my mother’s incredibly old makeup from her medicine cabinet in order to reinstate the excitement and confidence that I received during the marker fiasco. As one can imagine, my first attempts at applying makeup were, in simpler words, terrible. Bright green eyeshadow was smeared across my eyelids, fire truck red lipstick was applied messily on my mouth, and a hot pink blush was visible all over my face. It was not exactly what one would consider an ideal look.

Despite the fact that I closely resembled the Joker in my early stages of makeup application, I continued to practice. While each failure was a bit disheartening, it only motivated me to persist and execute the intended look. I remember believing in these stages that failure was only temporary, for after enough practice, it would eventually turn into success.

My theory on failure was eventually proven to be true. As time progressed, I became more skilled, and the passion that I held for makeup now took a physical form onto my face. The adoration that I held for this past time was visible with each stroke of a makeup brush, never ceasing to spark excitement within my bones. Makeup served as a platform for me to feel my most confident, and to express beauty in ways that may be originally deemed as unconventional. When it came to my makeup application, simple was never the way to go. Bright colors and freckles would cascade my skin, thick feathery brows would find themselves on my forehead, and my lips would almost always resemble those of a Bratz Doll. I had truly embraced this form of art, and had found my true self along the way.

“Why do you wear so much makeup? You should be satisfied with your natural appearance,” I would hear people say.

While some of these statements may seem a bit harsh, they never truly phased me. In fact, it is ironic that a majority of the population considers makeup to be a mask, a method to hide who one truly is. That could not be further from the truth. Using makeup as a medium to express my artistic ability is what ultimately makes me confident. Makeup is my form of creative freedom and expression, a way to constantly push the boundaries of what one may consider to be beautiful.

This artistic outlet has given me the ability to see beauty in all forms, especially within myself. I have been able to break down all barriers, and express myself to the utmost degree. While makeup may only temporarily transform my face, the progression of my makeup journey has permanently influenced the way in which I approach difficult situations and carry myself as a whole. I am very glad I had the urge to pick up that box of Crayola Markers for it,
quite literally, tainted me for the better.
The Joy in Helping

The main event, known as the Festival of Trees and Lights, was always my absolute favorite one of the Down's Syndrome Organization of Southern Nevada fundraisers. Seeing the dazzling lights and ornate decorations that filled the casino ballroom always proves to me the incredible passion so many people share with me about helping the cause. The Christmas season makes the event even more memorable. Everyone is in high spirits, ready to start bidding on Christmas trees and gift baskets where the proceeds went straight to the Down’s Syndrome Organization. Many families are going way over their initial budget because the cause is just so meaningful. Families affected by Down’s Syndrome are there, able to see all the work put into making their lives easier. The festivities come to a close with an exquisite meal and some final auctions. When eating the delicious food, attendees see performances only available that night, along with hearing speeches that evoke all emotions. Some speeches are enthusiastic, while others are melancholy, but all come from people who are determined to assist others in any way they can.

People lose joy for activities that they may have otherwise loved when they are required. Anything from writing a letter to Grandpa, reading a book for English class or doing a group science project can all lose a great deal of value when somebody feels forced to do them. This phenomenon interests me because I can see where it applies in my own life. I, too, feel like I’ve lost the yearning I once had when it comes to school assignments and other tasks that have become laborious with my hectic schedule. However, the major item that stands out when pondering this is community service hours. Sometimes they are mandated as punishment for a small-scale crime. Other times they are listed as a requirement for graduation. Performing these acts of service is often seen as cumbersome and time-consuming when it should be viewed as character-building and enjoyable. Service hours are no longer serving their intended purpose: getting individuals to be thrilled about volunteering. Thankfully, I was lucky enough to develop a passion for serving my community from a very young age thanks to my grandmother.

The Down’s Syndrome Organization of Southern Nevada has shaped who I am as a person today. I will always remember being too young to actually do anything, so I played with the toys that were in the main office building while my grandmother, aunt and mother were hard at work planning events to benefit the Las Vegas community. Eventually, I grew old enough to help out, too. When that time came, I was already quite knowledgeable about the organization and stumbled across several parenting books in the building mixed in with the toys when I was left to my own devices in my younger years. Right away, I felt sympathy for parents of kids affected by Down’s Syndrome, which gave me an urge to help in whatever ways I could. I helped set up different events, which allowed me to see just how exhilarating volunteering can be when done right.

I am absolutely certain that my determination to help others came from my childhood of volunteering with my grandma. I learned how to be a part of a community and work well with others, which will assist me in not only college, but my entire future. I have directly seen the impact being kind and generous has on others. I am extremely devoted to making sure everyone is happy. I try to carry that passion with me in all that I do.
Solving the Case

Ever since I was a child, I’ve loved solving crimes. Whether reading mystery novels or watching crime-solving movies, I crave anything and everything dealing with the aspect of solving mysteries. For as long as I can remember, I have adored this genre. From Nancy Drew, to Clue; the board game AND the movie; to Sherlock Holmes, and all of Alfred Hitchcock’s films; my desire to solving puzzling crimes has blossomed. Since my first interaction with mysteries, which was the Nancy Drew books and movie, my eye has been hooked on the genre, and I always come back wanting more. From putting the pieces together, such as Colonel Mustard in the Ballroom with the candlestick; it has brought me great satisfaction to discover any clues. It may have only been a board game; but it seemed like so much more to me.

From a very early age, I have continuously dreamed of solving puzzles, and that’s what forensic science is all about. Forensic science has always captured my imagination because it is like solving a riddle; once you have all of the clues, you can put them together to bring a situation and story to life. Like a puzzle, with a crime you take the corner pieces, or the evidence found at the scene. Then you connect the pieces that are similar, just like a crime, tying the evidence to a suspect; finally, placing the last piece in the puzzle, figuring out who committed the crime and why; the motive. I love puzzles, riddles, and mind games, I relish having to use my mind to think and connect the pieces and solve the puzzle. Crimes are puzzles that need to be solved.

During the 2019-2020 school year I took an Honors Human Physiology class, and one of the units the class involved was a Crime Scene. A faux crime was committed on campus when the students least expected it, with the Honors Human Physiology class in charge of solving the crime. From visiting the crime scene, receiving motives from each of the suspects, to analyzing blood, handwriting, footprints, hair, clothing fibers, and fingerprints, I learned a lot. At the end of the unit, I wrote a whole crime scene report, and decided who committed the crime and why. This unit enhanced my passion for forensic science, and I came back to school everyday wanting to continue the evidence analyzing process. This unit in my junior year was something I will take with me forever, it was a learning experience, but it also made my passion for forensic science grow, and allowed me to realize what I wanted to do in my future.

My interest and dedication for forensic science, including the unit in school, has shown my quality of motivation, how hard-working I can be, and how driven I am as a person. Once I set my mind to something, for example the crime scene unit, I will do everything to reach that end goal and the finish line, as well as, it shows my motivation, and how hard-working of a person I am. Ever since I was little, I have always been a very diligent and determined person, always striving for my goals and fighting for what I want. In forensic science, you have to be dedicated, motivated, and hard-working which is what has always drawn me toward that field. Those qualities have assisted in my love for volunteering and helping others, and I believe that I am a very compassionate, dedicated, and driven person. From those experiences I have grown to become a better person, and have grown in all of those qualities, with a desire to grow everyday for the rest of my life. At the end of the day, forensic science isn’t only about solving a crime or a puzzle, it is about helping others and the community.
Sir Gawain Archetypes

Sir Gawain Archetypes

Archetypes are seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* numerous times, whether it be seen in characters, numbers, or even weather. An archetype doesn’t just have to be a character, but rather it can be a symbol seen continuously throughout the text. Archetypes assist in shaping the story and allowing the deeper meaning of the text to come to the surface as the reader goes through the novel. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* archetypes are primarily seen in weather, numbers, and characters, more specifically Sir Gawain himself. Through the use of these archetypes this infamous story goes along, allowing the reader to understand the deeper meaning and connect with the reader.

Sir Gawain himself is a primary archetype, his personality can be seen as *gentle*, constantly being the representation of who he is. When Gawain is first met he says “‘I am the weakest,’” (Borroff 354), this is the true first impression the reader has of Gawain and who he is as a Knight of the Round Table. Gawain is the primary protagonist and character of this specific novel, and the novel follows his journey to the Green Chapel, meaning the story follows Gawain’s character archetype. Throughout the entire story, Gawain’s inner self is as a conflict; how noble he is, if he should go through with the journey, being cowardly, and when Gawain finally encountered the Green Knight towards the end of the story his morals were put to the test. “‘Accused be a cowardly and covetous heard!’” (Borroff 2374), this is said by the Green Knight, a very *vainglorious* personality, to Gawain when Gawain flinches at the first swing of the ax from the Knight, bringing back up the archetype of “weakness” that Gawain state early on. But, Gawain also says “‘Bestow by one stroke, and I shall stand still’” (Borroff 2252), this is a text to text connection, specifically from the Bible, of when Jesus was in the Garden on Holy Thursday willingly accepting God’s fate though it may not have been what he wanted he was willing, instituting bravery. Gawain in this moment accepts fate, though he flinched, he accepted whatever may come to him, like Jesus. The archetype of Gawain and nobility, bravery, weakness, and his morals overall are a recurring theme throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The archetype of weather is seen a lot throughout the story, foreshadowing future events, or setting the mood of the entire story. The first depictions of weather seen are “‘And then the season of summer with soft winds,’” (Borroff 516), this weather setting is seen before Gawain leaves for his journey, it being summertime, a time of joy, but soft winds, which foreshadows an unknown fate that begins with Gawain is preparing to leave. Another time weather is seen as an archetype is when Gawain encounters the Green Chapel: “The wind warbled wild as it whipped from aloft,” (Borroff 2004), during this setting there are words such as shivering, cold sky, gusts, snow, etc. seen right before Gawain encounters this Green Chapel. This depicts Gawain truly unknown fate, he has taken the girdle from the Lady of the Lord, but is his life truly saved, is his fate truly known? Gawain struggles deeply with his innermost self, so this symbolically also represents what Gawain is feeling inside, petrified of what may happen to him when he sees the Green Knight once again.

The last archetype seen can be through numbers, specifically the number three. The number three is seen quite a bit throughout the story, through the three hunts, the three temptations, and the three swings of the ax. First, the three temptations that Gawain encounters from the Wife of the Lord, “‘Three times, before they part, she has kissed the stalwart knight,’” (Borroff 1888-1889), the three kisses, the three temptations of the Wife trying to make a move and tempt Gawain, testing his morals. Truly those three tests are tests of Gawain’s nobility, chivalry, and morals, would he take the offer of love from a married woman? Next are the three blows from the Green Knight and the ax, Gawain encounters the Green Knight, his fate unknown, but feeling a little sense of hope for he fed into a temptation from the Wife of the Lord, taking the green girdle that was supposed to save the wearer from death. Gawain flinched as the first two swings, being mocked by the Green Knight, being called a coward, but the third time Gawain accepted his fate, “‘How he faces him fearless’” (Borroff 2334), Gawain was willing to accept his fate, whatever was supposed to happen to him, this is the *pinnacle* of Gawain’s journey, though it may not be what he wanted, he was
willing to allow it. This goes back to the text to text connection between Gawain and Jesus, but also the number three symbolizes the Holy Trinity, the Christian references seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* all tie together to create a journey for Gawain, in a way like Jesus.

The deeper meaning lies within the archetypes seen throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* The deeper meaning is that the reader is depicted through Sir Gawain, whatever internal struggles or preconceptions of ourselves there are, we can overcome, but we must be overcome by ourselves because we are the hero of our own story. The reader can relate to Gawain and these archetypes, first through Gawain himself, no person ever has the most confidence in themselves, calling themself the weakest, but through our trials we come out brave and better. Next, through the weather, weather represents a lot in many people's lives, and how they will go about their day, for example, rain can make many men and women feel gloomier or more down because it is darker outside. Finally, the number 3, this represents the reader through the depiction of faith, or temptations, typically in society we see a lot of the number 3, in sports, in faith, or in our own personal lives the number 3 can be connected in some way, shape, or form. Archetypes help carry the story and move it along, but there is a deeper underlying meaning to them, connecting them to the reader, and bringing the true meaning and theme of the story to life.
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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

College essay

BAM! I was smacked by two linebackers and fell on the football field. Next thing I noticed is my left arm is hanging lower than my right. I push my arm up and try to shake it off and told the coach that I am good and ready to keep playing. The coach, of course, takes me out for the rest of the football game. At the end of the game, I go to the locker room and attempt to take off my shoulder pads. This is very troubling because I could not lift my arm up above my head. At last, I take off the pads and something told me to look at my shoulder in the mirror. I go check and the first thing I see is the bone popping out of my shoulder. I meet my mom outside of the locker room and she takes me to the trainer to see what he can do. Gus, the trainer, tells us that I have torn my acromioclavicular (AC) joint from my collar bone and suggested we go to the hospital. We went to the hospital and they did nothing except take an x-ray.

My parents then found a Sports Medicine Orthopedic doctor to look at the shoulder. The doctor was thorough and came back with some good news! My shoulder is fixable with two surgeries and told us that I was lucky that when I got hit that the bone did not break my neck. The bone was pushed towards my neck and spine leaving only an inch before reaching my spine. Having the surgery was clearly the best option but the twist was that we were going to be moving back to my hometown, Alexandria, in Virginia. The surgery took place on September 11, 2018, I had a screw placed in my shoulder for the ligaments to grow back around the AC joint and the Collar bone for it to stay intact. Even though I had many friends trying to help; I did not want their help and I was in a lot of pain. I could not move or lift my arm. I wanted to fight through this myself and get back to normal as soon as possible. At this point, I felt that I was struggling with all the pain, no more football for the season, and on top of everything, we were about to move back to Virginia. My father left first to find an apartment, and my mother and I stayed so that I could finish my semester at Gorman. We sold our home and we moved to a rental in Red Rock Country Club. I did what I could do to help pack, move, and set up. We stayed there for until December 2018 to finish up my Sophomore year. Then on November 12, 2018, I had another surgery to remove the screw from my shoulder. Once I finally had it removed, the pain was not as bad, but I could not move the arm or lift it yet. I went to physical therapy and tried hard to get my shoulder back to its original strength. The doctor said that he has was surprised that I healed fast and had not seen anyone get back into activities that soon.

My life continues to change, and the most difficult change is that we move clear across America to Virginia to start a new chapter in my life. When we first arrive in Virginia, we were in an apartment and even though my arm was done with surgery it still hurt when I slept or picked up something very heavy. We moved into the apartment right before Christmas. This was not bad, as the complex had a mini gym and I was able to lift weights. Like the gym rat I am, I started to go everyday and begin to regain muscle back into my left arm. I started a new school, Bishop Ireton for the second semester of my sophomore year. As for sports, My parents and I went to watch the varsity basketball team to scout out the competition, as I was walking out of the gym to get snacks and the counselor pulls me aside and introduces me to the Varsity Basketball head coach before the game. He knew that I had come from Bishop Gorman and played basketball and he asked right away if I would like to “tryout” for the JV team, this was not really a tryout it was more for the coaches to see how I play. This was good for me because I was able to meet new friends and start off the new school year. It was good to feel that I belonged and be associated with a group at the new school. However, the first day of school was scary because I did not know the layout, the teachers, the students, and the class curriculum. I knew no one. Finally, I get to the end of the first school day, and I recognize one of my best friends from elementary school before I first moved to Las Vegas in one of my classes. This gave me some hope. However, the second day rolls around and it seems more and more people from my old elementary school remember me and start telling all their friends about me. This helped me a lot and soon in a weeks’ time, most of the sophomore class at Bishop Ireton knew my name. Although things were going well, I did feel out of place and did not go out much. I found myself feeling sad and
missing Bishop Gorman’s athletics, teachers, and the friends I made in Las Vegas. This led to my sitting down and having a talk with my parents asking them if we could move back to Las Vegas. My mother was able to get approval to continue working remote and travel to Washington DC as needed. By Summer 2019, we moved back, and I was enrolled at Bishop Gorman. Last year was incredibly challenging not only from a physical perspective but emotional as well. However, due to my parents support and my faith in God, I have been able to grow and learn from these tough times and major changes.
Everyone enjoys having power. One can only imagine the position I was in. I watched for years as my brother lived a life he didn’t deserve. He had his queen. He had his crown. He had his family. Alas, he was not meant to be the one in charge. The end of his story meant the beginning of my own. So, his story had to end earlier than expected.

Things moved quickly. One day I was mourning the loss of my dear brother. Next, I was committed to his widow until death. Everything was falling into place. Except my nephew caused it all to unravel.

At first, Hamlet’s grief was understandable. This had come at an inopportune time for the young man; He was away studying at the time and didn’t get the chance to say goodbye to his father (Shakespeare 1.1). He was shocked. We all were shocked. We were all trying to deal with the sudden death of king Hamlet. But, sooner or later we all had to move on.

He dwelled on his father’s death. He was tirelessly searching for answers. I started to struggle with Hamlet after his grief turned into madness. He stated that his father was speaking to him, and I began to fear his actions due to his mental state.

He suddenly became a danger to himself and others, and he had his sights set on me. He felt as if I was replacing his father in too many ways, he felt like he needed to find revenge. Poor Hamlet didn’t know how to deal with his emotions, and I didn’t know how to deal with him. I tried to reason with him, but I failed to calm the situation.

It wasn’t until the death of Polonius that I truly understood the extent to which Hamlet was a danger to me and my wife. “A bloody deed? Almost as bad, good mother, as to kill a king and marry with his brother” (Shakespeare 3.4). The knowledge that he was capable of murder made me serious about stopping him. I knew that if I didn’t do something about it, my life would be taken next. It was up to me and Polonius’s son, Laertes to put a stop to this.

Our plan was straightforward. Hamlet’s friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, were going to lead him to England, where the problem would vanish with his head. It was not what I intended at the beginning of this chain of events, but it was necessary. We had to put a stop to it all before anyone else lost their life.

Our plan quickly hit a detrimental bump in the road. Before we were able to carry out the plan, his actions led to the death of Polonius’s daughter, Ophelia.

That has led us to where we are right now. I understand the magnitude of my actions, but I must act now or face death. My solution is simple. Laertes is going to fight Hamlet with a poisoned sword. Any cut with the sword will end him. If Laertes falls to Hamlet as well, putting that entire family in the ground, there is a backup. Hamlet will celebrate his victory with a drink, and it will be his last.

This was never my intention at the start. But, the safety and security of Denmark is more important than anything. Killing Hamlet is really the only solution to our problem. What will go wrong?
Celestial Bodies

i.

I start my homeschooling career when I am eight. It is a painless transition; one day I wake up at seven forty-five on the dot, and the next I wake up whenever I please. The house is vast and hollow, and sleep-deprived high-school tutors keep me occupied with big new ideas erected from mechanical pencil lead – chemistry, trigonometry, Shakespeare. My mom swaps out plastic trays covered in sweating cling wrap with kale and edamame shakes; I end up missing greasy school lunches more than I miss my friends. For that first year, I do not choke on warm, amniotic fluid, and being alone does not yet sting.

ii.

My sister is also homeschooled, though she starts a year before, and unlike me her reason for quitting the American public school system lies in competitive tennis. Weekends are reserved for tournaments a city or two over bursting with helicopter parents dragging ice-filled coolers half as large as their twiggy kids. I go with her to provide moral support, which in practice means sipping water bottles nervously and clutching the strings of my floppy hat in the bleachers. Fifty feet away, she is wrought brass made flesh: bent at the joints, baptized in sweat, noon sun glinting feverishly off the skeleton of her racket. Through the chessboard pattern of the wire fence, I watch her. Large sections of the summer are cordoned off so she can fly to Los Angeles and Denver and Boca Raton and train with the kinds of coaches that churn out Grand Slam winners; those times, I stay in the hotel room and stare out curtained windows with gorgeous views of the parking lot. I spend several Christmases sitting in the dark on the last step of our staircase, waiting for the tell-tale garage-door grind which would signal that my parents and sister are back from nationals in some miserable little town in Ohio, but my sister wins more than she loses so typically I get a phone call at around eleven telling me the good news: she made it to the semifinals and they're staying for another two days.

iii.

I read about the Greek primordial goddess, Gaia, from the book of myths my dad gives me for my birthday, and of how she was worshipped as the personification of the Earth. I imagine her swallowing the blanched moon whole, chalk-dust sugar staining her molars; I imagine her holding the sky between her teeth, possessed of a curved spine whose juts burst through the planet's delicate skin as great white mountains. I imagine what it is like to be expansive – whole, all-consuming, a titan built from elbows and knees and ribs, pressed up against empty space, yearning to be bigger. Yearning to be more.

iv.

At some point as I grow up, as I sprout shoulders and hips and sacrilegious language, I develop a fascination with perfection. I count the indents on my bedroom walls (two, from the times my dad threw plastic blocks across the room after failing to teach me multiplication.) I go on walks around the neighborhood and kick rocks in the Polaroid silence and spit at the plastic grass, looking for some scrap of divinity lying around that I can pocket and make mine. I write down a list of things that, in my opinion, come close to holy: unblemished hands with saintly geometries,
immaculate planes of shifting Arctic ice, tangerine street-lights saluting in a straight row down my block. That night, I arrive at the conclusion that this tideless flesh is no less malleable than bloody clay; that I can and should emulate perfection through cleanliness of the body; that I can be the magical size-shifting girl of my very own circus, taking up less space by crumpling into myself.

I begin by kneeling on the bathroom floor.

v.

This vast, hollow house is starting to feel like a gutted corpse of stucco and plaster. I run my hands across the wood of my desk and it is tangible. I run my hands across the column of my throat and I am not. Sometimes I think of how few people know me, of how thin and sparsely my web of connections is stretched, and I convince myself that if I wanted to I could fold myself into the dirt under the garden and no one would notice. I learn of Schrödinger once in physics and once again in chemistry and cannot help asking – if I am not seen outside the caving walls of this house for six goddamn years am I still as real as everyone else?

vi.

Genesis 3:23: Eve is banished from Eden when she eats the apple.

The Greek myth of Persephone and Hades: Persephone is doomed to remain Hades' bride when she swallows six pomegranate seeds.

Snow White: a beautiful girl falls into a deep, death-like slumber when she accepts food offered by an evil queen.

Can you see the pattern yet?

vii.

On one of the few times I leave the house, my dad brings me to watch a comet. We stand in the cold for hours, he and my sister and I, squinting at the darkening sky in a grassy enclosure in the middle of nowhere. At somewhere around nine-thirty, my dad excitedly presses binoculars to my face and tells me to look up, beyond two parallel stars, and focus on the tiny speck of silver. I observe the comet crawling across the atmosphere millions of miles away; a few seconds later, it disappears behind a milky wisp of cloud.

When I go to bed that night, I dream of myself as space-dust – trails of luminescent vaporized ice and orbits that go round and round for ten thousand years until the sun melts them to nothing.
It's Been A Long, Long Time

Greyson Scott
Mrs. McEachern
English 4CP
24 September 2020
It’s Been A Long, Long Time

It’s a great song. One of my favorites, it’s not just a classical slow jazz tune that makes you want to get up and box dance, it has an important meaning, and is part of one of my favorite movie scenes of all time. This song connects to my life in ways that even I didn’t expect, not directly, but more subtly, and more meaningful. It all started with a one marvelous scene.

“It’s been a long, long time” is one of the best quotes from the song to explain its underlying meaning. The song is told from the point of view of a married woman welcoming back her spouse from the treachery of war. Back in the 30’s and 40’s, men were being pulled from their families to go fight in a place they had never been and with a weapon they had never touched. This was a time when men’s lives were disposable, mere tools to take the winning side in a conflict they didn’t even understand. To return home was a miracle, and to return without major psychological damage was an even greater one. But when the men were unloaded off the ships, they realized that they had something waiting for them. They had their parents, their significant other, their siblings, someone to come home to. This reflects deeply on my life, and it moves me every time I think about it. All my life I have deemed myself lesser, worse than other people, in the sense that I was a good person. For the past few years, I have been trying to amend the damage that I did to myself. I have tried and tried to be a better person, to be able to deem myself a better person. This is where the lyric comes into the explanation: Good people, people who deserve the world because they are good to others, are the ones who see their world as the people that they love. I’ve only recently come to that conclusion, and it is so hard to be accepting of that belief. I’ve spent more time with my parents and brother, and have done more to help my community, like donating a portion of my weekly paycheck to charity, and have started a job as a courtesy clerk, helping people with finding items in the store that I work at. I have also come to the realization that the only way I experience true joy and happiness is by helping others.

As for me, I am constantly grateful for what I have, and what I have done to make an impact on other peoples’ lives. Where my life leads after college and beyond is a hope for a position in which I can benefit the people who have helped me, and others who are less fortunate. All I can hope to accomplish is what I have been put here for, and to better the world before I leave it.
“Wait, what do you mean that he took the robot apart?” In disbelief of what my team had just told me, I had to find out for myself. I stood there, teary-eyed, looking at the robot in pieces less than twenty-four hours before our big competition. This teacher was notorious for acting out horribly when he didn't get his way. He always preferred male captains, so one can only imagine his shock when the team selected me, a girl, to be a co-captain. Throughout the year, I had known this teacher was not always encouraging, but I could never imagine him taking things so far.

As a result, I organized an after-school meeting with my team to salvage what we could, and though it started getting late, the other co-captain and I stayed behind to continue repairing our robot until dawn the next day. In the end, it was constructed out of metal, screws, and mainly duct tape, but it was a perfectly imperfect masterpiece. With all the skepticism building against my team, the events of the competition would determine if our efforts the previous day would pay off.

Tension began rising within the group as the First Tech Challenge (FTC) competition began. The problematic teacher who had set us back tried to strike again. Except this time, with the support of my team, I stood firm and told him that I would not let him tamper with our robot again. Furious at our distrust, he decided to disappear on us for half the competition. We were now on our own, forced to depend on each other. I divided the team into two groups: the first to practice the presentation and the second to finish the programming for the robot to make the catapult work.

Once the presentation of our robot was over, the most significant event began: the robot games. Full of excitement and anxiety, we proceeded into the main room for the tournament. As I stared at our last-second patchwork robot, I couldn't help but think that our robot actually resembled my journey with my team. My team was like the metal foundation of the robot, showing me what can be achieved when we support one another. The screws of the robot reminded me that each person played a significant role in the team: if even one came loose, the robot would not properly work, and neither would we. The most meaningful piece, however, was the duct tape, which symbolized the effort that brought us all together in friendship. The robot, against all the odds, finished 2nd in the competition, with the judges complimenting our engineering resourcefulness and the determination of our team.

This experience made me realize that I want to make a difference by inspiring other females to join the STEM field despite the many adversities. My mother teaches students with learning disabilities and encourages them to chase their dreams, and through her example, I hope to do the same throughout my career in STEM by encouraging those who are less fortunate or marginalized to ignore the haters and the fear, and to trust that others in the STEM field will have their backs. As a student whose perspective, knowledge, and leadership were underestimated by a teacher, I know what it means to persevere and rely on my peers for support.

In the future, I want to help children without limbs challenge and overcome their adversity to discover, pursue and achieve their dreams, whatever they may be—for I know what it feels like to be doubted. It is what fuels me to work twice as hard to help shape a more inclusive world, where anyone can accomplish their goals without bias or prejudice. And if anyone tries to break any more “robots” in my life or those of my peers, you can bet I’ll be standing in the way!
I arrived home at four in the morning, reeking of gasoline fumes.

Backtrack about four hours to my friends and I, stranded on the shoulder of the freeway, completely out of gas. Fully understanding that this embarrassing experience does not exhibit the finest highlights of my driving skills, it prompted just the change of mindset I longed for.

I picked up my buzzing phone at midnight to hear the voice of my friend desperately begging for a ride home. Having the chronic inability to turn down others’ requests, I jumped out of bed and hopped in the car. My first sign of trouble: the abrasive beeping complemented by the glowing orange light outlining a gas pump on my dashboard. But while my car was running on empty, so was my wallet. I convinced myself I could make the short drive there and back with no inconveniences. Without another thought, I took off.

Oh, how I was wrong...

When four people instead of one piled into my car, getting gas became my main priority. I began to scrounge a few dollars together and hopped on the freeway, clenching the steering wheel as I nervously drove to the nearest gas station. Soon, we began to slow. With all my strength concentrated in the sole of my foot, I stomped on the gas — but we only inched forward, slower and slower as each second passed by. Then, no acceleration at all.

The trepidation in my heart began to overpower the laughter emanating from the backseat.

As a child, when I couldn’t pronounce my name, I called myself “Abi.” When someone tried to open the door for me, I would shriek “Abi do!” If someone offered to grab something for me… “Abi do!” While these immature and stubborn actions often irked my parents, they soon blossomed into an extremely independent nature. Such an independent nature that sometimes, to a fault, I am afraid or embarrassed to ask for help. My mind raced. In what way could I, with no help, transfer my stalled car off of the freeway and into the nearest gas station half a mile away? Simply put, I couldn’t. A few moments short of the water works, I once again picked up my phone — but ironically, this time I called for help.

The road back to my house that night was agonizing, nerve-wracking, difficult, and tiresome. But I soon came to realize, the true road home for me has so much more in store. I have no idea where I am meant to go, who I am meant to see, or what I am meant to do in different places. I don’t know what “home” is for me yet. However, I do know that getting there alone will be impossible. There will be many curve balls thrown my way in the future, leading me down new and exciting paths. As I have learned, with new experiences comes inexperience, and with inexperience comes a need for assistance. I have had to accept the fact that I cannot and will not ever do it all on my own. Working together remains crucial; listening to others only takes us further; and incorporating everyone’s ideas will launch us towards success, growth, and community.

On this infamous night, I overcame my fear of asking for help, but it was only the beginning. Since this unexpected enlightenment, I have faced many of my fears — my fears of inadequacy, of failure, of uncertainty. My fears of being wrong. My fears of letting people down. My fears engendered by pride and ego. Our fears hold us back from finding our true “home.” Our fears that generate doubt in seeking dream schools or professions limit our potential immensely. How can we ever expect success when we cannot overcome failure first? Our fears need to drive us into the future (pun intended) — not push us further into the past.
Lotería

Lotería

“Vamos a jugar Lotería!”

Bingo? Probably my last activity choice at 9 in the morning, the first being sleep. Apparently not to Abuelo.

Still gaining full consciousness, I unwrap the last of my gifts: a necklace dangling a cross. Marveled, I subtly mouth “Thank you” to my mom, careful not to unveil the Santa Clause ruse to my little cousins nearby.

This morning is practically the same as the 16 other December 25ths I’ve lived: holiday greetings exchanged every year in the Pasadena hills — almost too green to be real — at my abuelos’ house. Since immigrating to the states, my grandparents made sure it was a tradition left untouched to spend Christmas Eve and morning together. Even as a group of 25 split among 3 beds, 4 couches, and 2 blow-up mattresses.

Grabbing my seat at the table, the stack of lotería cards is passed to me. A pang of anxiety overwhelms me, as I wonder which card life will deal me today.

I’ve spent years hearing the cards called out, since before I could even form my own sentences. Unable to resonate with my culture through most tv shows and movies, it’s how I first connected to my heritage: seeing my life captured through a series of simple pictures in a game.

“La maceta.” The flower pot.

Got it. One down, 11 to go.

Abuela’s care is gentle and patient towards her grandkids and her garden. The card brought me back to the countless summer days I spent with her, caring after the same flowers pictured in la maceta. I felt reminded of the advice she loved to pour out in cheesy nature metaphors. ‘Listen for what the flower tells you without words, you’ll learn that some people, like flowers, can’t communicate well. Trust your intuition.’

“La bandera.” The flag.

Another quarter on the card, I’m on a roll.

Red, white, and green. Nothing made me feel more in-touch with my background than this seemingly insignificant trio of colors. The ones that make up our clothes on the days of Mexico’s soccer matches, detail the folklorico dress I wore during performances, and decorate the bracelet each family member proudly bears.

“El Borracho.” The Drunk.

It wasn’t on my playing card, but it was something I could recognize instantly.
My heart swells for my dad, yet his drinking problem is a gripping reminder of the alcoholic culture existing hand in hand with the male machismo attitude. One that I can’t help but to look down upon, like many other parts to my upbringing.

Looking down at the cross on my neck, it is simultaneously an essential part of my identity and an ethical battle. While prayer and worship fulfill my heart, I’m reluctant to agree with many of the Church teachings my culture enforces.

Looking at my grandma, tucked away in the kitchen stirring three pots at a time, while my aunts stuff excess wrapping paper into garbage bags, I notice the men in my family comfortably enjoying their lazy morning playing bingo.

Within the same four walls, I could pick out what made me feel proud about how I grew up and I could also separate what didn’t. That Christmas morning, I was reminded of what framed my upbringing, both the good and the bad.

Constantly tugged at by the progressive, liberal views of my western American culture and the traditional, conservative views of my Hispanic one, my cultural identity had to be shaped by what I consider to be meaningful. There comes a time when we’re no longer children mindlessly believing everything we’re told. When we can no longer be dependent on others’ ideas, but instead must learn to stand up and ask questions for ourselves—just as I did. I realized that it was okay to reject aspects of my cultures that didn’t align with my personal values, in no way lessening my appreciation for them.

Only carrying forward the parts of my background that I believe belong in the future representation of its people, I can look ahead to generations that, like I, seek to break apart what makes an individual. Whether through the biological relation between brain processes and cognitive behaviors, or their humanity and lifestyle risked at the hand of a flawed deportation system.

I define myself with an And, not an Or.

Ten years from now, I know exactly where I will be, at least on Christmas. I will be in Pasadena — praying, celebrating and loving my family. Maybe I will arrive at the party as Dr., a neuropsychology researcher. Or maybe esq., a lawyer representing underprivileged immigrants. Ten years from now, I will grab the loteria cards: it’s my turn to deal.
Reflections; A Distant Echo

The path of most professions, have a set path toward success. The road of an artist, however, is more blurred with twists and turns, making it especially difficult for artists to find their way. Despite the risks, I’ve always been one to go off the beaten path in pursuit of my passions.

Like most adolescents and just starting elementary school, I didn’t quite know what I wanted to do with my life yet. I was carefree and unaware of what hobbies to focus on. I knew there’d be something that would catch my interest, but knowing where to start wasn’t my forte. All I knew then was how to do my school work and how to demonstrate respectful behavior. I also had playmates, and my grades were average, just as how any normal student should be. It wasn’t until middle school that I opened my eyes to a calling towards art.

My parents always encouraged me to share my artistic talent with the world, as I would doodle over my assignments often. At the time I took many things into consideration out of the fear of judgement. I feared that I was going to be made fun of for having such a basic art style adopted from many young teen artists I knew and liked, but I finally convinced myself to start sharing my art. I didn’t receive much public validation at first, but my family and friends were there to support me. And, as time went on, I learned techniques that’d improve my style. Unfortunately, one day, this progression of craft encountered a slump.

The problem at hand was who’s progress I was focusing on; I started paying more attention to the gradual increase of popularity in other’s works rather than mine, and started comparing myself unfairly. Artists who have a more minimalist style end up with a plethora of fans, while I put hours into a piece for an almost non-existent public audience. I felt utterly hopeless, and thought that my work could never garner enough attention to make a full-time career out of it. Sure, I had my family, but I couldn’t help but feel a bias in their compliments. The fact that I wasn’t alone was my saving grace that got me out of my own head.

I recognize now that thousands and thousands of artists, no matter their media, churn out amazing pieces only to receive minimal, if any amounts of publicity. But, when the little guys come together and support each other, the audience can start to expand and grow as it reaches out to different fans. More importantly, I learned that being an artist means to realize that art is subjective. Not everyone will be pleased with my art, and that’s okay. If I force a change for the audience alone, then my art won’t feel authentic to do anymore, which is a core factor of the very creation of it.

Therefore, I’d like to make a final statement that even though I may not have the grandest techniques and skill or a major fanbase to have my back, I know that those aren’t required to be a “great” artist. Putting heart and soul onto the canvas is the essence of what art is. Art releases emotions that can’t be quantified into words, and gives the audience a glimpse into those emotions one can only feel. And, in times of loneliness when the audience has left, the humble artists that create for the love of creation can stand together and help one another understand the emotions held within the reflections of themselves.
The Color of Song

The Color of Song

Color and music have always been deeply connected in my mind. For the longest time, I thought it was normal for people to know the deep purple sound of a piano, or the gorgeous, golden summer tones of a saxophone. I wish sometimes that I could paint the color of Jazz, or the soft peach tones of my best friend’s laugh. However, as much as I held music so near and dear to my heart, it was always a passing observation. I wasn’t built to be a musician.

I’ve always been self-conscious about my hands. I didn’t like the way they were too small, too thin, too awkward to do much more than tie my shoelaces. I didn’t like the way the knuckles on my ring and pinkie finger looked concave when I flattened my palm. On top of that, I couldn’t stand my voice; it was too high and breathy for my liking; my sentences came out choppy and never the proper volume or inflection.

These thoughts paralyzed me throughout my early life. I was terrified of failure, so I never tried. I kept myself trapped in that box for the longest time, and all of it came to a climax when I picked up a guitar for the first time at fourteen. It was at summer camp, and my friend Cameron had a beautiful steel-string that sounded like pine and thistle; so, being urged by counselors to always try new things, I asked if I could borrow it for a bit. What happened as I settled it in my lap was incredible. Shivers ran down my neck as they showed me how to pluck my first few chords, and I began to feel the same way I imagine Joan of Ark must have felt the first time she wielded a sword and charged into battle, gleeful with righteous zeal. My fingers seemed to know by themselves exactly where to go after a bit of practice. A whole new palette opened up in front of me, a magnum opus more beautiful than any Monet or Degas.

“You’ll never get anywhere with music.” My uncle said, smirking “nothing is worth doing if it’s not for profit.” Though I refused to believe he was anything less than well-intentioned, I can’t say I took his word; my baby cousin’s smile was priceless. She lit up to Hey, Jude, and I was far too happy to care about profit. I even loved the way my hands looked when I picked out a melody.

A few years and a few more instruments under my belt, I had somehow landed a gig at a small art gallery at a local festival, and it soon became a habit. So, for the first Friday of every month, I would pack up a couple of my instruments, don the flower crown and golden eyeshadow I wore like armor, and played and sang my heart out until my lungs were sore. I felt at home. Music taught me more than how to entertain a crowd; it taught me how to make my greatest flaw my most treasured skill. It had become my warm nest, my escape from the storm. Fine Arts remained a way to escape even after I became too busy to play at the gallery, even after I stopped practicing as much as I used to, even when I moved from music to sculpting beautiful pieces out of clay.

Though I’ve grown more aware of my responsibilities, there are many nights when I pick up my guitar or sit down at the piano and play like I used to. Usually, it’s when I’m settling down from a bad day, or when my nightmares get the best of me, as they often do, but I don’t mind the extra hour or two it takes to keep my heart from racing. My thoughts have never been more quiet than when I play. There’s nothing I love more than the color of song.
My Future And Why It Took So Long To See It

If you were to ask a teenager what their most dreaded question to be asked is, I think it's more than likely that they would answer with "where do you see yourself in the future." At least, that was my most dreaded question, and I like to think that I wasn't alone in that sentiment. I'll be the first to admit that throughout my high school career I had absolutely no clue where I would end up in my adulthood. From cringing at the idea of facing my college counselor, to desperately attempting to cling onto any interests that may lead to passion, my uncertainty about the future caused me a decent amount of stress on a regular basis. However, the past year has brought me nothing but clarity, even if the circumstances that lead to said clarity were less than desirable.

I'll start off by describing the factors that kept me from being able to clearly see a future for myself. Firstly, I'm a woman. To clarify, I have never felt less capable, less intelligent, or less ambitious because of my gender, however the experience of being a woman can affect people very differently. For me, being a woman meant I would always need to prove myself in order to be regarded as equally skilled to my male counterparts in whatever field I chose to go into. For this reason, I felt immense hesitation towards pursuing what I now know is my passion: computer science. As male-dominated as the field is, I think it would be unfair to blame me for being intimidated by the idea of always having to over-perform in order to prove myself. I’m glad that this fear didn't drive me away completely, however, because I’ve loved every computer science and programming class I’ve taken thus far.

This wasn't the only obstacle I faced, however. When I entered my freshman year of high school, I started dating a boy from my old middle school. Now, there was nothing wrong with him, but my biggest issue was that I became far too dependent on him. Being thrust into a school, I tended to cling to my then-boyfriend and, eventually, he ended up being the only close friend I had. I’m not an extrovert, so this wasn’t a huge setback for me, but pretty soon I began forming my life around him. I was practically attached at the hip, and even wanted to follow him to college. That, however, is exactly when I took a step back and really questioned if that was something I wanted. He was going to the east coast for school; was I really going to abandon everything I know to stay with my high school boyfriend? Needless to say, I decided things needed to change and that I needed to become my own person again.

The recent covid-19 pandemic is what finally set things into motion for me. Time spent away from my boyfriend allowed me to realize that I enjoyed being independent and pursuing things that I was truly passionate about. One of those things was of course, computer science, but I also discovered a passion for politics. The pandemic and the way it was handled here in the U.S. and specifically in my city Las Vegas practically gave me no choice but to pay attention and to stand up for what I believe is right and what needs to be done to keep people safe. On top of that, the Black Lives Matter movement was the fire under my wings that truly made me understand my desire to be politically literate. My journey towards self-discovery is very personal to me, however I know that I’m not the only one who has struggled with not knowing where my life is going. I feel that now I have a much clearer understanding of who I am and who I want to be.
Matthew Thomas
Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Bishop Gorman High School, Las Vegas, NV
Educator: Caprice Houston-Bey

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Kings Garden

I have always been good at solving problems. When I was a boy of seven in Denmark, I wanted my own fencing sword for Christmas. I did not unwrap a sword but instead, I received a book on Great Danes. I do not mean the large hounds but a book on famous Danish philosophers of the late 1500s. My older brother Hamlet, the crowned prince, received the sword.

My childhood continued in this pattern of disappointment and playing second fiddle. A lesser royal would have let these circumstances get the better of him and wither away into obscurity. Not me. I persevered and mastered the art of prognosticating. I understood the reality and limitations of being second born and I was resolved to create a future for myself that I knew I deserved.

I studied hard and received good marks from my teachers. I knew that success occurs when preparation meets opportunity. I saved my money and bought myself that sword and taught myself to fence by shadowing my brother during his lessons. I read volumes and volumes of books on elixirs and led my class in alchemy. In my heart, I knew I was destined for greatness and when they day came, I would be ready.

I am not a Royal that sees the world in black and white. In fact, gray is my favorite color because it is the color of smoke and it suits my existence of smoke and mirrors perfectly. The Holy Book tells us to love thy brother and not to covet thy brother’s wife. To most, these would seem like insurmountable ethical dilemmas. But the same fortitude that has made me excel in my studies, propels me to see that my actions, although appearing grim to some, are just and good because I fulfilled the greater purpose for our beloved Denmark by taking my seat on the throne. Some would say that my ascension was unjust but a good student of life knows that there are no accidents and things turn out as they are prophesied to be.

A greater obstacle existed for me. One that my studies left me ill prepared to resolve. Obstacles only become impediments if you let them. My challenge was the unrequited love of my beloved Gertrude. Challenges exist to awaken our potential and I was up to the task. The same skill set of patience and perseverance that make me a great leader are the tools in my box to help me prevail. After all, a queen’s duty is to love her king and my Gertrude was also an excellent student of her duties.

The great 1st century Roman philosopher Seneca said, “Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power.” Power is the aphrodisiac of great men and can facilitate the rose of love to bloom. I took the steps necessary to till the soil of my love and tend to my garden. I was rewarded with a perfect rose; the symbol of love and affection. A royal playwright recently penned “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” That phrase has stuck with me and it would any royal gardener. My sweet rose Gertrude. Like a garden crawling with aphids, my rose did indeed have a thorn. The thorn has a name. That name is Hamlet, my nephew and stepson.

Even Kings must continue to educate themselves to stay relevant and modern. My talents and expertise that has brought me wealth and power will most certainly benefit the great University of Copenhagen. I beseech your grace and request admittance to your fine school to elevate my education and devote my attention to acquire knowledge on the subject of child psychology to improve relations with my stepson Hamlet.
I’ll never forget you

Every morning after a sleepover at nonna and papa’s, my twin sister and I would wake up the sounds and smells of my grandma making her famous zucchini and eggs. She always had a routine of what appliances and steps she would use. I’d always ask if I could help cut the zucchini because I wanted to be just as good as her. She would take out several small bowls and cutting boards to crack the eggs, cut the zucchini, and peel apart the onions. At first, I had to take a liking to the advanced taste of zucchini and eggs mixed together into one delicious breakfast dish. Soon after, I began to indulge in the scrumptious taste. It was always a hit meal for my family. My grandma passed down this meal to me from which she learned from her parents. I can taste and see why. The several smells that went into making the zucchini and eggs floated and spread throughout my grandparents house. However, these smells soon floated far away from the house, and Alzhimers slowly floated in.

Alzheimer’s brought a whole new meaning to those zucchini and eggs. As my twin and I grew older, we tended not to sleepover as often. Early teenage years and puberty meant that we needed more time and space for ourselves. While our memories were growing, my grandmas were fading. The smell of zucchini and eggs never reached from wall to wall at my grandparents anymore. My grandma is aware that something is not quite right with her, she just doesn’t know what. She’ll ask me questions like, “Who’s your mother?” or “Where do you live?” Her painted canvas was slowly fading.

One morning I noticed my mom bought fresh zucchini from the local store. The memory of mornings at nonna and papa’s house came rushing in my mind. I remembered all the steps and appliances my grandma once used. Without hesitation, I started cooking. The smell of zucchini and eggs filled my home. I couldn’t help but think of my grandma. I asked her if she would want to come over and have some delightful zucchini and eggs. When she stepped into the kitchen, she recognized the smell and the meal. It was as if for a moment, nothing changed. The light and excitement that came upon her face made me happy.

As my grandma’s disease is still progressing, still am I. I’m progressing in trying to become a better caregiver along with my family. I would dream of giving her memory back, something nobody should lose. However, I know all her memories are engraved within her heart. You can see it in her smile.

All of her love was made into that dish. Now it’s my turn to return it. I know she’ll always remember me, even when she doesn't know who I am.

All for our world, All for our country, All for our lives. I’m now in a place where she wants to come over for zucchini and eggs occasionally.

I will leave my mark
Ryan Wagner
Age: 17, Grade: 12
School Name: Bishop Gorman High School, Las Vegas, NV
Educator: Christi Thomas-McEachern
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Optimism

My varsity lacrosse season had just begun. Our team had finished its first game and we were preparing for a travel tournament of which we had a good chance at winning. Spirits were high, until the day before our trip. While gearing up for practice that afternoon, the athletic director suddenly appeared and told us to leave campus immediately. All sports were shut down because of Covid-19 and our tournament was canceled. My entire team was practically in tears and I was devastated, as our season had hardly started. We all packed our things and went home for the weekend, worried about so many unknowns.

The school began sending out emails canceling school for the following week. Then a few days later we were transferred online for the remainder of the year. Months of training and preparation for the lacrosse season would be for nothing and to top it off we would all be trapped inside our homes. Most of my friends’ morales diminished as a result of shutdowns of school, sports, and other Covid impacted activities. I decided to be an optimist and use this tragic event to grow myself personally and prepare for my future.

As an Eagle Scout, my approach to life has always been to stay optimistic. When things don’t go as planned for me I turn them around. During quarantine I began to have a lot more free time in my schedule. While some of my friends sat around playing video games, I decided I was going to get outside and explore. I began going on daily hikes with my family, liberating myself from the grasp of modern society. I decided to challenge myself even further by climbing to the summit of a local mountain, even crawling on my hands and knees to the top. This accomplishment gave me a whole new sense of reality, opening my eyes to the world around me. I began to eat healthier and workout on a regular basis, bettering my physical self. These were the first steps of my journey towards personal growth.

After virtual school ended and with my family’s summer plans canceled, I decided my next priority would be to keep myself busy. I reapplied for a job I held previously at a golf course. I had worked in the player services department, which is one of the most desirable jobs on a golf course. Due to my commitments to the school lacrosse team, I resigned this position prior to the start of spring season. When I went to reapply, all of the player service positions were full. However, I was offered an opportunity within the maintenance department and I accepted. I worked six days a week all summer long in the intense Nevada heat, beginning each day at four-thirty in the morning. I developed a new sense of personal responsibility. Very quickly my manager recognized me as a passionate hard worker among my peers. He decided to take me under his wing and mentor me. I worked alongside him each day, learning everything from irrigation to the basics of motorized mechanics. I appreciated each moment as I knew these skills were preparing me for the future.

I pride myself on being a forward thinker. I try to take the challenges thrown at me and find a way to not only solve them, but also keep them as positive experiences. Covid-19 has tested many aspects of my life in ways that I could never imagine. I am proud that I was able to successfully turn these struggles into the most productive, educational, and enjoyable opportunities of my life. We were put on this earth for a reason, and for me that reason is to solve tomorrow’s problems today. I continue to research ways to improve myself and attending college in 2021 is the next mountain I look forward to climbing.
Up and Down

Life is unpredictable. That’s probably why I love sad movies so much. Usually, in an action, romance, or comedy movie, we generally know the ending will be happy. They wouldn’t be able to sell tickets otherwise, right? Sad movies, however, leave the audience guessing, wondering if the worst could happen (and often it does). They reflect reality. And as a musical person, I pay special attention to the way the movie’s score follows the plotline, sweeping from low G’s to high F’s, adagio to allegro, with each dramatic twist. Always changing. Always moving. Like my life.

One very low G occurred in elementary school, when my grandmother passed away, and then went even lower when my dad was diagnosed with cancer soon after. It was a pretty challenging time for my family and me, and I believe a lot of the inspiration for the melodies that randomly appear in my head or the lyrics when I write my songs stem from this dark period in my life, a melancholy mood in my soul that lingers to this day.

Life can also swing up, however. Really up. When I was thirteen, a talent scout from America’s Got Talent caught one of my YouTube videos and reached out to my mom for an audition. It was a chance for national exposure. I remember preparing at the Pasadena Convention Center, a little excited but annoyed that all the interview questions weren’t about my music but attempts to find some drama in my life to turn into a story. I remember waiting backstage for my turn, when the contestant before me, a cool clown act, sadly received the dreaded buzzer. Then a man at the front asked me to “act” really sad if I got the buzzer myself. And finally, on stage, after I performed “Dream a Little Dream” on the piano to a clapping audience, Simon, yes that Simon, after minutes of dead silence from the entire panel of judges, asked me why I picked jazz. It all ended with Howie nicely commenting that my performance seemed “staged.” I was thirteen. It was a pretty devastating moment. Somehow, I made it to the next round (3 out of 4 Yes’s; Howie, the lone No. Not bad.) but turned down an invitation for another audition. As much as I appreciated the chance at “reality tv” exposure, I prefer to become a musician in my own way, at my own pace, organically, anyway.

Since then, I’ve focused on my school and pumping out my own music on social media and Spotify. I also worked a paid gig, at least until Covid hit, singing and playing the piano or guitar—some jazz, coffee house indie, old rock—in a two-hour set at a country club restaurant. Pop music may be more attractive, but I will always prefer the slower, moody pace and tone of jazz. I think I have a little too much of my late grandmother, who would play Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York” frequently when I was very little, in me.

It’s like a sad movie, isn’t it? I don’t become a star, and my family still has its issues. But I’m still young and motivated, and I plan to continue writing and singing my songs as I find my purpose in life, even if it’s just for myself. My dad’s cancer is minor, it looks so far (fingers crossed), though that could change at any moment. So, yes, like those sad movies I love so much, life is unpredictable. But I did learn one thing, one silver lining to all this chaos: that the best way to deal with the uncertainty or unpredictability is to be authentic to myself. At least then, I can be certain that something in my life will be grounded in reality.
College Essay

“You two are going to be Co-Presidents!” Hearing these words were the conclusion to my experience with the “Shine-A-Light Club” junior year of high school. The club provides materials for people living in the tunnels below the city. I was astonished to learn there is a completely unknown society in the tunnels of the city, and I could make a major difference to improve it as a little help can go a very long way. When I first joined the club, I was skeptical of how simply making care packages for the homeless could alter the course of someone’s life. I was initially assigned to cover the club for the student news, but the mission to help others quickly called me to join. In my first meeting, I was confused and didn’t know how to pack bags. I was also nervous because I had never been in a club that dedicates itself to others. As I packed, I realized each of the materials could be symbolic for aspects of my life. First, we shove the socks to the bottom of the bottle and this forms a solid base for everything. This symbolizes my family, as they are my base on which everything is built on. Socks are durable by protecting my feet and provide a barrier from your feet and outside, like my family protecting me in adolescence. My family is durable because their love is unconditional, showing me I have an unwavering support system.

Next, we placed soap on the socks. This reminded me of God because God cleans and nourishes my faith. Additionally, it was located near the bottom and it made me think about how God is another building block in my life. While packing, the bottle plummeted and the contents fell out. This prompted me to think of setbacks we encounter during life. I’ve learned that the reaction to setbacks is more important than the setback itself. I restarted the process of packing and ended up packing batteries. Batteries are essential for the homeless as it powers their generators, which keeps their lights on while in the pitch black tunnels. The batteries reminded me of friends. Both provide a boost in energy and their value isn’t truly realized until they’re gone. I quickly realized the value of everyone working together and how much quicker the process of packing bags went when we worked as one cohesive unit. This interaction reminded me of how important human interaction, teamwork, and communication are and set the standard for what qualities I want in a learning experience.

The bottle reminded me of myself because I try to incorporate each aspect into my own life. Gradually the process of making bottles got easier, reminding me that life may start out difficult and bizarre at first, but as we progress through it, we get stronger through hard work. Gradually, I came to realize how truly blessed and lucky I am to have the resources and relationships that I do in my life. If making these bottles has correlated any message, it’s that small acts of kindness can amount to a major impact in your community.
A Local Favorite

A sizable smile arose on my face as I admired the delicious creation we had just made. As I took the first bite of the delectable treat, it was salty, yet sweet, crispy, yet soft. I remember as my hand wrapped around the delicacy for the first time, feeling the crackly seaweed outside. As my teeth sunk into it, they hit the steamy rice, then the most influential ingredient of the mix, spam. All fusing together to create a spam musubi. What is that? Well, to put it broadly, it is a food of layers that each speak their own story and showcase their own taste in life, while also carrying a deep message within myself.

For as long as I can remember, I have been eating and making this beloved Hawaiian dish with my family, who are actually from Hawaii. It has come upon me how such a simple snack could represent much more, in fact represent an outlook on life, my life. When assembling, we start with the seaweed, or as it is popularly called, nori. It is the beginning of something new. Maybe this could be when I had my very first day of school, or played my first game of soccer. Perhaps the start of a friendship or even a simple “hello”. Next, we move into the following layer, the rice. Rice, to me, portrays a soft, comforting image that translates to life as the comfort zone. In my life, I have always grown up being the one who was shy and too afraid to do anything unique or bold. I liked being comfortable and some considered me a creature of habit.

That’s when the tasty piece of courage, or in this case, the spam, is placed. Now I am well aware of the unattractiveness that spam brings to many that are unfamiliar, but this is exactly the kind of message it holds. This layer is all about breaking the comfort zone, trying something new. This could be when I moved to a whole new team, knowing no one, or similarly, moving to my current high school where I only knew a select few and would be surrounded by a whole new population. This section teaches to grow as a person and try new things, and most people end up loving it, just like spam.

Finally comes the topper, the same piece of seaweed that comes and wraps around to the top to seal it all together. What I see here is the bridge to tie it all together. Maybe a reward to make the time worth it or a goal set in mind. A graduation or a first paycheck may be what most people are imagining right now. In reality, most of us have not reached this layer yet and it’s something we look for later in life. It is something full of mystery and excitement as life should be. All together, we have assembled the local favorite of Hawaii, but the message doesn’t conclude there. Each one is not like the other. There are endless ways to customize and make one perfect for a specific person’s liking, whether it is substituting for different meats, adding some soy sauce, topping with furikake (Japanese seasoning), or maybe all three. Each person in the world is different and I learned to not base my life off of others, and really just start to live the life I want to live.

Everyone’s life is full of their own unique challenges and I learned to take mine step by step, or maybe layer by layer in this case. This simple food, close to the culture I grew up with, showcases so much about what I stand for in life. From a young age I stuck by these messages and when life got hard, I just took a bite out of it.
What is the one guilty pleasure that brings you the utmost of comfort and complete bliss? Imagine finding that sheer joy and fullness from just listening to a single echoing note. A single echoing note with the ability to drive shivers and chills down your spine. With this relationship that I’ve created with music, I’ve been able to discover myself as an individual and become confident in the young adult I’ve grown to be today. I started my musical journey when I first picked up the violin in the second grade. Since then, I’ve expanded into singing and playing the guitar. My passion for music has taught me important lessons that have helped to form and grow into the person that I am now.

With every sung note like a nightingale, singing has taught me confidence. Growing up I was very shy. Even to the point where I would cry when I would have to speak to a stranger. This fear and anxiety eventually led to distancing myself, becoming very close-minded, and often spending a lot of time alone. I first took a leap of faith with my shyness when I joined the church choir in middle school. I first started off singing in the back of the choir where I was most comfortable, and I eventually slowly worked my way to solos. Who knew that the quietest girl would end up singing solos in front of hundreds of people. I was able to grow in confidence through the people I became friends with that supported me in the music community and through slowly challenging myself to achieve as much as possible. I learned confidence and how to always strive for more.

With every strum and vibration of the strings, the guitar taught me peace. Since I was quiet and shy, I suffered from a lot of anxiety. My nervousness consumed me and obstructed me from enjoying life. Thankfully, once I learned the guitar I was able to find the peace that I needed. Guitar became a very easy instrument for me to pick up and learning the classical songs became very calming for me. Learning guitar gave me something to enjoy that was easy and non-stressful. Since the start of my guitar journey and finding my peace, I’ve learned how to take everything one step at a time. I’m very much a “taking things as they come” type of person now and is able to handle problems calmly. The guitar showed me how much better peace and a calmer outlook on life would be more beneficial in the long run.

With every bow and sway, the violin taught me cooperation. With the violin being my very first “musical love”, it has taught me many lessons; but cooperation has been the most significant. I’ve always been cooperative with others, but being in an orchestra teaches a new level of working with others. When working with large orchestras there is a certain synergy and team-work that is necessary in order to play together as one. This type of unity was very difficult to get used to, and was nowhere near to anything I had experienced. Although synchronization with a full orchestra is extremely difficult, when it is perfected it is the most rewarding feeling in the world. From my experiences in orchestras and learning cooperation, I’ve come to enjoy working with others. Through helping others and others helping myself I have learned that harmony between people is achievable. This is a feeling and outlook that I constantly reach to achieve.

Through music I’ve been able to learn important life skills and shape myself into the young adult that I am today. Amongst many other skills, I’ve learned how to be confident, determined, peaceful, cooperative. Music has played a large role in bettering my life and myself as a person.
True Power

I had never used a power washer before. “Why do I have to do this” and “Dad, can I go back to sleep” are questions that I wanted to ask, but I refrained from doing so. I didn’t even know how to use a power washer. All of the silly jargon seemed intriguing, yet pathetic for a hyped up hose. I read about the Pneumatic wheels underneath a Megashot siphon tube filter that leads to a 3200 PSI hose and my complex observation was that: “This would be awesome in a water gun fight!”.

However, I got back to work and jetted the garage floor aimlessly in hope that some Lincoln or Washington coins would arise. They didn’t. Foolishly, I used the wrong hose tip, sprayed 2 year old leaves up on the white walls, and even managed to spray myself. Many mistakes were made. I was about to quit, then, my dad, who left Taiwan at the age of 13, said to me, “Kid, if you’re going to do something, do it the right way”. I think he noticed that my power washing skills were quite substandard. Very substandard to be honest. Nevertheless, his advice had an impact that was worth a lot more than some silly little pennies; pennies that would add no purpose or long-term happiness to my life.

I strived for true power. I used to think that power was the ability to read a history book without falling asleep. To a certain extent, it’s true. However, with deeper consideration, I decided that if I wanted to live a life with purpose, value, and selflessness, I needed to wash out my past. This was an implausible task for a meager hose. My dopamine stained brain craved unquenchable feelings of attention and belonging. I was a 5’2” sophomore! It is extremely hard to fit in when you have peers towering over you. The thrive for attention eventually started to fade away once I realized the demonizing effects of social media. Every like, follow, and comment was drawing myself and peers into an endless hole of dopamine. I conquered it. I became more productive and started to walk down a path of confidence and freedom. Freedom and confidence leads to happiness. Happiness leads to purpose. Purpose leads to power.

Why do I enjoy power washing? It’s lame and pathetic. Yes, power washing may seem pathetic, but I think of it as an art form. With every spray of the 3200 psi hose, I have the ability to transform a generic, nasty garage into a personalized masterpiece. Every movement must be meticulous or else you end up with soaked clothes and a frown. You’ll look like someone that just lost their phone on the Splash Mountain ride at Disneyland. Nobody wants to be sad; especially at Disneyland! This is why every stroke of the brush, every pull of the lever, every movement made must be choreographed and tackled with as much precision as a surgeon in the “OR”.

Like switching the nozzle from turbo to a 75 degree angle, I am able to adapt to all circumstances whether there is a persistent stain, or a flock of birds that decided to do their business in front of our house. No matter what the circumstance is, my Pneumatic wheels and a 3200 PSI hose will overcome and prevail. It has taught me to do everything the right way, create opportunity, and use creativity. Throughout the past couple years of my life, I have cleaned out the garage and the negativity; the bird defecate and the stress; the fences and the passiveness. I have harbored true power.
Deadly Force

Domestic violence is a pervasive issue within the United States. According to the CDC, around one in three women and one in three men over the age of 18 experience domestic violence each year; annually, it causes more than 1500 deaths. Domestic violence is a case-by-case matter, and difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate. However, change is possible, if not before the occurrence of domestic violence, then after it.

Deadly force in self-defense in cases of domestic violence is considered an intricate and complicated legal and moral topic. Many argue in opposition of the use of deadly force, but I would disagree. In fact, as President Ronald Reagan once said, “Self-defense is not only our right, it is our duty.” Should this not be applicable to all matters?

I argue that deadly force in self-defense in instances of domestic violence is both permissible, by law, and morally upright. The Center for Family Justice defines domestic violence as a type of repeated life-threatening crime in all communities, affecting all people. Not only is domestic violence a detriment to its victims, often sending them to clinics or hospitals due to severe physical injury, it is also a threat to society, costing over $8 billion in a year. In a legal sense, I argue for justice - the principle that people receive what they deserve. In a moral sense, I argue for giving each his due, a crucial part in upholding justice. As a society, we value these concepts and therefore should agree that victims of domestic violence deserve the right to retaliation, especially when their domestic abusers repeatedly carry out fatal violence towards them.

Our country's laws have already begun to reflect the growing consideration for the destructive circumstances domestic abuse victims endure. Jaffe of Nova Southeastern University School of Law agrees that “There is generally no dispute that deadly force may be used in self-defense to protect oneself from death or serious bodily injury.” Scientific support has provided further backing for this standpoint. Findings have shown that domestic violence causes the development of a psychological disorder known as Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS) which results in psychological paralysis and learned helplessness often preventing victims of domestic abuse from leaving. Courts across the country acknowledge the legitimacy of this condition. Cookson from the University of Vermont Law School states, “Every state in the country allows for the admissibility of expert testimony on battered woman syndrome and evidence on battering to varying degrees. Other states provide explicit self-defense jury instructions to supplement the use of BWS or general battering evidence.” Moreover, Wright of Santa Clara University explains that courts are receptive to and educated about the effects of BWS on victims of domestic violence and their choices and thought processes.

As a result of expert testimony and meticulous scientific study, BWS has become an important consideration when dealing with domestic violence cases. In fact, it has even successfully expanded the scope of self-defense by victims permitted by courts, as explained by Leivick of Georgetown University Law School, who observes that laws in 27 states have “provided a person with the statutory right to stand one's ground and use deadly force outside the home - to meet force with force - in any public place where the person has a right to be (as well as in one's automobile), as long as the individual ‘reasonably believes [deadly force] is necessary […] to prevent death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony.’”

While many might question the legality of deadly force, which sounds very similar to murder, we must understand that these are two separate terms for good reason. We must make the effort to empathize with domestic abuse victims. We must learn to understand that those who face deadly violence on a daily basis are vastly different from those who kill of their own volition. To reevaluate our standpoint on this issue, we must recognize and acknowledge
the conditions abuse victims survive in every single day.

The truth is that victims are trapped in their situations, unable to escape from the endless loop of devastation that wreaks havoc upon their home life. The circumstances surrounding their lives make it difficult to extricate themselves from abusive relationships, as described by Wright, where victims are often trapped by poverty or by abusers who limit their interactions with family or friends who could provide help. Krause from the University of Houston sheds light on the severity of their situation by describing how “the woman's attempt to break free from the relationship often spurs the abuser to escalate the level of violence, sometimes fatally -- a documented phenomenon known as ‘separation assault.’” In the end, victims are often unable to leave, either for fear of their own lives or because of the inability to, and must resort to self-defense.

In almost all cases, self-defense of abuse victims against their abusers is a last resort born out of desperation and the inability to leave or even contact help. Ramsey of the University of Colorado supports this information with the fact that victims “usually commit intimate-partner homicides ‘after years of suffering physical violence, after they have exhausted all available sources of assistance, when they feel trapped, and because they fear for their own lives.’” The key is the phrase, “self-defense”. Victims are far from killers. Goodmark from the University of Baltimore further clears the distinction between abuse victims who use deadly force in self-defense and murderers by clarifying, “‘Women charged in the death of a mate have the least extensive criminal records of any female offenders.’ Most have endured repeated, severe abuse over a period of years. At some point, the violence against them escalated to a level where the battered woman believed that if she did not kill her abuser, she would be killed. Lenore Walker explains, ‘Battered women who kill their abusers do so as a last resort.’”

From this deeper understanding into the lives of domestic abuse victims, we can build new moral ideals. First and foremost, we must establish that victims have less culpability than murderers. Ramsay explains that “the culpability of a defendant who sincerely thought she faced a threat of inevitable death or serious harm from the man she shot cannot be equated with the culpability of "one who intentionally murders another without such a belief [...]. There is or [...] there ought to be, a difference in punishment between these two types of people." In a sense, invoking the punishment of a murderer on a domestic abuse victim morally equates them to a double victim. This thought process is furthered by Colvin of Bond University in Australia when he reasons, “When all of the circumstances, including the suffering experienced in the abusive relationship, are taken into account, a conviction of a serious offense might be unjust because it is a disproportionate response to any wrong the battered victim committed.”

Meszaros from the University of Pennsylvania echoes this sentiment when he explains, “Frequently, when a battered woman is convicted of a crime connected to her history of abuse, she becomes a double victim. She is first a victim in the obvious sense of having been battered by her partner. Less obviously, she is a victim of a legal system that struggles to clarify how her abuse history is relevant to her legal defense - thus, the consequences of the battering fail to inform the jury's consideration of her culpability, and she is convicted.” As a result, issuing the same punishment to a domestic abuse victim as a murderer is morally inexcusable and classifies the suffering of these victims as insignificant.

What this tells us is that we must look at domestic violence on a case-by-case basis and that we cannot afford to make hasty generalizations. When the circumstances indicate as such, deadly force used in defense against domestic violence is both legally and morally permissible. What this means is that we have the chance to instigate change. We must work to empower victims whose voices are muted or silenced. We must work to change the ending of this social tragedy. Together, we must fight the plague of domestic violence that tarnishes our society and advocate for widespread change. Together, we can accomplish anything