

2026

**Lakefly
Writing
Contest
Winners**

A Deeper Meaning

“It's over” were the words coming from all my teammates, and honestly, I was thinking the same thing. It was the state championship, and we were down 15 to 12 with 48 seconds left. We were playing the infamous team that won state the year prior. Tears filled the sideline as we knew winning the game was highly doubtful. What was supposed to be “our year” was 48 seconds away from being over, and nothing mattered to me other than winning the game.

Six months prior to this moment was our first practice, and I was chosen to be a team captain. This role was something I dreamed of since I was a kid, and hearing my name be called as a captain proved that all my hard work had paid off.

“ And your captains for tonight's game are #24, Ryan Heiman.”

Hearing those words, followed by a roar of cheers made me feel extremely blessed for the team and the community. Those words also put a big responsibility on my shoulders, but I knew I was ready for the challenge.

Fast forward six months, and I was standing in front of an entire community of 10,000+ people who were all praying for a miracle to happen.

“Let the ball go to Heiman,” “don't touch the ball if it comes to you-let Heiman get it.”

These words kept flooding my mind.

It was the biggest sporting event of possibly my entire life, and my name was the one called to make that miracle happen.

As I ran back onto the field and looked at my teammates and the crowd, all those tears seemed to fade as if they knew something crazy was about to happen. My heart began beating boldly faster in my chest, then finally the whistle blew, and the ball was kicked and headed straight for my teammate in front of me. Right before it got to him, he ducked, so the ball was headed straight for me.

I grabbed the ball, and I saw my best friend leading straight up the middle. A sense of calm hit my body as if I knew I was about to score. The opposing crowd fell silent as it was just one of their players between me and the touchdown. He dove at my legs, and I stumbled. As I regained my balance, I looked ahead, and all I saw was the touchdown. That's when the moment became surreal. *I really did it*, I thought to myself as I pointed my finger in the air 20 yards before the touchdown.

“TOUCHDOWN ARROWHEAD!!!”

That night, I realized my name meant more than just the name I was given at birth.

That night, I didn't just score the touchdown

I became the name they believed in

Pretty Pink Flowers

The colors pink, green, and brown. The walls of my childhood room, before painted over with grey. My name in big pink wooden letters hanging over my bed. My name-Malorie Jane- is pink. It's the delicate, pretty pink flowers on the walls of my childhood room.

My mom always said she spelled my name differently from the usual M-a-l-l-o-r-y, because it looks prettier, and she likes how it looks in cursive. She likes how it flows with my middle name, Jane. I would watch her write my name on school papers, looping the M wide and smoothly, and coherently writing Jane behind it, with the e curling high.

When she would say it, it always sounded gentle. Like something fragile she was handing to me. I didn't realize then that she wasn't just naming me, she was decorating me. Decorating me, like she decorated my room with the pretty pink flowers. Then, my world was small and safe and painted in warm tones. Pink meant sweet. Pink meant polite. Pink meant quiet.

Malorie Jane is the pretty pink flower hanging on the green and brown walls of my childhood room. The flowers are dainty and delicate, like how Malorie looks in my moms cursive hand writing. Now the walls are painted over with grey and only a few pretty pink flowers are left hanging on the walls, and everyone calls me Mal. Mal feels sharper. Shorter. Less like the pink flowers. Mal doesn't have the loops and curls of Malorie. It doesn't ask to be admired anymore.

Sometimes when someone says "Malorie," I feel that old pink room open up inside of me. But grey walls doesn't mean the pink is gone. It's just underneath. Covered, maybe faded. Still there, when my mom says my full name when she's proud, worried, or asking when I'll be home. Malorie is pink, green, and brown. Mal is grey, but still me.

“Omelets”

“Nah, you know what yer problem is?” Morton announced, sitting on the hood of the black Studebaker. “Ya put the eggs in the fryin’ pan before turnin’ on the stovetop.”

Clive held up a gloved hand, shielding his eyes from Morton’s flashlight and the Studebaker’s low beams. “I always burn the eggs when I do it the other way.”

“‘Cause ya turn up the heat too damn high! I tell ya once, I tell ya a million times – low-t’-medium heat. Yer stove got the little numbers?”

Clive finished drinking from his canteen, then turned away so he could screw it shut. “One through eight.”

“One through *eight*? What, nine an’ ten not good enough fer GE no more?”

“It’s not GE. I dunno who made it.” Clive lobbed the canteen up and over the edge of the pit. He beat his bicep, trying to restore feeling into it. Not for the first time that night, he wished he’d thrown scissors instead of rock so he could’ve had lookout duty and Morton was down here.

“Well, whatever. Ya put it at, ah... three or so, ya wait ‘till the butter melts, got a nice sheen all over the pan – boom. *That’s* when ya pour yer eggs in.”

Clive planted the shovel into the earth along the wall of the pit, then used it as a step-ladder so he could reach his arms up and over the edge. “It takes forever to cook through that low.” “Not if ya let it heat up before ya put it in!” Morton moved the beam of his flashlight, following Clive as he pulled himself out of the pit. “Takes a little longer, sure, but that’s the difference between a nice, silky smooth omelet that melts in yer mouth and that hockey puck ya fed me this mornin’.”

“You said you liked it.” Clive reached into the pit to grab the shovel.

“I was bein’ polite. I weren’t gonna start nothin’ with the Missus around. You know how she gets.”

Shaking his head, Clive stuck the shovel into the mound of dirt he’d amassed at the edge of the pit. He looked around the dark forest clearing, searching for where the canteen had ended up.

“What do ya use fer garnish?”

“Garnish?” Spotting the canteen by the base of a tree, Clive stalked over to it and picked it up.

“Don’t tell me ya don’t put nothin’ in yer omelets, I saw ya sprinklin’ stuff in there.”

“Little salt and pepper. Some oregano. You know.” Feeling a little more water sloshing around in the canteen, Clive allowed himself another drink.

“You and yer oregano. What, ya got a deal with the Oregano Guild of America or somethin’?” Morton counted on his fingers. “Oregano goes in bread and stew, and that’s it.”

Clive wiped his mouth dry, then screwed the canteen shut again. “You haven’t had my mama’s shepherd’s pie.”

“Ah, got me there. Here’s what ya try next time, though – vanilla extract.”

It was dark enough that with Morton shining his flashlight on the ground, he probably couldn’t see Clive’s face. Still, Clive gave Morton his best ‘are you kidding me’ look as he walked back over to the car. “Vanilla in an omelet? I’m not made of money.”

“Did I say saffron? Did I say gold flakes? Clean out yer ears, pal, I said *vanilla*. You can spare a drop er two o’ vanilla in yer eggs to really make ‘em sing. It’s the difference between a good omelet and a *great* omelet.”

Clive shook his head, then set his canteen on the roof of the Studebaker. “Gimme a hand, here.”

“Yeah, okay.” Morton stood up with a grunt. He set the flashlight down on the hood before following Clive around to the back of the car.

Twisting his key, Clive popped open the trunk. He'd retained enough of his night vision that even without Morton's flashlight, he could see the lifeless lump that had been Mr. Avery not three hours ago. The thick carpet borrowed from Mr. Avery's front hall had done much to absorb the blood, but Clive knew from experience it'd take a good wash or two before the smell was out of the car.

“Green onions, too. White onions are okay, but green onions work better.” Morton reached in to pull out Mr. Avery's corpse. “Subtler flavor, folds into the eggs a bit nicer.”

Log Cabin

it sits dark again, first built for a farming family
as rough shelter from Wisconsin winter.

a homestead cabin, simple but strong
as the equine muscle used to plow

the silt loam soil, then abandoned like
the shell of a crustacean.

a lifetime later, the house was relocated
resettled and lovingly refurbished by

the granddaughter, now a grandmother
and for a while, the windows glowed again

the stove burned landscape's kindling.
August cornfields bloomed with approval

and the squirrels scurried by with business
tucking their acorns in the terraced wall

built with slabs of the Paleozoic ocean
compressed into sandstone and fossils

of abandoned shells. now she is gone and
the light is put out. the cabin waits quietly

for the next tenant, a last critter to make in it a nest
before it crumbles into the ancient ocean

“The World Health Organization named it Viral Panpsychism Disorder, VIPAD.” The TV documentary encapsulated the past year. “What started as a cold led to the extraordinary ability to hear the voices of all organic things.”

Evelyn listened, eating a peanut butter sandwich. She'd preferred salads before VIPAD. One benefit of moving to Atlanta near her daughter's family had been the longer growing season. Evelyn had loved gardening before the plants talked, but the screams from autumn's harvest devastated her; tomato plants shrieking, carrots begging for mercy. This spring, she couldn't bring herself to trim leaves from the early kale or lettuce.

“The virus struck the Nordic region first, rapidly spreading across borders. Symptoms started as coughs and fever. Then the voices began. Early patients were thought to be mentally ill, talking to butterflies, houseplants, even marble floors. Doctors took MRI scans of patients' brains, revealing enhanced activity in the temporal lobe's auditory cortex. Patients weren't crazy. Every organic thing on the planet was talking. VIPAD patients could hear them.”

Evelyn took her plate to the kitchen. She poured some milk, grateful that plant and animal products like milk and peanut butter didn't speak. She was also grateful someone else had harvested them. The cows were probably relieved for being milked, but the peanuts would have screamed like Evelyn's carrots. She washed her dishes and set them on a dishtowel.

The granite countertop's words made Evelyn jump. “We've talked about this, Evelyn. The least you could do is mop up the water.”

“I'm sorry.” Evelyn reached for another towel. Rocks remained rocks regardless of their shape. Granite countertops, marble statues, even Evelyn's diamond wedding ring had something

to say. With her husband long deceased, Evelyn kept the ring in her jewelry box where it gossiped with her mother's ruby earrings.

The documentary concluded. "Scientists and world leaders continue to dispute the virus's origins. Some claim it entered the atmosphere from melting glaciers due to global warming. Others point across oceans, swearing it was manufactured by rival governments to slow economies and cripple armies."

Evelyn remembered when science and politics were separate entities. Perhaps the patina of sentiment only made her think they had been. She returned to the living room. A news program began.

"Moments ago, CDC officials announced a breakthrough in the cure for VIPAD..."

Evelyn's cellphone rang. It was Abel, her grandson. "Sweetheart!"

"Grandma, we need to talk. Something's happened at work."

"Work? I'm honored, but wouldn't you rather talk with your mom or dad?" Evelyn's daughter and her husband were CDC scientists. Abel was a biochemistry graduate student at Georgia Tech. He'd accepted a yearlong CDC fellowship, choosing a project outside of both his parents' laboratories. When VIPAD struck, every lab was tasked with finding a cure. Abel now worked for his mother, a horror for any young man. "Or is this about Mom and Dad?"

"No. Yes and no. Are you at home?"

"Yes..."

"I'll swing by. Grandma, please don't do anything until we talk." Abel hung up.

Evelyn checked the time and looked out the window at the overcast sky. She wondered if Seymour was napping.

Evelyn stepped carefully along the path traversing her garden, apologizing to the crying gravel beneath her feet.

Seymour, the enormous oak by the sidewalk, could sense Evelyn's presence. "Exactly one year ago today, Evelyn. Do you remember what you said the first time you heard me?"

Evelyn descended onto the bench beneath Seymour's canopy. "I shouted, '*Who's there?*' and ran into the house."

"After that."

"I said, '*How do you know my name? Have you been talking all this time?*' Then I asked you your name. You said it was impossible for humans to pronounce."

"So I said, '*Choose a name for me in your language, something appropriate.*' You chose Seymour, from a story about a plant who talked."

There were advantages to hearing every organic thing. Walks were less lonely with everything anxious to converse with once-deaf humans. Everything had a voice. Everything had feelings. Everything had an opinion.

The grass beneath Evelyn's sneakers shouted, "Pick up your feet!" The lawn had grown out of control since she no longer had the heart to mow it. The longer the stalks grew, the louder their protests. Evelyn spun in her seat, lifting her feet onto the bench.

“Don’t worry about them,” Seymour said, “Grasses complain.” He raised his voice across the lawn. “Show some gratitude. If it weren’t for Evelyn, the dandelions and chickweed would’ve choked you out years ago. Give her some consideration.” The grass grumbled and went silent.

“Thank you, Seymour.” The giant oak was in the garden when Evelyn bought the place. Neighbors called him a “witness oak,” alive during the horrors of the US Civil War. Seymour told Evelyn that during the war years, witness oaks had begged soldiers to stop killing, to realize what all trees had always known: To hurt another was to hurt all.

“Any time, Evelyn. What’s today’s news?”

Evelyn relayed what she’d seen on television, then shared news from their neighborhood. “Clayton Miller next door lost his job at the furniture plant. Do you remember me telling you about the billionaire who owns it? Elias Hover. He says he’s embraced the cause of organics’ rights and will no longer support the murder of pine trees to make furniture. He’s shut down all his furniture plants and announced he’s formed a political party called Plants Over Plants.”

She described Hover’s morning press conference. The billionaire delivered his speech standing on the shoulders of his two Bearers like a circus performer, a move he must have practiced with his personal trainers for weeks. Wealthy people like Hover hired strong men called Bearers to carry them so they could remain above the pain of trampled organics. Bearer had become the fastest growing career in the global economy. “Hover’s pushing to give all organics voting rights.”

“Voting rights?” Seymour sounded amused. “Decide who leads the humans? Should I walk to my polling place or take the bus? How do I mark my ballot?”

“Hover addressed that. He’ll pay displaced furniture plant workers to document the votes of all organics. He’ll tally them using his corporation’s computer network to eliminate additional taxpayer expenses.”

“Sounds generous,” Seymour said.

“He feels strongly enough to run for President in the November election.”

“So generous.”

Evelyn and Seymour fell into companionable silence, quietly sharing the air and the sun.

“Evelyn!” Clay Miller’s voice broke their peace. “They’ve done it!” Clay ran across their lawns, ignoring the grass’ protests. “The CDC announced a cure for VIPAD. A goddamn cure!” Clay stopped on Evelyn’s gravel path. “This nightmare will finally be over. I can go back to work.”

Beneath Clay’s work boots, the gravel groaned. Instead of taking a seat beside Evelyn, Clay twisted the soles of his boots into the path. “You’re nothing but goddamned rocks, so shut it!” He looked at Evelyn’s horror-stricken face. “Sorry, Evelyn, I can’t take it anymore.” He shouted at the ground. “You think you have problems? Try supporting a family when your life’s work goes away. You rocks just lay there. No responsibilities. No taxes. No food shortages because no one wants to make a damn chicken cry.” He finally sat. “I stood in line for three hours this morning for a Bearers job, Evelyn. Too many applicants, not enough rich people hiring. Never thought I’d wish for more billionaires.”

Abel's car pulled up in front of Evelyn's house. He jogged up the short lawn, apologizing to it. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. Grandma, have they been here yet?" Abel wore his short lab coat, his CDC badge hanging from the breast pocket.

"Who, Sweetheart?"

"The mobile response team. CDC's driving through neighborhoods, injecting anyone who wants VIPAD antiviral therapy."

"Well, hallelujah." Clay rose to his feet.

"It's not that simple, Mr. Miller. I don't think we're considering all the ramifications."

"Of what? Of going back to normal? Of getting my job back? Of my wife not begging my ten-year-old daughter to eat because her teacher says eggs and apples were stolen and hamburgers were murdered? My kid's dying in front of us. My wife cries every night. Exactly what other ramifications am I supposed to consider?"

Abel pursed his lips. "I'm sorry, Mr. Miller. I didn't know."

"Doesn't matter. There's a cure." Clay started back toward his place. "Let me know when they get here. My family will be first in line."

Abel looked at Evelyn, "Grandma, I'm sorry for Mr. Miller, but there's more to consider here. That's why I wanted to talk with you."

Abel took Clay's seat beside Evelyn. "A bunch of us at the university have decided. We won't take the cure. I don't think you should, either."

"Why? Is there something wrong with it?"

“No, it’s safe, and it works. That’s the problem. Once you get the injection, you won’t hear other organics anymore. You’ll go back to hearing only what you heard before VIPAD.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Evelyn sensed Abel’s struggle, his troubled eyes so like his late grandfather’s. “Isn’t that what you and your parents were working toward?”

“Yes, but... now that we *can* go back to the way things were, *should we*?” Abel took Evelyn’s hand in his. “Grandma, before VIPAD, we thought only humans had thoughts or spoke. If we stop hearing other organics, they won’t stop thinking or speaking. If we ignore them and go back to living the lives we now know were far from harmonious with the world... should we truly want that?”

Evelyn didn’t know what to say. “Sweetheart, life’s been hard since VIPAD. What else can we do?”

“We’ve discussed that at school. The students and professors agree. We should stop trying to go deaf again. We should focus on coexisting with other organics.”

A voice came over a loudspeaker from the next block. “Attention, please. We are the CDC’s Mobile Response Unit...”

Abel jumped to his feet. “That’s it, Grandma. The antiviral drug.” Abel took off his lab coat and tucked it under his arm. “I need to get back. I can’t risk being seen.” He kissed Evelyn’s cheek. “Please think about it, Grandma. Mom and Dad have already taken it. I... don’t want to be alone in this.” Abel trotted back to his car. He waved, got in, and sped off.

“He’s right, Evelyn,” Seymour said, “and so is Clay.”

“Should I take the cure?”

Seymour paused. “Before you could hear me, you came to this spot every day and fed the goldfinches. You talked to us and didn’t know we answered. You seemed happier then.”

Had she truly been happy? Was the bliss of ignorance the same as real happiness?

Twenty minutes later, the CDC truck stopped in front of the Millers’ house. Clay and his family stood first in line. He looked over at Evelyn and mouthed, “Coming?”

“Clay’s daughter won’t start eating because she can’t hear us, Evelyn. None of us can unlearn this.” Almost imperceptibly, Seymour shook his leaves, an act of extreme effort for a tree. “I will always cherish our talks. We were friends before you heard me. We will be still if you cannot.” A single green leaf fell into Evelyn’s lap. “Do what you must.”

Evelyn reached back and touched Seymour’s bark. They watched people filter into the CDC truck’s side door and out the back.

Evelyn looked up into Seymour’s canopy. “Would the garden lettuce be okay if I snipped just a few leaves? I could bring a salad over to Clay’s daughter and tell her they want her to eat.”

“I’ll talk to them. Leafy greens are reasonable, especially kale. They were grateful last year when you trapped that rabbit.”

Evelyn laughed. “I brought it to the park. Those plants weren’t grateful.”

“Life requires cooperation and concession, Evelyn, not gratitude. It’s the agreements we reach that define us.”

Evelyn stayed with Seymour until dusk, barely noticing when the CDC truck rolled down the road.

Color Spectrum

My name is a color spectrum. While it technically means just “Lauren” to me, it has always meant red, but also orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Similar to a rainbow after it rains, my name reflects layers of who I am, each color a different memory, emotion, or a different version of myself.

Red: the Fire. My mother always jokes she abhors the person I had become during my teenage rants, the fire. It’s the color of raw emotion, transparency, and the flickering flames of heat and defiance.

Orange: the Fog. This is the shade of uncertainty and confusion. It’s the heavy weight of always being asked to map out the rest of my life when I haven’t even lived one-third of it. It’s the sting of a hard test and the “it’s okay” that follows, leaving me lost in the fog.

Yellow: the Sunshine. This is pure joy. The light of every high school accomplishment and extraordinary realization that I made it into college. I am finally becoming the person I dreamed of becoming.

Green: the Renewal. The feeling of a fresh start in life when you step onto your college campus for the first time. It represents the growth, anticipation of new skills, and opening doors for new opportunities to come in the future.

Blue: the Memories. Blue is my nostalgia; the feeling of the quiet ache of missing the times when I had no responsibilities or worries. The question, “Will my childhood move forward with me, or is it a shadow I’m leaving behind?”

Purple: the shadow. This is my anxiety. The “what ifs” that keep me wide-awake at night. What if I don’t like who I’m becoming? The fear of losing what I cherish the most.

Every letter of my name comes with a color, some I may embrace but some I am embarrassed by. Nevertheless, together they form my identity. They are all, fundamentally, Lauren.

She never liked caged animals

On the farm, dogs and cats were indoor/outdoor pets, roaming at large

And the world must have seemed bigger back then

Living on a farm on the outskirts of town

Population 112, Iowa—

A place that felt distant from every other point:

The next cornfield, farm, grain elevator, town...universe:

and the stars so vast.

"Have her show you the parakeets. They're so colorful," my son says,
when I go to visit her in assisted living.

We shuffle across the complex,

The wheels of her walker turning as slowly as her living room clock's hour hand,

And I stare at the improbable number of birds in their wicker castle

hopping to and from the same few perches all day.

She tells me she is bored, every day is the same

The cheerfulness of the place is as artificial

As the fake flowers lining the hallways,

As unnatural as garishly-colored parakeets

Plunked down in the prairie,

Boone, Iowa

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The seconds ticking by until

There's nothing left to do but dream of escape.

Swinging my car into the roundabout at the front door

Like I'm assisting a jailbreak,

Walker folded like a deck of cards and stashed in the trunk,

We drive an hour south to Boone,

And ride the famous scenic train she's never boarded

Despite living here for over 80 years.

As the towering trestle bridge approaches,

No guardrails on either side,

We both hold our breath, gripping the armrests,

unable to look into the distant valley below--

Two uncaged birds, both afraid of heights.

Anoka Area Scavenger Hunt

Summer, 1957

Teams of two. All items must be borrowed or found—nothing taken without permission.

1. a marble
2. a button larger than a nickel
3. a penny dated before 1940
4. a matchbook
5. a thimble
6. a fishing lure
7. a skeleton key
8. a four-leaf clover
9. a postcard sent from outside Anoka County
10. a horseshoe

*

Steve and Petey were the youngest kids in the contest and weren't supposed to have a chance. The older boys whispered and laughed, but Steve didn't say anything. He just wanted to beat them.

He folded the list and shoved it into his jeans pocket.

“Petey. Go to the house and grab a marble from my pencil box under the bed. And don't grab a steelie.”

“Where are you going?”

“Over to see the Chicken-Man. He’s got that horseshoe above the coop.”

“Is he gonna let you have it?”

“Don’t be stupid, I’m gonna borrow it for the contest. I think we’ll be the only ones who get a horseshoe.” Steve adjusted his bike’s handlebars. He needed to get them tightened, but didn’t want to go back inside for tools.

“Meet me out there when you’re done.”

“But it’s so far,” whined Petey.

“It’s only a couple of miles. Don’t be a baby.”

“Fine.”

Steve watched as Petey rode down Main Street before he took off for the Robinson Farm. He cut east, past the hardware store and the bait shop, then out where sidewalks thinned and houses grew farther apart. Somewhere behind him a train whistle sounded, heading north toward Elk River.

He stood up on the pedals once, to see if the handlebars would wobble. They did. He sat back down and rode on.

Everybody in town knew Old Man Robinson. Kids called him the Chicken-Man because of the coop behind his farmhouse. The one with the wire sides and the roof patched with tin. He sold eggs to many of the folks in town, though Steve’s family got theirs from Uncle Joe.

Two summers ago, he'd chased a foul ball into Mr. Robinson's yard during a pickup game and found the man standing by the fence, watching the chickens scratch in the dirt. He smiled when he handed the ball back and told Steve to be careful where he ran.

He was the only Colored man in the county.

Steve and some of his friends enjoyed the old man's company. They even helped replace the old hay with new in the spring, the coop reeking so badly it stuck in their clothes all day.

His father never called Robinson the Chicken-Man. He said "Mr. Robinson" and corrected Steve when he didn't. "That's not the man's name. Show some respect."

Uncle Joe thought differently. He said Robinson should keep to himself and stay out of town, which he mostly did. He said things like that when they were fishing shoulder to shoulder on the riverbank, lines in the water, cigarette smoke drifting downwind. Uncle Joe looked cool like the Marlboro Man even though he smoked Camels. He never yelled when Steve tangled his line like his father did. He was good company.

The road to the Chicken-Man's farm narrowed and turned to gravel. It sat back from the road, the house low and square with paint peeling along the south side.

Steve rolled to a stop, left his bike in the dirt and strolled up to the front door. He knocked and no one answered.

"Mr. Robinson?"

No response. The only sound was the low drone of summer insects in the tall grass.

He knocked again. The old man had to be home, his truck was parked alongside the farmhouse.

Maybe he was out back by the coop.

“Hello?” he called as he walked around the side of the house toward the coop. The chickens stood bunched along the wire, their heads tilted, dead eyes fixed on him. They didn’t scatter or cluck. Chickens were never this quiet.

The horseshoe was there, nailed above the coop door, rusted and bent, open end up. He walked inside.

The smell hit him first—the same sour straw and old droppings he remembered, sharp enough to sting the back of his throat.

Then he saw him.

Mr. Robinson lay on his side near the back of the coop, one arm twisted under. His other arm stretched out in the dirt as if reaching for his hat a few feet away. Steve waited for the man to move, or cough or roll or say something sharp for sneaking up on him.

“Mr. Robinson?”

He took a step closer. The dirt near the man was darkened. The straw covering the floor was pressed flat.

Steve went rabbit hunting in the spring and goose hunting in the fall with his father. He’d seen things die before, but this was different.

This was a person.

He backed away and leaned against the rough boards on the side of the coop. He looked out the entryway toward the house, then back to the body as if checking to see if it was still there.

It was.

He stood there. He knew not to touch anything. His father would know what to do.

Somewhere behind him, a bike tire crunched on gravel.

“Steve?”

“Petey, stay back.”

Petey’s bike skidded to a stop just outside the coop. “Why?”

“Just—don’t come any closer.”

Petey leaned around the doorway. “Is he home?”

Steve didn’t answer.

“I got the marble,” Petey said. He held it up, blue with a white swirl. “You said not a steelie.”

“I know.”

Petey lowered his hand. “Why are the chickens like that?”

“They’re fine.”

“They’re all staring.”

Steve shifted, blocking Petey’s view.

Petey frowned. “Did we do something wrong?”

“No.”

“Are we in trouble?”

“No,” Steve said again.

“Then why can’t I see?”

“Because I said so.”

Petey was quiet for a moment. Then: “Is he sleeping?”

Steve swallowed. “Petey.”

“I guess he’s just old. Old people sleep all the time.”

Steve didn’t respond.

Petey edged forward.

“Stop.”

Petey stopped. “Do you think he’s gonna be mad we took the horseshoe?”

“We didn’t take it.”

“But we’re gonna, right?”

Steve tightened his grip on the doorframe. “Just—wait.”

“Okay.”

Petey stood there rolling the marble between his fingers. “Steve?”

“What.”

“When are we gonna finish the list?”

“Not right now.”

“Oh.” A pause. “Should I put the marble back?”

“No. Keep it.”

Petey slipped it into his pocket. “Okay.”

They stood like that until the insects filled the quiet again.

Steve stepped back out of the coop into the light. Petey hovered near the doorway, watching his brother's face.

“You okay, Steve?”

“We gotta go.”

Halfway to his bike, Steve turned back to the coop. He reached up and pulled the horseshoe free. It came loose with a dull scrape, leaving two bent nails behind. He carried it by the curve, careful not to let it swing.

Steve paused near the side of the coop where the dirt was packed hard from years of boots and feed buckets. Something pale caught his eye.

Three cigarette butts, paper stained brown where they'd been pinched out.

The smell reached him then—dry and sharp, faint but unmistakable.

Camels.

They were ground down into the dirt. He had seen them put out that way a hundred times before.

“Steve?”

He hesitated for half a second.

“Let's go.”

They got on their bikes and rode back down the gravel road. Steve stood on the pedals, and the handlebars wobbled harder than before.

Petey rode ahead, then slowed to match Steve's pace.

“Are we still winning?” Petey asked.

“I don’t know.”

Petey glanced at the horseshoe hooked over Steve’s handlebar. “I think we are.”

The wobble grew worse when they hit the pavement. He overcorrected once and had to drag a foot to steady himself. Petey didn’t notice.

Steve rode on, the handlebars never quite settling as they crested the hill and the town came into view.

They stopped at the place where the road split—one way back toward home, the other toward the sheriff’s office.

Steve took the turn.

AN INVITATION TO WALK IN THE WOODS

AN INVITATION TO WALK IN THE WOODS

(In Memory of Lilas Smith ~*Artist, Poet and Nature Lover*)

With longer hours of daylight, we meet at the bluff.

Follow me, my friend motions.

Let me show you why we're here.

Look between the debris of last autumn's leaves.

The spring beauty and hepatica appear as delicate as silk,

and yet they've survived the long winter like the rest of us.

Come, greet the other blooms as we walk among them.

These are dutchmen breeches in a row.

It's like they're pinned to a tiny clothesline on wash day.

These are trillium dressed in three-piece linen.

A bellwort hangs its blossom head, not proud like the others.

While this mayapple opens into a floppy green hat.

Each May, for the past decade, I honor my friend.

I drive a rustic road and step out beneath the trees.

After a silent prayer of thanks, it begins again_

between the debris of last autumn's leaves.

Three Days After Abby Mapes

Three days after the school shooting, there is a crick in my neck from holding you and my arms ache from tending the knots in your muscles. I want to finish the leftover birthday cake
and crawl into bed to sleep for days, but only if you are beside me—your body warm against my
back, your arm heavy around my ribs, your breath softly tickling my bare shoulder.

When I told you this was my biggest fear, you used to say, “It won’t happen here.” I believed you, afterward, when you walked through the front door, numb and exhausted, rested your head on my shoulder, let your uneaten lunch drop to the floor, and said, “I never thought it would happen here.” Of course you didn’t. How could you have gone to work each morning, worried, waiting, wondering if today would be the day you had to rush lights and sirens to a school and run in with your rifle?

We keep saying we can’t U-Haul, but now, maybe we can. Maybe we should move in together, because, now, four months into dating and three days after the school shooting, I can’t bear the thought of spending a night without you beside me close enough to pull to my chest when you wake in the night; I can’t bear the thought of not snuggling beneath the covers while the obnoxious country song blares from your phone at full volume at five a.m.; I can’t bear the thought of not squeezing you on your way out the door, telling you I love you, and making sure you have hot coffee to-go because, once again, we held each other too long in bed.

Three days after the school shooting, when I pull back from hugging you and hand you a
thermos of coffee on your way out the door, that old worry fills my eyes. And if you see it, you don’t say, “Don’t worry.” You don’t say, “It won’t happen here again.” Because this time, if you
said it, neither one of us would believe it.

Three days after the school shooting, after I close the door behind you and watch your
car
pull down the drive, I make the still-warm bed. I wash up the dinner dishes and wash your windows ‘til they shine. I stuff the HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner in the trash. I clean anything I can get my nervous hands on while I wait for you to walk back through that door. I’ve always joked that I’m not the marrying type, but as I vacuum and dust, I can imagine myself your wife.

The Crush - Jennifer Garcia

Tom's heart sped up as Kat stepped into the quad. He stood taller, pushing away from the back door of the gymnasium where he'd slumped for the last fifteen minutes. Kat's hair shone like gold in the afternoon sun as she strolled toward him. Tom pushed his glasses up further on his nose and noticed she was holding his hand. They stopped a few paces away. Kat's arms couldn't reach all the way around his bulky letterman jacket, but he had no problem brushing his fingers through the pleats on her red and white cheerleader skirt. He kissed her. She kissed him back. Tom casually waited beside the building, pretending to watch a flock of geese fly overhead.

"Hey, Tom." Kat said, jogging up beside him. The popular football player stayed where he was and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Tom breathed in the scent of strawberries and cream as Kat stepped into his space. Her fingers tickled his bicep, and he flexed, attempting to fill out his Captain America t-shirt.

His traitorous heart skipped a beat.

"Hey, Kat." Tom blinked and met her gaze, like he hadn't been staring at her for the past five minutes. He was pretty sure the redness on his face had faded back to his usual pasty white.

Kat traced a path down his arm. The touch so natural, their skin connected like magnets,

until her hand slipped around the rolled-up papers he was holding.

“Is this it?” Her face brightened like he was giving her a diamond necklace.

He could fuel the rest of his day with the memory of that smile.

“Uh-huh,” he said, releasing the papers into her grasp. “All the Calc homework for next week, including proofs.”

“Tom, you’re the best.” Kat flung her arms around his neck where they fit perfectly. His arms stiffly encircled her waist, afraid to squeeze too tight. He wanted to hold on and never let go, but...

His eyes hesitantly drifted to him, but he was scrolling on his phone.

“See you next week,” Kat said. She skipped away, her skirt swishing around her long tan legs.

She nudged the burly football player who immediately slid his arm around her shoulders.

They headed back the way they came. Tom overheard Kat chattering excitedly about her parents allowing her to go to Emily’s big party tonight, since she finished her homework.

Tom inhaled the lingering scent of berries, still feeling Kat’s arms fitting comfortably around his neck. He turned in the opposite direction and imagined she was walking away with him instead.

Glorf Saves the Day

Glorf was going to starve. He was sure of it, just like he knew the blah beige of his cubicle walls were ugly.

“Hey, G,” a floppy-haired blonde poked their head up over the dividers between cubicles.

“You going to go to lunch soon? Our pod is gonna try that new Mediterranean place off Harris. Comin’ with us?” Joe asks. Joe was always hopeful that the boss would join him and the rest of their work crew. Glorf was down-to-earth and preferred working in the trenches rather than in the windowed offices on the sixteenth floor. For a frog, Joe thought Glorf was a gentleman and a scholar.

Glorf smiled at Joe, knowing he meant well. But why did he always ask Glorf to join them for lunch? Did they enjoy his company? None seemed put off by his greenness, something not everyone could say.

Nine years ago, when he bought the company, part of the covenant agreement with the previous owner, a flea-bitten golden retriever, was to accept a new appearance. The golden had sighed deeply after he’d retired and passed the torch to Glorf. He watched the dog enter a closet and reappear in a human body.

“What a relief. It was hot in that fur,” the retiring boss had said.

Glorf got to choose the animal he became, and he had always been fascinated by frogs' movements. Plus, he found them to be unassuming and non-threatening. He didn't want anyone petting him or to smell like a dog, though a common pet would have been an easier pill to swallow. His human body was in a closet somewhere on the sixteenth floor. When he retired, he supposed his old self would be waiting. He didn't miss it, though. His frog skin felt right. There was also a distinct difference in how people treated him. Frog Glorf was respected, while Human Oglr (his dead name) was ignored. The transition to frog wasn't gradual; it hadn't occurred to the employees that Olgr was Glorf. They'd been so accepting, to his great relief. Upon seeing Glorf, they might be surprised, but he would always ignore the hesitation and be polite. This swayed even the most frog-hating people.

“Nope. You know me, same ole’ lunch. It’s Tuesday. I eat tacos on Tuesday,” Glorf says in good humor. Glorf had found that his oddness needed balance. His schedules and rituals gave him a sense of concrete reality that buffered him against the fear of others.

The floppy-haired Joe shrugged, “I’ll always ask, buddy. One day...” Joe smiled and ducked behind his pod.

Glorf chuckled to himself. He liked his coworkers and appreciated their acceptance, but his habits came first. He glanced at his owl clock. Ten minutes until lunch. He knew he could make it. He thought he would die of hunger every day by this time, but he always made it until lunchtime.

Glorf stretched his long, skinny green arms. Extending and splaying each finger wide, the webbing between, a thin moss-colored tissue. He shook his hairless head, and when he stood, he caught sight of Anna, one of his favorite employees. He waved gregariously.

She stopped mid-stride, an almost-smile on her petite human face. Glorf opened his too-wide eyes, his lips thinning as they stretched across his face, exposing his version of a grin. Glorf knew it took a moment for anyone to adjust their mind when seeing him, no matter how long they’d been acquainted.

Anna smiled brightly, with only a few seconds of disquiet between gawking and greeting.

Glorf went back to stretching. He bent at the waist, adjusting each of his nine spinal vertebrae. The chair he was given was for humans, not his overly long, thin legs and well-padded, pyramid torso. He didn’t mind; he could stand at the new desk. Glorf glanced again at the owl clock hands. Four minutes.

Glorf grabbed his ID badge, wallet, and cellphone, tucking them securely into the pocket of his light-blue-checked button-up shirt. It took two minutes to descend the six flights of stairs and another three to get to Tacoporium, his favorite restaurant in the city. His long legs brought him to the door in ten seconds. Glorf could almost smell the marinating aroma of peppers, onions, and carne asada.

His stomach made a gurgling noise, and his long tongue lashed out to catch the drool about to escape his lips. He prided himself on his physicality.

He ran down the stairs, counting each one, slow breaths, even heart rate. It almost felt like leaping, reminiscent of the amphibians he studied at a nearby pond.

Glorf hit the sidewalk with a thump from his size-18, webbed feet. He couldn't wear shoes. The nakedness of his appendages often brought stares and a few rude gestures. But Glorf never cared. He loves his frog form. His green skin and ancient nictitating eyelids made him stand out among the flood of humans. Also, he was seven feet. He could never go unnoticed, so he stopped trying.

#

“Karsten. What the hell? Your break was over five minutes ago. We are about to hit lunch rush,” the manager, Bull, of Tacoporium, said, trying to catch his breath after running up the stairs to the rooftop garden. Karsten flicked him off with a long, bone-tattooed finger. “I'm almost finished, unc, Chill.

Uncle Bull threw up his hands and ran back down into the restaurant. Karsten moved the sweaty reddish-brown hair from her eyes, tucking it under a ‘Magick or die’ bandana. If her boss and uncle hadn't interrupted her, she would have been finished with her morning casting. She liked to come up on the roof, pick herbs for the lunch rush, and then look out over the open-air food court below. She was feeling for ‘vibes’, trying to determine if today would be a successful attempt at her goal of animating an object. She was focusing on the umbrella over in the corner of the roof. It wasn't working.

Karsten sighed, opening her eyes and looking down. The crowd was already getting long, and they had another ten minutes before they officially opened. Karsten unfocused her vision, trying to read the customers' auras. Her breath caught in her chest when she saw a familiar glow. “Glorf!” Karsten whispered his name and put her hands, one on top of the other, over her heart. It was pounding hard. She'd fallen hard for the big green dummy the first day she met him. Her flirting was ostentatious and overt. But Glorf turned her down every time she asked him to take her out on a proper date. Karsten didn't like rejection, but from another magickal being? It was untoward. Karsten saw Glorf speaking to a smiling blonde waiting in line with him. “Ugh, he dares to rub it in my nose!” For all her calm, practical magic acumen, she was a hot-headed

witch. The fire in her started to rise. She wouldn't let him twist her off balance. She began her box breathing, closed her eyes, and hummed softly.

Karsten immediately sank back into her transcendental state. She was working on an experimental spell with intentional commands. She was good at manipulating things with her mind. She had discovered that some of her magick brought inanimate objects to life—or, more accurately, once-alive things back to life.

Karsten had turned her brother's wooden desk into a tiny tree, now growing unfathomable roots into their apartment floor. Today, though, she wanted to try something new. She opened one eye, landing straight on Glorf's lovely waxy green face. She had her mind spell set, closed her eyes again, and pushed her magical command out into the ether.

#

Glorf tapped his large, flat feet to the beat of the music piping through the courtyard surrounding Tacoporium's plaza. The line was already long, but he knew how fast it would move, so he enjoyed the cool fall breeze and the solid beat of the electronic dance tunes. He loved music and felt his vocal sacs expand, wanting to hum or sing. This wasn't the right time for a performance. He was too hungry.

Glorf could see a commotion at the front of the line. The restaurant was hardly that, more like a single-level building with large windows that opened to a cookline and counter that offered seven different salsas, napkins, and utensils. The windows were all open today, and the four customers at the counter were moving quickly to the left side of the courtyard.

“Oh, my gods! Move, hurry,” a customer at the front was screaming.

Glorf wondered what was going on, but the open mouths and wide eyes hinted at something interesting.

Glorf leaned his whole body out of the line, trying to get a better look at the brouhaha. He hoped whatever was happening would be over soon; he was so hungry. He had only planned to spend twenty-two minutes purchasing, eating,

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and cleaning up before returning to the office.

Ahead of Glorf, the line began to disperse, customers running in every direction. Now, he could see why they were fleeing. The sight of the giant walking taco did not make Glorf run. It wasn't in his nature to do so. He stood his ground. However, as he watched, his horror grew when the taco grabbed a piece of loose Carne off itself and slapped a woman in his path who'd been watching in transfixed terror. The woman touched the spot where the hot meat hit. A red welt was already forming. The delicious meal seemed to be heading straight toward Glorf.

The taco, as wide and almost as tall as Glorf, was ambling jerkily between the scattering customers. The corn tortilla looked like an open coat with a high-necked collar. The carne asada was jiggling with each wimpy step of its cilantro-made legs and feet. The taco toppings swayed like jewelry against the sweet-smelling meat belly. The herb-made legs, short and thin, and its leafed feet flitted up and down like flapping laundry in the breeze. There was a distinct smell of white onion, pepper, and citrus from the fresh lime always included with his order.

Glorf's mouth watered, his long tongue slipping from his thin lips. Everyone around him quieted. Any sight beyond the taco faded, honing Glorf in on the succulence of this giant food, just as it seemed to be doing to him. He wondered if this was a strange dream or if the world was changing. What magick could create food that fought back against their devourers? Glorf knew magick was possible; his mucous coating- part of a frog's skin and breathing functions- was a prime example of the magicks in the world.

The taco was now only a few feet in front of him. Glorf didn't stop to think about his next action. He opened his mouth even wider, loosening the rest of his tongue. The sticky, sleek spit- the scientific term for a frog's tongue- reached the walking taco and wrapped its pinkness around the tortilla head, wrapping around the cilantro feet all the way to the meaty head. Glorf thrust out his hips quickly and powerfully, bending away from his lunch. This caused the giant taco and tongue to whip back into his mouth. Glorf closed his eyes. His jaw was already adjusting to the largeness inside, each soft bite tearing into squirming

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flesh. Glorf had no neck, so his chin dug into the front of his torso because the food seemed to be fighting back.

“RRmmmowohloppp,” the taco made language-like noises inside Glorf’s mouth. But even the disturbing sounds couldn’t stop him; he continued to chew. His eyes closed, pure joy marking his frog face. His skin prickled with pleasure. And lucky him: this one giant meal would be filling and probably free. After all, Bull couldn’t charge him for a giant taco he never ordered. Glorf thought he might even skip dinner. His own practicality in the face of such lunacy was just another sign of his humanity.

Glorf laughed. A bit of corn tortilla fell from his mouth. He caught it with his tongue and shoved it back inside, chewing with his only upper teeth, the ‘spit’ doing most of the work. The taco stopped struggling; Glorf had begun to swallow the thing. At last, the taco was masticated and on its way to his cardiac stomach. Glorf puffed out a little burp, “Pardon me!”

When Glorf opened his eyes, the light filtered back in, and he slowly looked around. Every person left in the courtyard was staring at him with mouths agape. Some of the children were crying as their mothers hugged them closely. The closest bystanders had pulled out cellphones and were recording or streaming live. The oddness of the moment was broken when a little boy began to clap.

#

“What the hell is going on? What the fuck was that?” Bull asks no one in particular. He, too, had witnessed the taco stumble off the warming rack, grow large, hop over the food counter, and begin to saunter out into the crowd. It had happened so quickly that Bull’s mind didn’t have time to process the craziness and react accordingly. He looked down to see the tongs still in his hand- maybe he could have used them as a weapon against the danger of the taco. But today, he wouldn’t be the hero. Suddenly, a cry of hearty hooray and a burst of discordant clapping began—loud and uproarious. The crowd now surrounded Glorf, a regular here. He was always polite and pleasant, despite his niece’s salacious attempts to woo him.

Bull watched as the customers touched Glorf’s green, wet-looking skin. A few

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guys tried to lift him in their exuberance and relief at Glorf's prompt reaction to the zombie taco.

Bull dropped his head to his chest and sighed hard. Somehow, he knew this weirdness was Karsten's fault. "Well, I bet she wasn't expecting Glorf to be so decisive!" Bull laughed hysterically at the odd life he lived.

#

Glorf took his peers' admiration in stride. He didn't know why they were making such a fuss.

"Why'd you eat it? Weren't you scared?" a small human girl asked him. She was on the shoulders of, presumably, her father.

"What else could I have done?" Glorf responded and patted the little girl, still a foot beneath his gaze. With his arm extended, he caught a glimpse of his watch. Uh oh, he was a minute behind schedule. But not to worry,

"Alright, folks, I must run. But I'll see you all next Tuesday. Same place, same time," Glorf says with a jovial tone and tip of an invisible hat. He turned and pushed through the crowd in one long-legged stride. As the humans made their way, he began to run. He patted his stomach, rubbing slow circles over the firm bulge. The taco seemed to be settling better than a giant walking taco would, could, or should.

"What a great day," Glorf said, picking up speed, heading back to his cubicle haven and away from the cameras and gawkers. "And once again, all is well with the world," Glorf mutters almost breathless. Indeed, the day once again reeked of normalness and no trace of magick. Glorf burped again,

"Well, maybe a little magick." He says, as he swallows a cilantro arm pulling its way back up his throat.