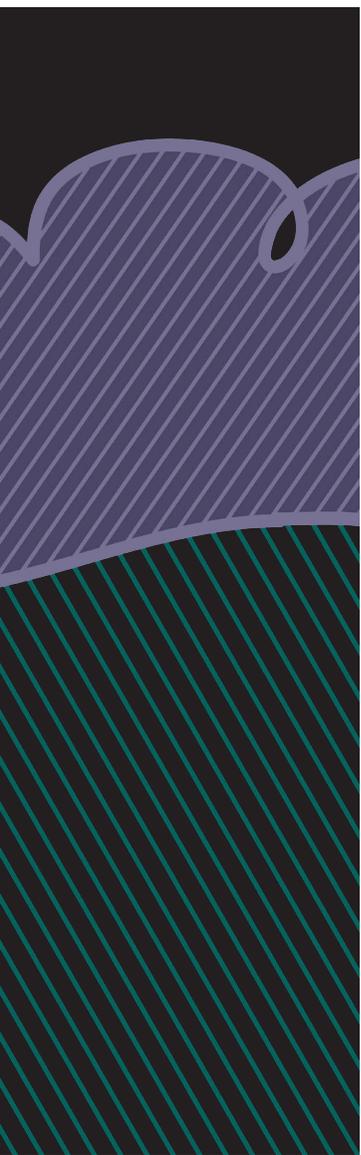
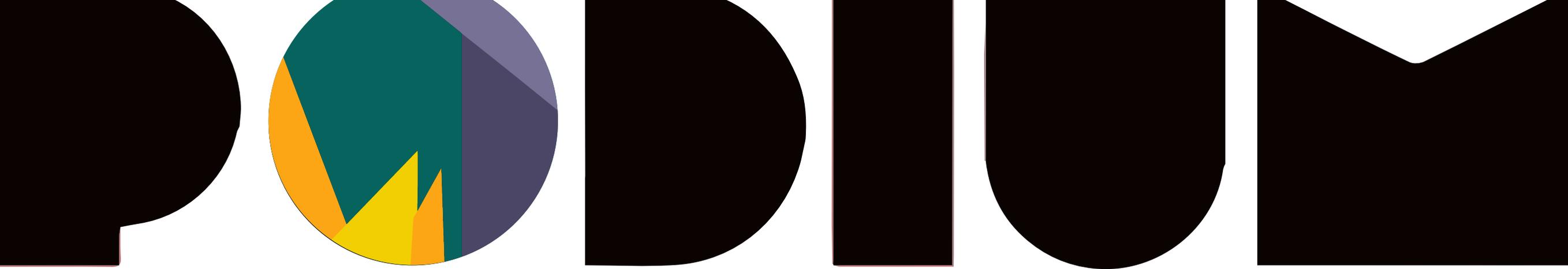




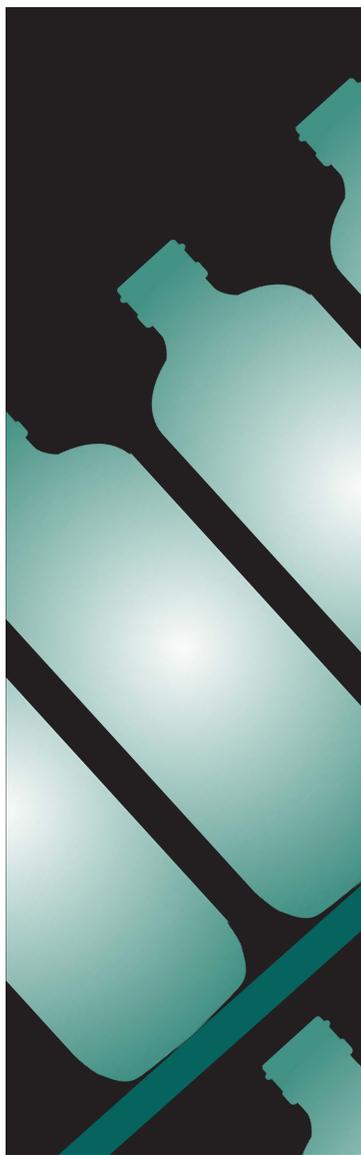
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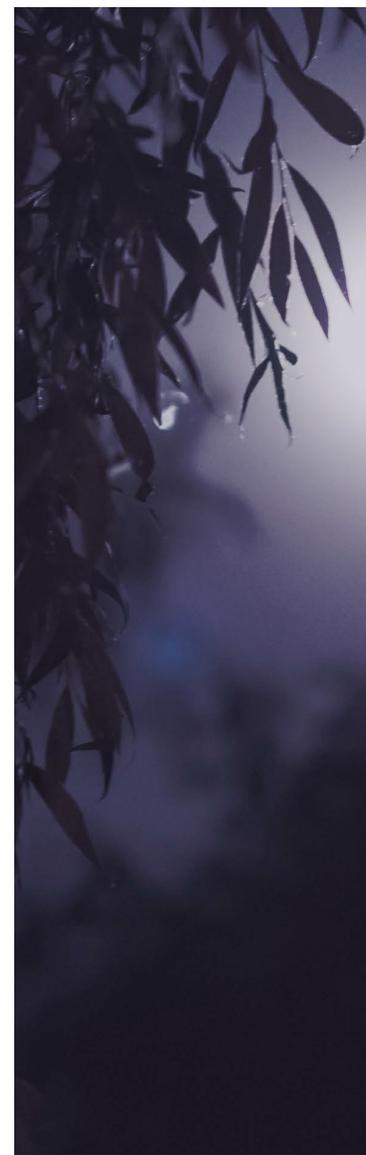
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Best Day Ever

by SHA'MYA GREENE

Bean Lou, a student at Lunar High, woke up one morning ready to take on the fun and certainly enjoyable school day. Starting off with the usual routine of brushing her teeth, showering and the best part, eating. As she was eating, she rushed to do her homework, finishing up all she could and putting it on the counter. She was as enthusiastic about school as she was about her vegetables, and she hated vegetables. Finishing up her food, she made her way out the door, and of course, it's pouring rain outside. "Just rain, what harm could it cause?" She thought as she grabbed an umbrella and began walking to school. It was about a fifteen-minute walk, so leaving early was the best idea, but for Lou, leaving late was her motto. "It's so displeasing out here. Who even enjoys rain?" As she walked through the hard pouring rain, crashing down like a kid coming off a sugar rush. The mud splashed on her as she tried to carefully walk through it without showing up to school looking like candy dipped in chocolate. Splat. She stepped in mud and is now stuck in the rain. "What a fantastic day I'm having," she groans about the situation. Her foot won't budge, and she's growing impatient, being that she's already late for school. Pulling at her foot only made matters worse as mud slapped her in the face. The mud smelled like rotten yogurt on a hot day, and she just knew it was in her hair. She was livid. And as she stood there, foot devoured in mud, she realized she forgot her homework on her bed this morning. Already twenty minutes late, Bean dug her foot out the mud and made her way back home. Walking back through the house covered in mud was just what her parents needed. What didn't kill them made them angrier, and she knew they'd be angry.

But in Lou's defense, she had just the morning too. She just knew they wanted her at school, so that's what she was doing, trying to get to school. The logic behind why the mud was everywhere made perfect sense to her, and she'd defend her reasoning.

Clothes, bedspreads, and mud were thrown around as the homework was nowhere to be found. Time passed, and she decided to look into her book bag. Low and behold, her homework was sitting there, unbothered. "For the love of sanity, give me a break." She laughs! With no time to look at the homework, she dashed out the door, slipping and sliding on her way out. With only one thing on her mind, and that was to get to school, she had everything: her phone, keys, homework, and her sanity from this long morning.

"I made it!" Lou ran through the doors into her first class, ecstatic that she was finally at school. As she's rummaged through her book bag for the homework, the teacher called on her to bring it up. There was no homework in sight. The papers were scribbles she'd drawn from the other day when Ms. Longwood, her first block English teacher, was going on about who knows what.

Bean Lou was fed up with the day, and instead of listening to the teacher, she walked out and went home. As she walked through the doors all she heard was, "BEAN ANN LOU!" Of course, it's her mom yelling about all the mud. But instead of answering, she went into her room and said to herself, "Of course today's Monday." As she got into bed and went under the covers, she said to herself, "Today has been a rough day, so let's try this again, never." And Lou was out like a light, the best part of her day. ●



Luck in Glass Bottles

by KAVIN JACKSON

They always say never say to deal with the devil, and I guess this is why I should listen. He promised me sweet dreams and the performance of a lifetime. I was going to be a star... but now, that all just seems...

"Oh, will you shut up already, we've heard this story about fifty-eleven times" an exhausted female voice cuts through the speaker who was waxing poetically in the moon light as if he was on stage again. He presses his face against the glass bottle that was he cage looking down to the shelf below to a female in a similar bottle.

"Hey, no one asked you. Just let me have my moment," he with said face smushed. Another sweeter voice came from the bottle next to the female.

"Come on Val, let Romeo have his fun. Not much of it we have in here." Romeo spoke up

"Thank you, love. I'll serenade you later" He removed his face from the glass. The soft-spoken woman looked to him with a smile

"No thank you. I hate your voice," Val said, bursting out laughing.

"Damn, Iris. Don't just break his heart like that," Iris looked to Val.

"Oh, did I say something hurtful?" Unaware of just how honest she is sometimes, Romeo clutched his heart in pain, holding back a tear or two.

"No, it's fine," He sniffled. "It's not like it's the whole reason I made the deal or anything like that. Not at all... no, no, no, no." He softly repeated, sinking further into the bottle. Val sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Oh, look Romeo, the moon is so full and so bright. Won't you tell us a tale we've heard before?" she voices, carrying the heaviness of sarcasm, but it didn't matter to Romeo.

He shot back up to regain his composure, then turned to the moon to start up his story again.

"I, a young actor looking for stardom, moved to the city where it was to all begin: New York,"

Val cuts in, "I hate that place."

"Shut up," He snapped quickly before continuing. "As we all know, being noticed isn't the easiest thing in the world, or in New York, and it pains me to say my shows were... bad. Low reviews and scores all over from critiques who apparently knew the show 'biz.'"

"Could it also have been you were just a bad actor?" Iris asked.

"Nope, not whatsoever. I am the best at everything I do."

"Obviously," Val rolled her eyes. Romeo pressed on with his tale

"With all the bad reviews, it was getting to me, and the mistress herself, aka depression, rolled by, and to drown my sorrows, I went to and old friend... bars. But I walked to my doom that day when I visited the Double Tapp."

"And that's when he made you that deal? The bar-keep?" Val decided to play along

"Exactly. He promised me so much for so little, an amazing career for the rest of my life, and it was grand.

Amazing shows, great reviews, the best life, and then... it all faded to black. When I woke up with a bottle in hand, looking at him, I screamed because it was too early to be the end. It had only just begun. But he said in that smooth voice of his, "Your life wasn't that long to begin with, and now I have everything from it." He placed his hand on the bottle, looking towards the night sky.

"And now you burden us with your stories, hur..." Val stopped as the door to the room opened. "ry." ●



This is Your Fault

by TRISTAN WYNN

This is all your fault you know." Pride barked at Maria. "Oh yes, because I was totally the one who chose this for us!" Joy exclaimed. The pair continued walking across the desert. "Well, you didn't say anything when we saw the random lot we had drawn did you!" Pride took a swig of water and wiped his brow. Maria, having heard his comment, spun around and erupted. "What should I have said!? 'Oh please redraw all the lots just for me just because I don't think we'll be able to find anything all the way out here in the damn desert!'" Pride looked her in the eyes and with the smuggest look he could muster in the heat simply said, "Yes, exactly that. Glad you understand it's your fault, love." he began walking past, giving her a peck on the cheek. "Now's not the time for the blame game. We have to look for something out here to bring back to the boss." Maria simply followed behind him pouting; she knew he knew he was just as much to blame as her, but being so vain, he'd never admit it. That was what the little kiss had meant after all. The pair looked across the vast desert before them, searching for whatever it is they were searching for. The boss hadn't told them exactly what it was they were on the hunt for, so she didn't even know herself. She had simply said, "You two drew the short straw. Find something out there in the vast wastes to make me and my associates laugh. You'll no doubt find two paths before you, but you can only take one and bring back one object. You have one hour. Good luck, you'll need it."

"Maria look, a sign!" Pride chimed as he dashed off down a dune, tripping and falling along the way. "You idiot don't fa-" Maria choked out as she also began tumbling down the dune. The sign posted before them read A and B both pointing opposite directions. Without even so much as a warning, a dust storm quickly began to overtake the pair. They began charging down path A, as they were swiftly running out of time. At the end of the path lay a mirror, standing upright and tall, reflecting the pair back at themselves. Grabbing it and being whipped up by the dust storm, they found themselves back in the boss' office with her glaring in disappointment. "You failed."

"Well of course we failed. Vicki, you told personalities in charge of edge and insanity to make you laugh. Who does that!?" ●

Lessons in Laundry

by SEAN DANOWSKI

Of all the places Tripp thought he might end up in life, the bottom of a dirty clothes hamper was not one of them.

Then again, he hadn't anticipated being six inches tall at any point in that life, either, so the day was full of surprises.

"Okay Tripp," he said to himself, his eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of light finding its way through the underwear, shirts, and jeans that sat atop him. "It's now or never – what was the reversing spell?"

The fact that he couldn't remember it was surprising – he'd read the old magic book countless times (though always in his head, not aloud), and had practically memorized the dozens of incantations and pictures that filled its pages. Even before he owned the book, when it sat in a locked safe under his grandpa's desk and saw daylight only with the supervision of the old man, Tripp could have likely been effective enough to turn his cat into a dog or his sister into a mouse. Or perhaps worse – who can tell with that old magic?

Tripp shifted his weight slightly, still unsure of whether he was facing up toward the top of the hamper or down toward its bottom. All he knew was that the weight of those clothes was getting heavier, and the air he was breathing was taking on the humidity of his saliva...

He heard a creak – faint, likely from a footstep down the hall from his bedroom – that third board never settled. Could someone be in the house, someone who could save him from this coffin of clothing? "Help!" he cried, "Help me! Mom, Dad, Brenda – help me!"

Nothing else. Likely just the house settling – after all, hadn't he decided to pull the book out of its hiding place specifically because no one would be home for the afternoon? I'm doomed, he thought. Even if I do somehow make it out of here, my parents are going to kill me when they find out what I've done.

A click. Almost just outside the hamper. Could it be, his savior?

Suddenly, Tripp's whole body was shaking. His ground, his sky, his entire surroundings were shifting, moving, turning. "Help!" he cried again, realizing someone was reaching into the hamper. Someone would find him and save him.

A flash of light, as the jeans were lifted away – Tripp was blinded by the sunlight pouring through

his window. He held his hands up to his face, then slowly pulled them away as his eyes adjusted – and just in time to see a black, wet nose atop countless sharp white teeth hurtling at him.

He rolled, his body avoiding the snap of incisors around his body, but he was not quick enough for his loose shirt to be caught in their clench. And then he was up, pulled into the air, unable to wriggle free from Jasper's grasp. "Jasper! Down boy! Put me down!" he screamed, his arms and legs flailing as his dog began to shake his new toy. The world was spinning. It was only a matter of time, Tripp realized, before Jasper chomped down on his owner.

And then it happened – the words came to him. An image in his mind, so clear, that he was saying the words before he even knew why. "Encant Yi Foxus Monto Uno Felinis!" with what he could only assume was his last breath.

Then he was airborne – flying across the room, Tripp looked back to see a cat with wide eyes standing where Jasper had been just moments before. It let out a loud hiss before taking off out of the room, skidding into the doorframe before disappearing down the hall.

Tripp hit the ground hard, his shoulder taking the brunt of the impact before rolling butter-over-biscuits, stopping only because of an unusual crease that hindered the rest of the rolls he had left. And as he gathered his bearings, he looked down at the ground – at that familiar text, the well-worn paper of his grandpa's book.

"Thank God!" he cried, standing up slowly, uneasily on his two little feet, his six-inch body bruised but not broken. And there it was – in lettering almost as large as he was tall, the spell he needed. "Minius mino bor Gigantius!"

He didn't know how long his eyes were closed, or how long he had been lying there, but when he lifted his arms to see all ten fingers, looked down to see both legs and feet, and a book of typical size beside him, he knew he was back to normal.

The next thing he saw was his mother standing in his doorway, her arms crossed, her eyes almost black and almost as frightening as the scowl on her face.

"Tripp," she rasped, "What have you been up to!?" "Mom, I swear, I just wanted to look," he started, but was unable to finish his sentence before his mother released a stream of unintelligible words. Words Tripp had not seen in that book but had heard when his dad had broken his hand in an unfortunate picture-hanging accident.

She grabbed the book off the floor, slamming it shut while walking toward his door. Before turning, she said, "I'd better not find out you've been casting spells while we've been gone!"

Tripp sighed, then chuckled. "Don't worry, Mom – I'm over the magic stuff. Grandpa always said it wasn't to be messed with, and I believe him."

His mom glared at him, allowing a smirk to cross her face. Then she turned and walked out of the room.

Phew, Tripp let out a breath. Close one, though the relief was short-lived.

"Tripp! What the hell did you do to Jasper?!"



Whatever Zed Said / Under the Willow on Wednesdays

by KAYLEIGH CRANDELL

For the first time, he arrived at the house without her accompaniment. Henry took on the prospect of stairs. He was clutching onto the handrail with an earnest need as his second wife was clutching onto the collar of a neighbor. He whispered curses under his breath, lamenting the decline of his health ever since handing over his company to his eldest son. At the very same time, different curses were whispered by the unsuspecting pair in the Western wing bedroom. It was a large room that would have been naturally lit by the windows that coated the walls if it weren't for the willow tree that had grown so tall and wide that its branches spread to block all light. The pale green walls were intended to be bright, welcoming, yet all those stipule-filled shadows clouded any of those ideas.

The idea to move up here was Michelle's idea. She needed space, a slew of rooms. She used to be a suburban secretary. Now she was Michelle, with her very own Western wing bedroom. And closet, and bathroom, and office. Henry had met her years ago, and she had laid in waiting for him while she kept him laid in his loveless marriage. Soon enough, wife number one was out of the picture, along with the affections of Henry's youngest two children. But then there was Kevin, kind Kevin, who had been up in the peninsula for plenty of vacations with his fraternity brothers and highly favored friends. He was quick to take up the mantle for Henry, look out for family assets, and look after his father. He approved of Michelle, quite frankly they got along well, and Henry was pleased by this. So pleased in fact, that he had said yes to a trip to the peninsula with his new wife and eldest son to celebrate the transfer of the company. After the champagne was popped and they walked throughout the small seaside town, Michelle found

herself awestruck from the sight that lay ahead of her.

It was the perfect home. Pristine white siding, freshly painted shutters, a wrapping porch, only to be completed by the willow tree that swayed next to it. It was perfect, all that she had envisioned for the day that she had a husband and home to call her own. The men by her side were captured too, taken by the dream that they could have a little piece of the peninsula.

There was one problem. A crotchety old man who went by Zed, who owned the shack next to it. Kevin, kind Kevin, approached him and asked who owned the house, so strung out on his own sense of wealth that he was ready to make an offer right then and there. Zed presented the deed and was open to the offer but didn't let up on his insistence in staying in the small shack just beyond the main yard. Henry's eldest son gave his father a wavering look. Almost as if to say, "This guy, really? You want him as your neighbor?" Henry said he'd think about it, and the newfound family were on their way.

Except Michelle, who couldn't stop thinking about the place. It was a far cry from what Michelle ever had made available to her, and because of that, she cried all night long. For two days of the vacation, she huffed around the rented holiday house, crossed her arms at every interaction, and only let out a snicker at her husband's jokes. This indifference and attitude provoked Henry so much that he changed his mind. This time, he went to Zed alone. The men spoke in frank terms about their expectations, shook hands, and made a gentleman's deal. Henry took Michelle back there that night and promised her the home. She could hardly believe it was real. She knew she was new money, and this type of love was new to her. But if the tree of life were to give her lemons, Michelle was the type who was going to make lemonade.

Make it she did. Making lemonade, love, luxurious parties for the in-crowd of her new community. Zed watched from the shack as she threw party after party, even as her husband left the state to go deal with final legal proceedings of his business deals. The first night, when he saw the western wing bedroom lit up behind the shade of the willow tree, was when Henry fell ill. Zed knew a simple stroke was enough to kill a man, no matter how Henry had protested that he was fine when he came and visited with him under the willow tree, where Zed sat with his wood whittling on most days, but mostly Wednesdays.

Zed knew Wednesdays were when the pool boys came over. Henry's new home didn't have a pool. That's just what he had affectionately called them. The pool boys were the men who came over, just like the man who was here today. Henry struggled as he ascended up the stairs. Zed watched

on, knowing more humiliation, known or not, was not needed, not today. With a stubby thumb, Zed pointed up at the willow tree. "I think you've sprung a leak, bud. There's a pool up there, watch out." Henry's bushy eyebrows furrowed, frustrated with the supposedly crazy man that he so happened to share land with. He wasn't crazy, he was just making a joke for himself.

Except it wasn't funny once Henry's knees gave out. Was it the gust from the nettled leaves above, the needless and unobvious poke at his very manhood, or the unknown intimacy that lay above in a pale green room? Michelle was laid back, unaware that below her, Henry took to laying on the ground. A winter shiver coursed through the ocean filled air, shaking them all in their respective fashions. It was a chill so deep it got through to Zed's hardened bones. Henry's too, though the full reason, he would never know. ●

Never Asked for This

by DESTINY HALL-HARPER

“rap!” she screamed. Quickly and quietly she stuffed the bag with as many clothes as she could reach for. She was careful, though, to not pack the white Adidas in the corner. Those were at least an indicator that she still occupied the room. “Come on, Bea, we gotta move,” Richie quietly screamed from his post at the door. Approaching were two well-dressed men in suits. One had a pistol evidently holstered on his side. Their footsteps gained more audibility as they walked down the wooden walkway with their loafers on. Richie locked the door as Bea made her way towards the window. She looked down at her smart watch. “Rich, the helicopter isn’t gonna make it in time,” she panicked as she kept a close eye on the unusually blue sky. Medium knocking began on the door followed by the jiggling of the doorknob. In the distance, a large object could be seen hovering between buildings. “Bea we gotta jump,” Richie pleaded. Down below was the harsh pavement of the hotel driveway. Keys could now be heard from the other side of the door being tested in the lock. “Richie, we have to wait for the copter! There’s nowhere to land,” Bea stuttered out. As the helicopter approached closer to the hotel, they could hear the creak of the door being opened. “Bea, we have to go,” said Richie. “This is against orders,” Bea replied. “Screw your orders, you’re gonna be dead if we don’t move,” Richie choked out. Her...dead? They were partners. They’ve been

partners for two years now. When she joined the organization, Richie was quickly sent to her aide. But this life isn’t easy. She was alone; except for her ailing mother, kept half-conscious through the medicine she had to take. It was something to ease the pain. He seemed...like the brother she never had. Her mother always talked about a son that was taken away. She even wore an “R” around her neck as a pendant. But she didn’t think it was a coincidence because her late father’s name was Robert. She was jolted out of her haze by Richie pulling her onto the helicopter’s ladder just as the two men forced their way inside the room. They were now zooming towards the headquarters. “Way to almost get us both fried, Jones,” Richie sneered. Bea just kept her eyes locked straight ahead, not looking at any one thing. She never made this connection before. He really was like a brother to her. Every time she talked about her mom, Richie would look away. It was as if the thought was too painful. It was like he lost something too. Something that he couldn’t bring himself to tell her. Back at HQ, they were both greeted by their aggravated boss, who today was even more aggravated. Strangely enough, not at Bea, but at Richie. “You idiot! You had one job. We told you to watch her back at the hotel while she hacked the multiplex. We told you not to bring your phone because it would alert THEM. Then you went and almost got both of you annihilated,” Boss screamed. No one knows his actual name. Apparently, it’s some sort of secret. In the past two years, she has only been able to go out on missions these last three months. Much to the scorn of Richie. He took his job as her aid very seriously. In fact, he took it too seriously. She joined this organization

completely by chance. Bea received a random email on Christmas morning, two years ago that looked very official. The email insisted she join as a hacker, given her expertise in computer science. Bea needed the money for her mom. She wanted to make sure she had her medications and that she was going to be alright, if not, hopefully she would hang on a bit longer until she was able to take her someplace else. With the money she had made so far, Bea put her in a nursing home for the time being. Just so that she knows someone will be able to keep an eye on her. “Boss, chill out,” Richie said. “No I won’t; you don’t care. We brought her here on YOUR recommendation! So she is YOUR responsibility,” Boss bellowed. Bea remembered the lines of the email that stuck the most in her head:

YOU WERE RECOMMENDED IN THE HIGHEST REGARD BY SOMEONE VERY CLOSE TO YOU. YOU SHOULD FEEL EXTREMELY HONORED TO

JOIN THIS ELITE ORGANIZATION.

Something just was not adding up. “The next of your siblings you want to bring aboard, I am going to ignore the request,” Boss said. Richie’s head quickly turned to make sure she wasn’t paying attention, but it was too late. Bea turned towards Richie, with a somber but understanding look on her face. Everything made sense. The Boss looked between the two of them and instantly realized he had made a grave mistake. “Oh, I didn’t realize she didn’t know,” Boss said somberly. “Agent Gray, I...” Boss tried to stutter out. “You knew this the whole time,” Bea said defeated. “And you just let it happen.” “Bea...I,” Richie tried to begin. “My mother...OUR mother, has worn that chain around her neck for the son she had to let go for years. My older brother that she adored. Because her husband, our father, ran away with him, with you. She said you both died in a car accident,” Bea cried out. “Dad wanted me to join the organization when I got older. Mom wouldn’t budge. So he ran off with me in the middle of the night while the two of you slept. I was raised in HQ. This is home to me,” Richie explained. “So where is Dad?” Bea stammered. Richie walked towards a large screen in the center of HQ. On the monitor, a criminal profile list sped past, stopping on a strange man. “This is who alerted the two men in the hotel,” Richie said. Bea looked at the screen intently. This couldn’t be her father. He was gone. She was sure of it. Or was she really that sure? “You weren’t supposed to make it out of the hotel. He thought you were already long deceased,” Richie said, oddly calm. “But Mom,” She began. “...said that because she didn’t want her only child left to find out, she married a mastermind. He wanted us to go into business with him. She covered it up to protect you,” Richie finished. “So, Mom knows I am a part of this organization?” She questioned. “I had to get her blessing to give the go ahead for the email to be sent. Of course she knew. I needed to know my sister was safe. Because for most of your life I wasn’t there. And I am sorry, Bea,” he said solemnly. Bea turned away from the screen, sat down on the floor, and stared into the distance. Mystery solved, she guessed. ●

Sister, Interrupted

by ASHANTAY COLEMAN

It was the early morning of 1969, and there are two polar opposite sisters. One always seems like she has something to hide while the other seems to never have a problem opening up to any person she meets. In a luxury studio apartment, a large bedroom that belongs to the sisters sits at the top of the stairs to the left. Two twin size beds inhabit the room: one next to the door and one in the corner next to the window. The bed next to the window is neatly made with a white comforter, pink pillows, and stuffed animals. The left side of the bed sits a white rug and white nightstand with a red alarm clock and a sheer light pink lamp. The second drawer is cracked open, and a peek inside reveals a brown diary with a gold heart shaped lock but no key.

The bed next to the door is half made with navy blue sheets and wrinkled black and gray pillows. Four feet to the left of the bed stands a black dresser with a light gray rug underneath that's wide enough to reach that side of the bed. On top of the dresser sits a record player spinning The Velvet Underground with vinyl records stacked behind it against the wall. Next to the record player is a circular white ashtray with a burnt cigarette bud inside. Underneath, the ashtray peaks the tail of a gold key.

It is late in the evening, and the first and third

drawers of the white nightstand are now cracked; the second drawer is wide open, but there's no diary inside. The sheets are ripped off the bed and lie on the floor. Pillows and stuffed animals are scattered across the white rug. The brown diary is wide open, as it sits on the navy-blue sheets on the other bed. There are drops of blood scattered across the pages the diary was left open on. Blood also stained the navy-blue sheets as well as the gray carpet that sits next to the bed and underneath the dresser. Lying on the gray carpet is a blood-stained kitchen knife, the body of one of the sisters, and the gold key in the palm of her hand. On the dresser, the ashtray is moved slightly to the right of the record player. The record player is now spinning a Jefferson Airplane vinyl.

It was the early morning of the next day, and the navy-blue sheets and the gray rug are tucked inside a laundry basket that sits on the bed. Black and gray pillows cover the spot of blood that soaked through the sheets onto the mattress. On the floor beside the bed sits a roll of large trash bags and a thick, black towel wrapped around the kitchen knife. The white bed sheets are perfectly tucked in with pink pillows and stuffed animals placed neatly on top. The diary is placed back into the second drawer, as all of the drawers of the white nightstand are shut completely with the gold key taped underneath the red alarm clock. The record player case is closed with all the vinyl records stacked neatly behind it. The sounds of a car pulling up to the driveway intrudes its way through the walls of the now silent bedroom. ●



