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# ABSYNTH

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# THE NETWORK MARKETING SCAM THAT IS DEVASTATING STUDENTS

Brayden Knox

One thing a majority of students have in common is the crippling, never-ending pile of student debt that stacks up each year. Whether students are attempting to keep up with it or simply digging themselves a deeper grave each year, there seems to be an array of solutions that social media and other outlets offer to students in order to make a quick and easy buck. This is a great idea in hindsight, but most students find themselves in the middle of a scam before they even realize what they've signed up for. The number one scam affecting students and young-adults in general is multi-level marketing schemes. This is basically a nice way of saying pyramid scheme; a marketing tactic in which revenue is made from a non-contractual team of 'self-employed' sellers who gain money from either selling so much company product or recruiting new sellers for the brand, in which they gain a cut of their profits. Often to begin this process you are to purchase a 'starter kit' that sets you up to start selling. The reason people are dubbed as self-employed is because they are expected to purchase company products and make dollars based on commissions. This is done by having parties where friends and family of

the sellers can come and try the product or even become recruited under them. Sellers also use social medias, such as Facebook and Instagram to reach out to potential buyers and convince them to buy their product. This is essentially how the whole multi-level marketing scheme plays out, but let's get into why it is considered a scam and break down the bad news for college students who get into MLM's.

Have you ever received that extremely awkward Facebook message from a high-school friend that hasn't talked to you in 3 years, asking if you would like the opportunity of a lifetime? Maybe they asked if you wanted to be a boss-babe? Or, maybe they said it was easy money to pay off those student loans that keep you up at night? Well let me tell you, I have gotten one to many of these messages asking me to either become a part of their 'team' or to purchase their products because I seem like the type to benefit from them. Initially, out of guilt I politely declined or maybe even purchased a small item out of respect, but now that I know what I know about MLM's I do not engage. However, often I am approached not to purchase products, but to instead

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## The Network Marketing Scam that is Devastating Students

sell them on my own and join said persons team. This is the initial phase of starting an MLM; recruitment. This is done because the more people you have under you in an MLM the more likely you are to make money. When entering these schemes new comers must purchase their own starter kit in order to get started and later purchase more in order to sell more. However, these kits make up a majority of the revenue coming in for these companies. Some starting kits aren't all that bad. For example, Arbonnes starter- an MLM targeting the vegan movement- is only \$60 for a few items. In contrast, LuLaRoes starter kit is upwards of \$5,000-\$6,000 in order to get started. This money is often put on student's credit cards or covered by credit lines in order to get their own little business started because they simply cannot afford this on their own. Therefore, people sell that boss-babe life in which you can be self-employed and a full-time student at the same time, in order to pay off the debt the initial cost often puts these individuals in. Pictures of trips, events, parties and even company cars are paraded around social media in order to make you believe this could really be your life, when in reality, these things almost never happen for those who join an MLM. They make it seem like you will climb the company ladder in no time, hitting milestones in which you'll be rewarded with free vacations and cars. Seems like the dream for a student, right? Wrong. A recent study found that only 5% of individuals in MLMs are able to make back the money they spent initially in purchasing just their starter kits. This does not factor in the other merchandise they

need to sell on top of what they start with, as well on what's spent on parties and advertising. Further, it was found that of the 5% that don't actually loose money from get-go, they make on average, only \$50 a month. Not a very appealing side hustle, huh? This is because only the top few tiers of this schemes are successful in making money, 95% of those involved ending up in debt. Not very promising odds in my personal opinion. What's worse? You can't even sell back what you were unable to sell during your time with the company. Thus, you are left in debt, with a ton of product you don't want and most likely, regret.

So why is this an epidemic for students? Because as of the past 15 years, the marketing tactics used for most MLMs target specifically university and college students. They not only are creating products students are more likely to purchase, but also play into their need for easy money and a side hustle. Prior to this, it was apparent the target audience for MLMs was military and single moms looking to spend more time with their children whilst making a profitable income. This has now shifted with the increasing population of young adults going into University to target those most financially vulnerable. Personally, I have been approached by both friends and strangers in school that have fallen into the MLM trap. I find however, most of these people aren't even looking to sell me products that target students; such as free vacation schemes, leggings and trendy makeup. No, these people all want me to join under them because they think

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## The Network Marketing Scam that is Devastating Students

I could benefit financially. Don't get me wrong, I definitely could, but maybe in a side hustle that's secure and trustworthy. These messages often include the term 'boss babe', making it seem like I could be some super student with my own small business that takes up next to no time. These messages often include a disgusting amount of emojis to make it a more appealing and relatable offer. It overall leads me to cringe, but I can see how some students who are absolutely desperate may fall for this. Of-course working from home, selling products you actually believe in and being a powerful business person sounds like an amazing deal but this just isn't the reality with MLMs. Those that are asking you to join under them are simply looking for more people to make money off of, because this truly is the only way you can maybe be in the 5% of people making on average 50\$ dollars a month. The remainder of students often find themselves charging copious amounts of money they don't have onto a fresh credit card in order to cover their starting costs, to later down the road never make it back and simply give up. Of-course if you are one of the first to join a pyramid scheme, you are

more likely to be on the top, winning bonus vacations and company vehicles. However, that just simply isn't reality for most students. I urge anyone looking into joining an MLM to do their research first and look up the statistics themselves in order to ensure they are not just falling into a disgusting scam. Frankly, I think the idea of MLMs highlights some of humanities worst traits in that they are looking to benefit off of those that are most struggling financially and mentally. Students are exhausted and desperate, making us easy targets for scams like these. Of course, I only speak to one extreme end of the MLM scheme, some may be a viable option for creating a full-time income for students. It is just likely far more likely to result in money loss and debt build-up. Please be safe when it comes to getting involved with any product-based company and look for the red flags of a scam. When it comes to a side hustle there are so many more safe and structured options.

Be safe, friends!

Brayden



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# VIOLET TIMES

Remi Akers

*Purple is a door,  
A start,  
A shelter,  
A seat at the table  
Full of hearts that made this home  
And hands that guided me  
Through willow trees —  
Like a homing beacon or a blaring foghorn,  
Highlighting the path to a healthy mind  
And the importance being honest  
About hazards we find  
In houses we mourn.*

*Purple is a plate of armor,  
A sword,  
A shield,  
A security blanket,  
That holds power and protection,  
As it does not disguise  
But signifies  
A meaning that's permanent in its pertinence  
Yet only embodied by the subject,  
Assuring me that I have the right to  
Protest when you object  
To my existence.*

*Purple is a cloak,  
A sanctum,  
A secret,  
A set of shutters I close  
To hide from disapproving glares  
Without losing my grace.  
Gloating faces,  
Glowering from high towers engraving praxis,  
Grip their faith too tight to doubt mores that  
Glorify those who dismiss their guilt with  
Vain gestures while they're at  
Gate-keeping practice.*

*Purple is a megaphone,  
A shout,  
A storm,  
A sound that resounds  
When I refuse to disappear.  
I'll drown out your damning  
While you're trying  
To dismember me to reshape a memory.  
I yell "I am enough" and rip my lungs  
In pieces because I am not yours to  
Redeem like a wish from  
A dream factory.*

# RECORDS ON THE WALL

Remi Akers

*Dark circles wrap around their eyes,  
All the colour they found is lost.  
In ill-defined shapes: stories in disguise.*

*Every record is a fragment of their truth.  
All that you hear is one in distortion,  
Slight as jive overheard from a diner booth.*

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# A WEEKEND VISIT

Jamie Boyd-Robinson

It is the time of year when the crows call me home. I hear them at 6am on my way to work. At 10am, they search for food in the dead grass at my parks as I prepare the diamonds for the night's baseball games. 3pm rolls around and they wait for me on the telephone wires above my mother's house. I tell them that I still have work to do in St. Catharines, but I will visit.

So, on the last weekend of July, I set foot in Peterborough for the first time since April. The first thing I notice is that the crows are not here to welcome me back. But I can hear them in the distance. The second thing I notice is that Peterborough feels different. It does not feel wrong, just different. The feeling of difference is one that I cannot quite pinpoint. It leaves me questioning my sanity while also making me more aware. I have been coming back every year in September for the past four years and it has never felt like this.

Alone in my rented room, away from the influence of the city, I realize what the difference in feeling is. Peterborough feels...unnatural. At first, I wonder if it because of the time of year. I have always come back in September when everyone else has already moved in and a new semester of assignments, classes, and professors hangs over my head. (Who knew nine-thousand students could change the atmosphere of a city?) Visiting was never considered, even when the crows were calling.

On the other hand, one might say that it is the feeling of change, a major shift in the universe. Everything this coming semester is new for me except for the name of the city, the house I live in, and my new job. But here's the thing: I do not feel this presence in St. Catharines like I do in Peterborough. It is new, powerful. This presence is no longer a new semester hanging over my head, but something that physically exists in the air. I see it in the shadows, in the nonexistent movement in my peripheral, in the eyes of the people I pass, but I do not know if anyone else sees it. I am afraid to ask.

Perhaps the source has always been there. Lurking in the alleys of the brightly lit cafes. Fading in and out between gasps of laughter. Growing like mold in the empty stores of Portage Place and Peterborough Square. Perhaps a veil has been lifted.

This newness is unnerving to say the least. I am not usually the person to notice something amiss about a city. The usual details of a city blur together until they create a landscape—a picture that I can ignore. But here, there is a new silence, one that covers the city like a fog, directing and redirecting the everyday sounds that once created their own symphony. Peterborough has become its own little island, its own little planet. There might never be an escape. As a person who always has an escape route,

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## A Weekend Visit

this is something unnatural compared to what I am used to. I do not know if this newness is good or bad yet. The crows have kept their deadly beaks shut. But there must be a reason they called me back.

Perhaps this feeling of newness is all in my head. It is a coincidence that the crows have shown up at my parks when it is close to the time that I come back. Their presence in my parks could be part of their migration (if they tend to do that sort of thing). Peterborough is at a different elevation level than St. Catharines. The presence I feel could very well be the difference in air quality. Perhaps I am overthinking things again. I tend to do that when faced with a change.

Perhaps the crows are a warning.

A crow caws outside my bedroom window as if in answer.

Perhaps it is the new sentiment of home.

Something deep within the depths of the city calls to me, but unlike the crows, it calls in a tongue I can barely decipher. I recognize the word 'home' and wonder if this is why the crows summoned me. They are obeying orders from a much larger force. Something that has taken over the naturality of the city. Something that is patient but desperate for me to move back, sending out its messengers, its whispers, on the wind. I am wary sitting in the silence of my rental house. As if I am waiting for something to happen while also being stuck. Do I leave, go back to St. Catharines where I do not feel its presence? Or do I stay and let this force provide a new natural for the city?

I inhale and exhale. Perhaps it does not matter which path I choose. Perhaps the source is waiting for the right time to strike. When the new students start pouring in and the old ones come crawling back. When the leaves change to the colours of fire and the nights grow longer. When the Otonabee river freezes over. Perhaps during a time when we are most vulnerable.

Perhaps it is all in my head.



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# SUNFLOWER GIRL

Julie Musclow



At school, I was always asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. While other students around me said typical careers - a *police officer, teacher, firefighter* - I said I wanted to be a sunflower. My teacher Mrs. Lambert thought this was an unusual response, I could tell from the puzzled expression plastered on her face.

She would say to me, “Flora is there anything else you want to be besides a sunflower?”

I would repeat myself, “No just a sunflower.”

Mrs. Lambert made me feel like my dream of becoming a sunflower was a joke and not serious. I could hear the snickers of my classmates and them chanting the nickname they gave me: *Sunflower Girl*. Truth be told I loved the nickname they gave me, my mother used to always call me her *little flower*.

I explained to Mrs. Lambert and the class how I enjoyed the company of the flowers, listening to their whispers in the wind. The sun-

flowers were my friends and they never let me down. Every secret, accomplishment, failure and memory I told the sunflowers. I shared with the class my mother’s favorite saying by Rupi Kaur; “Despite knowing they won’t be here for long. They still choose to live their brightest lives.” My mother embodied the life of a sunflower and I was determined to follow in her footsteps. Sunflowers always persevere through rough patches in life and I knew if I was one I could too.

As I grew older, I was never seen as the *cool kid*. I never fit in with the *in-crowd*. My classmates never grew out of calling me *Sunflower Girl*. Other girls my age painted their nails, talked about boys, played sports and I spent my time walking in fields or talking to flowers. It was apparent to me that I was different from others my age, constantly allowing my imagination to wander with nature. In my mind I lived in a castle, sunflowers were dancing around me and thorn walls separated me from the weeds that teased me.

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## Sunflower Girl

Each day when I returned home from school, I sat in my garden. A beautiful garden of sunflowers, enormous petals that towered over me. The sunflowers were my guardian angels. I was always content in my garden spending many nights in it talking to my mom and the flowers. I believe the flowers could hear my thoughts and helped me through every curveball life through my way.

10 years ago, my flower friends helped me through the horrific accident of losing my mother. On a cold winter night in February, ice covered the streets. A lonely set of headlights on the road (or so my mother thought). My mother was struck by an on-coming car. The car came out of nowhere, going 100 km/hour. **CRASH. BANG. CRUNCH.** Loud screams as my flower froze. Everything felt numb to me, not even the flowers could cheer me up.

Weeks after the accident I sat in the field of flowers. But, this time I ignored my flower friends. How could anyone understand the pain I was going through? My mother was my sunflower, in my eyes she bloomed brighter than all others. She had wilted away from my garden leaving my heart torn. I became so bitter, full of sadness, anger and fear. I became a weed in what used to be a beautiful garden.

After being off school for 3 weeks I went back, only this time without my flower friends.

I spent every day isolating myself from everything and everyone. Sitting alone in dusty corners, laying in fields of weeds blankly staring at my old flower friends. I lost the happiness flowers gave me and my petals fell with a slight flutter to the ground one by one.

The next four years are ones I like to blur from my memory. I was getting bullied at school by the weeds. One weed Taya bullied me the most. Taya was the meanest weed, the one you would spray away but she continued coming back. She placed dead flowers in my locker, sticky notes with hurtful sayings on my desk and she even targeted me during dodgeball in gym class. I allowed the weeds to grow, they had a grip around me and I suffocated at their touch. I felt so empty without my sunflower.

May 13th, 2019 my life was transformed by an old friend. I was sitting in the smallest corner of my school's library reading R.M Drakes novel *The Beautiful and the Damned*. On page 366, I found a paper with a note written on it.



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## Sunflower Girl

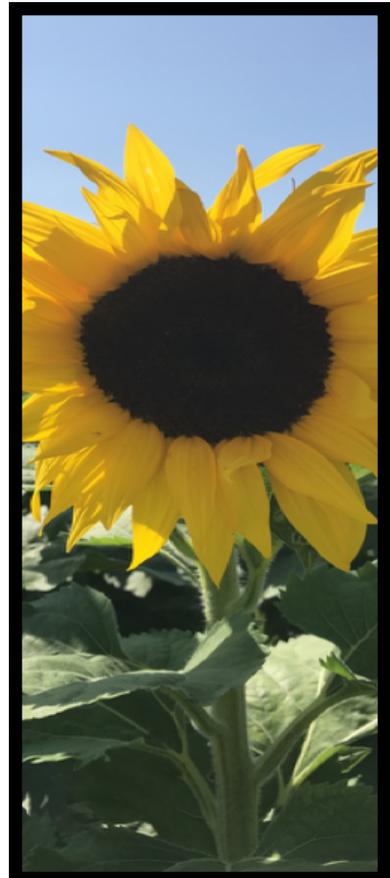
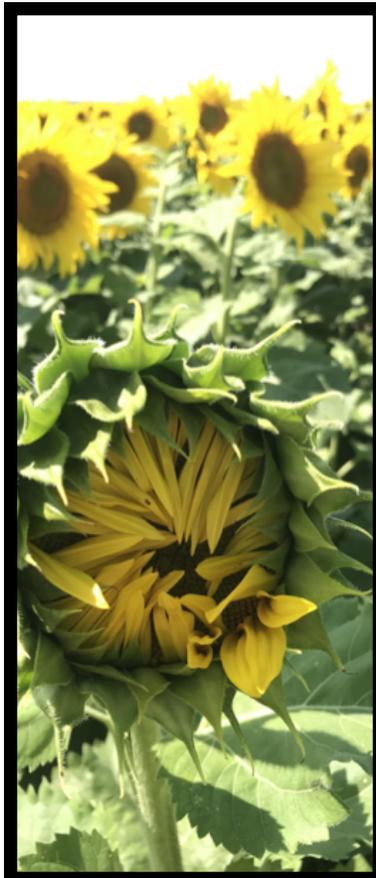
The note said, "Despite knowing they won't be here for long. They still choose to live their brightest lives."

I felt everything at once, for so long after my mother passed away I had bottled my emotions up and I could finally feel again. I blinked my eyes as a tear begin to trickle down my face. The trickle turned into a stream of water and I began to bloom again.

It would be an understatement to say that sunflowers merely changed my life. Sunflowers have helped me become the woman I am today. I stood up to the weeds at school and many of them are now a part of my garden. I transitioned from a wilting seedling to a beautiful blooming flower.

This summer I honored my sunflower by standing tall in a field full of sunflowers just like the giant ones she used to grow. I danced with the flowers and heard their whispers. I told them all my secrets, accomplishments and failures. Around 8:51 PM the sun was setting and a single sunflower stood taller than the rest. That sunflower was my mom, who helped me grow from a seed to a beautiful sunflower. Life is never easy, but if you stand tall and face the sunshine you will get through.

You are a sunflower my dear, "Little flower I love watching you bloom."



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# TRIBULATION

Kavya Chandra

*Poet's notes: The dramatic changes of Article 370 by the Indian Constitution have increased the fearful division between Hindu and Muslim communities in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India, where we continue to experience the loss of not just respect & empathy but of love & community. Even after 72 years of independence, we suffer the consequences of colonization as we forget the brotherhood that made us stronger in times of need.*

the sirens quiet down the lull we've  
cocooned in our stomachs - a coconut  
smashed at the door as good health, good  
fortune, good love, great promises are shadowed  
onto the barricades. the coconut is empty.

in my country, we hold hands on the streets  
unromantically - no shoes, no socks, rough feet -  
my brother is a silent vendetta, his brother is a  
loudmouth, our brother hates religion but builds  
temples on stained walls. the walls are pissed on.

when the army men walk back into the room, delicacies  
from East, West, North & South are processed in  
*gulab jamuns, roshagullahs*, anything to sweeten the  
missing limbs, missing friends, missing teeth, missing words,  
missed chances. we pretend to sweeten war.

my brother tells his *ammi*, and I tell my *ma* - we don't  
like holding hands, we hate coconuts, and our *chappals*  
are broken at the seams, how should we walk through  
the carnage of this love? - and they say nothing,  
lying still on the streets. someone asks us to have faith.

my brother has a lisp when he prays in the kitchen across  
the veranda of my house, across the cracks in our garden -  
the flowers are withering, and the barricades are borrowing  
all the vigor underneath our roots - he makes *chai* for two, hoping  
that his prayers will seep through the fissures. the cups grow cold.

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tribulation

when the children go to school again, the brothers will not ask for safety, or demand water, or food, or comfort - they will wrap guns inside the lunch boxes, & repeat *Allah, Bhagwan*, till the blades cut through hands and voices, the same blood painting *tilaks* on our foreheads. the guns trigger silence.

soot lines on our feet, the barrels are pointed to the sky:  
we have a limit on the pellets, and yet still, when my fitted camo merges with the sirens on the streets, no delicacies can fill my empty stomach, no coconut can smash comfort on my door, no flowers can bloom. hate consumes my faith.

the prayers soften into lullabies of a lost ambition, an embracing ghost of the past & the future sits like a monster with its tail between its knees as the false slumber grips the flowers, the cold cups of *chai*: my brother and I sit afraid of the streets we both forget are ours, we choose the speak *quiet* in our mother tongue. the resistance is never discovered.

my brothers are dead & forgotten.



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# ELDER MEMORIES

Tyler Majer



The halting cult of memory  
Olfactory notes  
Vaulted not by lock and key  
But hidden close,  
Yet under siege

Made Accessible  
Only by Mind  
Synapses, relapses  
Firing out of time  
The temporal  
Temporarily fine  
Deconstructed by  
Booze and Wine

The twinkling cells  
That slowly fade  
By alcohol  
Destroyed, dismayed  
Heaving, breathing  
Never leave unscathed  
Please, oh please,  
Come back to me.

A radish picked,  
Salt in my grandfather's palm  
Viewed with clarity  
A Catholic's Psalm  
Recited, and Lighted  
By breath and spoon  
He died.

Cancer.  
Blowing up balloons,

Wondrous myths  
And glorious tales  
Regaled by voices  
Wheezing, pale  
The acidic taste  
Of ciders, ales,

What more than this...  
Do I need?

Black Tar on Lungs  
Smoke on breath  
The concave enclave  
Of a smoker's chest  
Warnings ignored  
Though it's for the best  
Pour another drink for me

A grandmother's smile  
On a wrinkled face  
The franticity  
Of a gambler's chase  
Opening Nevada tickets  
At only 8  
She's dying now  
And my heart bleeds

Sloppy Wet Kisses  
Boxes of wine  
Too many cigarettes  
Never enough time  
We used to listen  
to the Platters and dance,  
Smoke getting in our eyes  
A frail, loving woman  
Ashes, denied.

Listen to their stories  
Although they'll succumb  
To the calming influence  
Of that whitenoise hum:  
Time drags on,  
And then you're done  
And all that's left is memories

And all you are is memories.

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# LIES AS TOLD BY EZEKIEL AND THOREAU

Zack Weaver

Thoreau, Thoreau, where did you go?  
I know you like this nature shit  
But I think it kinda blows,  
I've bestowed life to generations of  
leeches sucking on my toes,  
and normally I'd be sorta into that  
kind of thing  
but a crusty leaf rustled, then eternal  
damnation flashed before my eyes-

for I'm deathly afraid of snakes you see,  
and my eyes  
are a trembling china plate moon  
muffled by lake ripples, go  
bears shoo! Pesky monstrous beasts  
echo buhkweet field parties- brainless  
things  
seeking to satisfy any natural impulse-  
oh yes, I imagine this is where they shit,  
Thoreau, bears and snakes are trying to  
nibble on my toes  
nylon tent puppet show nestles rock  
ledge where the wind doth blows

and we drink lake water for fun until  
sadness wells and the water doth blows  
your insides out while frogs watch,  
singing their hubalub with bulging eyes-  
this must be the ecstasy Insane Clown  
Posse beholds midst their fans, toes  
not quite out of the question- clowns are  
into feet I'm sure, "go on"  
I can imagine them saying, while  
pondering the mysteries of life, out here  
in this nature shit-  
hiking and whistling for the pleasure of  
my companions, they love this avant-  
garde stuff

where my whistling is the sound of  
utopia, marching to conquer useless  
tree stuff-  
where birds are no longer needed and  
beefcake lumberjack on his frontier  
horn doth blows  
the good people into giving up on  
plastic straws to save the Canadian  
Dolphins from synthetic shit-  
Thoreau, clap these valiant stewards of  
nature on the back and dry their  
watering eyes

for I am out here in nature and its  
mediocre at best- but perhaps if I were  
to go  
to Walden and quit tormenting these  
sad and sweaty toes

they would rally behind me, and  
together we would usurp the forest  
wolves and their padded toes,  
then wearing fur coats, we'd play  
aristocrat, parade around like assholes-  
sorta thing,  
except we'd be in the woods as you'll see  
on Instagram, else it wouldn't count, to go  
and have it not be known? Thoreau, nature  
is totally my aesthetic o'how it blows  
my ego and spirits whimsical and  
sporadic, enough to be a used car  
dealership dancer, my eyes  
red with joy jet from tree to tree,  
examining where my used car lot will  
be, a sudden shit

spider breaks reality and I am the most  
vulnerable man, among the flowers and  
the spiders of shit,  
out on the trail I am the dancing queen  
when Abba plays on the blue pill  
speaker, my toes  
twirl with the grace of one thousand  
antelopes, each exploit catches my  
bouncing eyes  
suddenly Pitt Bull and I are harmonizing  
his hit song timber together, as we  
knock stuff  
down to create room for suburbia, and I  
can hear the drums Fernando dost blows-  
the trees conspire with gin  
hallucinations, I'm lost as fuck- Thoreau,  
where did you go?

searching for Walden I found three v's  
and wafted shit box summit daisies, a  
scuttling thing  
encroached my safe space bubble, I saw  
nature's demons lusting for toes, a  
dozen blows  
from sticks, bugs, and stones- my  
weary eyes pray you Thoreau, save me  
before you go

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# SOARING

Kelsey Guindon

*Content warning: This story deals with issues that may be triggering to readers, such as human trafficking, descriptions of sexual and physical violence, and descriptions of neglect.*

For as long as I could remember, I'd been afraid of heights.

I was eighteen and had never been to an airport. I was scared visiting the CN tower during a school trip, so I couldn't imagine being completely suspended in air. The thought made me anxious. But this would be worth it.

I always felt like a lost cause, a filler character. Then I came across an advertisement on an online job board to work as a nanny in Europe. The family hiring, the Dubois family, seemed very nice. They told me that my lack of experience wouldn't be an issue, and offered to pay my plane ticket. No more small town. Instead, Europe! A land of possibilities and romance. I giggled thinking of romance. I had never even kissed a boy before.

*Human Trafficking is the recruitment of people by means such as force and deception for the purpose of exploitation in tasks such as, but not limited to: prostitution, sexual exploitation, and forced labour (United Nations).*

On the plane, I shut my eyes tightly to avoid seeing how high up I was, and eventually fell asleep. I woke to an announcement saying we were arriving. In the airport, I waited patiently at gate 9, where I was supposed to meet the family. I was nervous, but also excited. Two men in fitted suits held a sign with my name. I wondered why Mrs. Dubois wasn't there. Hopefully one of these men was Mr. Dubois. I cleared my throat and extended my hand.

"I'm Ben," The first man said gravelly, leading me to assume he smoked frequently. His designer clothes could not hide the dark circles under his eyes and the translucence of his skin. He looked like a corpse at a funeral. "I'm a friend of the Dubois family. Something came up and they asked me to come get you."

The other man said nothing.

It wasn't the welcoming I was expecting but I was there to work, not vacation. I followed them through the airport. We walked quickly against the crowd, people blurring by. They led me to a grey SUV.

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## Soaring

I crawled in, then heard the doors lock. The SUV was cold, the air conditioner on so high that goosebumps raised on my skin. I had always been underweight, and it didn't help in situations like this. I looked out the window and watched as we passed trendy boutiques and vendors. The sky was dimming. The boutiques and vendors slowly disappeared from sight, leaving run down buildings covered with graffiti in their place. I began to sense something was wrong. The Dubois family had told me they lived in a small cottage on the countryside. "Just taking a quick shortcut," Ben said passively, as if reading my mind.

*Human Trafficking reports have increased steadily between 2009 and 2016. However, it is still extremely underreported. From 2009-2016, 95% of victims were female and 72% of victims were under the age of 25 (Government of Canada).*

I quietly tried to unlock the door without them noticing, but it wouldn't budge. The car sped up. I'm being dramatic, I thought to myself. I wasn't familiar with the area. Maybe it was common for neighbourhoods there to look that way. More character. Twenty minutes later, the SUV pulled into the parking spot of an old building. The sky was completely dark now so it was difficult to see. A group of men waited around the dimly lit entrance. "Making a quick stop. Come with us," Ben demanded.

I was afraid to wait alone so I followed the men to a door at the back. Ben motioned for me to go ahead. After opening the door, he pushed me down. My knee scraped against a nail as I hit the floor. The door slammed behind me. I stood and threw myself against it, but it was locked. A voice, laced with a thick European accent, chuckled.

"Welcome."

The man who accompanied the voice, slightly visible in the shadows, was large and scruffy; at least three times my size and a foot taller.

"You've been a naughty girl, haven't you? That plane ticket cost nearly \$2000. Now you'll have to pay us back somehow..."

His voice trailed off as he placed his hand on my left shoulder, and moved the strap of my shirt slightly off of it. His lips curled into a subtle smile. He reeked of nicotine and sweat. I started to yell but nobody came. Voices in the other part of the building drowned out my pleas and left me feeling helpless. The man's finger traced the side of my jaw and he tilted my head up. "And don't even try leaving before you've paid up," he grinned. "There's no getting away, and if you try, we'll have no choice but to stop you."

I was terrified. I was small and weak. It wouldn't take much for these men to hurt me. This was my new life, the kind of thing you hear about in the news.

## Soaring

*“According to the Integrated Criminal Court Survey, between 2008 and 2016 there were 84 completed adult criminal court cases in Canada where human trafficking was the most serious offence. Sixty per cent of those cases were stayed or withdrawn. One-third resulted in a guilty finding, and the accused was acquitted in five cases. ‘It’s a very difficult crime to prove. Sometimes you get the cooperation of victims, but not always.’” (Global News)*

Men came and went often, as if on an assembly line, each one making me feel emptier. A vessel, less than human. I no longer had the luxuries of being a filler character. Bruises coated my skin. My hair was dry and dirty. Already underweight to begin with, I had probably lost fifteen pounds. I was given scraps. They wanted to keep me thin and desirable.

Twisted smiles and dirty hands of men with wives and children became all I knew. They spit their words at me, calling me obscenities as I willed myself not to cry. I wasn’t street smart, but coming from a small farming town, I never had to be. I always shrugged off the stories of girls and boys like me as a scary story to warn children about being safe.

I wondered if anyone would find me.

Days drowned into nights, drowning me in the process. I felt suffocated. I had no concept of how long I had been there.

The man, the last man to see me, looked to be in his twenties. He had patchy facial hair and licked his lips when he saw me. His eyes hungered in a way that reduced me to meat. I was gift paper to unwrap then throw away once he opened what was inside. He didn’t speak any English and yelled when I tried to speak.

This time was different.

Looking into his eyes I could see the emptiness. The barbarity.

I could feel myself slipping away, soaring higher and higher. This time, I wasn’t afraid of how high up I was.

There, in the closet of a brothel in Europe, everything went black.

*If you suspect that you, or anyone you know, is a victim of human trafficking, please reach out for help. Human Trafficking harms and takes lives each day. You can report online at <https://www.canadiancrimestoppers.org/contact>, or call 1-800-222-8477.*

*You will remain anonymous and protected.*

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# GORDON RAMSAY'S MOM AND THE BIG, BAD, FUSSY EATER

Melchior Dudley

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Don't take this shit seriously.*

During a Wednesday supper an event unfolded which became the straw that broke Joseph-Laval Ramsay's patience; it was his son did the deed — the 12-year-old notoriously fussy eater known as Gordon Ramsay.

Supper was a helping of hot, tender beef cheeks, served on top of roasted fall vegetables and smothered in a lovely spiced gravy to wet the palate and provide a dimensional backdrop of flavour.

Mrs. Ramsay had invested the better part of the evening in preparing the meal. In fact, it had actually taken all day, for she had placed the beef and vegetables into a slow cooker before she left for work (along with carefully chosen spices, of course, including orange rind, garlic, bay leaves, allspice, and red wine). Mrs. Ramsay was considerably motivated to impress her young child. She was hoping that for once in her life, she might bring the faintest of smiles to the cold, unforgiving face of little Gordon.

She had even asked her husband, Joseph-Laval Ramsay, to be extra patient with their child that evening, so as to not give little Gordon reason for outburst.

Supper was served at eight o'clock sharp, which little Gordon had once expressed to be his preferred time of dining.

Mr. Gordon was not particularly impressed with this timing, for he had finished a long day of work at his legal office by five o'clock and his stomach had been gurgling and growling since. Now nearly faint with hunger, he also felt like growling. But he kept his lips thin and pressed together out of respect for his wife's wishes — but definitely not for out of respect for his insatiable, intolerable, inhumane demonic offspring which his wife fondly nicknamed "Gordo."

*"Gordo" is too kind of a name for such a child, Mr. Ramsay thought, staring across the table into Gordon's black, unfeeling eyes. "Gordo" sounds round and bouncy, like the name of a happy-go-lucky cartoon rabbit.*

*If it were up to me, I would call him "Gore" so everyone would know his presence is a horrible thing.*

With that thought, Mrs. Ramsay appeared beside him, carrying a steaming plate of food. Mr. Ramsay instantly began salivating for the aromas and colours which touched his senses like a gentle airy goddess — but the treasure was not for him. Mrs. Ramsay walked straight past him, placing the plate in front of Gordon.

Little Gordon didn't even look at the food; instead, he continued to stare at Mr. Ramsay, and Mr. Ramsay thought he saw the faintest of smug looks cross little Gordon's face.

## Gordon Ramsay's Mom and the Big, Bad, Fussy Eater

As soon as it appeared, though, it was gone.

*That little turd*, Mr. Ramsay thought, gritting his teeth.

Mrs. Ramsay looked at him. "Yours will be next, darling."

Mr. Ramsay forced a smile in her general direction as she left, but he continued to look at Gordon. The tween sniffed the air above the food and wafted some steam toward his nose. His features turned sour at the smell, and he scrunched his nose and pulled his lips back into a deep grimace as if it was hot, rotting garbage that was sitting on his plate, and not the most succulent, soft, and savoury meal he had ever seen.

Mr. Ramsay was on the verge of losing his coconuts. His son's disrespectful display had incited within him a furnace of hurricane fury, and his vehemence was visible in a neck and face that were redder and goosepimpled than a turkey's. Everything within him burned to reach across the table and slam Gordon's apathetic little head into his plate of food.

But a coolness overcame his body when his wife walked into the room, carrying both his and her plate of food. She gave him his plate and sat down, smiling at Gordon. Gordon, meanwhile, was poking a piece of beef cheek with his knife, as if testing whether it would spring to life with ample prodding.

"Well," Mrs. Ramsay said, "I hope you like it. It's beef cheeks —"

"We all know what it is, mother," said little Gordon coldly, sawing mechanically into a dark piece of meat.

Mr. Ramsay tightened his grip on his knife, watching Gordon. Mrs. Ramsay was also looking at Gordo. They both knew what was coming next. They were about to receive a review of Mrs. Ramsay's cooking, whether they liked it or not.

Little Gordon finished cutting through

his beef and used his knife and fork to separate the pieces by a half-inch on his plate. His face went to disgust.

*Here we go again*, Mr. Ramsay thought.

"IT'S FUCKING RAW!!!" Little Gordon screamed.

"Don't be ridiculous, sweetie, it was cooking in the pot all day —"

"MOOOOOOO!" Gordo shrieked. "HEAR THAT? IT'S STILL ALIVE! MY GOD! YOU'VE OUTDONE YOURSELF!!!"

Mrs. Ramsay rolled her eyes. *Tonight, is not a night for smiles*. She was disappointed, but not crushed by little Gordon's response. The night would unroll like all the nights before it, and that was fine by her. She began to eat her own food.

*Mmmm. Quite lovely*, she thought.

Within Mr. Ramsay's mind, however, murderous impulses fought for freedom. He furiously cut into his own beef and took a bite. Perfectly cooked. Tender. Juicy. A kaleidoscope of intersecting flavours and spices blessed his palate. He was appalled at Gordon's assessment. He saw nothing in the dish that could be improved. This realization — which he had uncovered on so many occasions before — just infuriated him even more, and a quick pump of blood visibly climbed up the artery in his neck.

Now little Gordon moved on to the vegetables. He pulled them apart quite easily, and this action brought more disdain to his sharp features. He began to shout once more.

"OH, DEAR GOD!! NO FIRMNESS AT ALL! SOFT AND FLACCID, LIKE A BABY'S PENIS!!!"

*This is beyond unacceptable*, thought Mr. Ramsay, glaring daggers at his child.

Mrs. Ramsay turned to her husband. "Darling," she said, "I was thinking of making

## Gordon Ramsay's Mom and the Big, Bad, Fussy Eater

chicken cacciatore on Sunday for the Robinson's visit. Do the Robinsons have any food allergies? I thought a streusel would be nice for dessert, but so many people have dairy allergies these days. I wouldn't want to risk it, because I make it with butter. But maybe I could use coconut oil. That might be fine. What do you think?"

"Great, honey." Mr. Ramsay had heard nothing she said. He had been thinking about the factors which led to the creation of the demon-child, and his internal contemplation had just given rise to a profound realization. He was suddenly born new again, and he could now see his surroundings for what they were. He looked to his wife — she was a kind, sweet wife. *The sweetest.* But now he saw her faults, too, and knew that *her only fault in the whole world was that she let little Gordo get his way with everything.* Then he looked to Gordon. *Pale. Heartless. Demanding. A demon-child.* But what had he done to promote respectful behaviour in the boy? Mr. Ramsay instantly felt dread, for his fault was like his wife's. Except his flaw was that he always let her get her way, and she used this, in turn, to let Gordon get his way! It was a terrible, terrible situation. *Spare the rod, spoil the child. Nobody is better for it. Especially not little Gordo — what kind of future is there for a boy who only knows how to hurl fresh, hyperbolic insults?*

Little Gordo by now had turned his attention to the sauce which was glazed over the vegetables and meat. He dipped his spoon along the side of his dish and inspected the liquid. It was a glassy, light-brown jus, freckled with dark specks of spice which floated within.

He protruded his tongue into his spoon, so that only a drop of the sauce dissolved on his tongue. It was more than enough for him, evidently, for he once more snapped into his tyrannical tirade.

"DAMN!" Gordo yelled. "HOW MANY BLOODY SPICES DO YOU NEED! WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE SUPPOSED TO TASTE IF YOU JUST THROW EVERYTHING AND THE WHOLE BLOODY NAVY IN THE POT! JUST

LOOK AT IT, YOU DONKEY!!!"

Mrs. Ramsay continued to eat without the slightest hesitation.

"ENOUGH!" Mr. Ramsay roared, standing up and slamming his fist down on the table. Both Mrs. Ramsay and little Gordo jumped at the outburst. Mr. Ramsay had never so much as raised his voice before. Now he had everyone's attention.

"I've had ENOUGH of your snide little comments, enough of your yelling, your screaming, your 'this overcooked, that isn't spiced well, this tastes like a homeless man's sweaty balls.' It's unfair to your mother!"

Mrs. Ramsay and little Gordo stared at Mr. Ramsay, wide-eyed.

"You need to take your forked tongue and sharp wit and peculiar sensitivity to flavour, and channel all that junk into some kind of outlet — so you're not hurting others, and you're not hurting yourself. Because right now, Gordo, you've got two parents who are absolutely SICK TO DEATH with your unsubstantiated bullshit criticism, and it's not gonna work in your favour when you get older. This is you in four years: 'Hey, father, can I use your car to take my date to prom?' ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT, YOU DONKEY!"

There was a deafening silence. For once, little Gordo had nothing to say, and there was no sound at all, save for the slight noise when he placed down his knife and fork.

"I'm sorry," he said, to the spectacular amazement of his parents.

That night was precisely forty years ago, and it marked the beginning of a positive change in Gordon's psychology — the moment when he began to capitalize on his talents and use them for "good." Sure, he still screamed at cooks from time to time — absolutely devastating their mental states and humiliating what shreds they might have had of social lives — but that was okay if one adopted

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## Gordon Ramsay's Mom and the Big, Bad, Fussy Eater

a utilitarian perspective, since his outbursts brought him great fame and fortune. Also, the cooks he screamed at were paid heartily for working with him, and once in a while, Gordon might even pay them a compliment. Over time, his mother and father had taught him how to pay a compliment where a compliment was due.

The cooks who worked with him knew what they were getting into; Gordon's antics were quite well known. They were even sought after, high in demand like any other socially acceptable gladiatorial spectacle. He was the foremost celebrity-personality of his sport. Just as people who know nothing of golf know of Tiger Woods, and people who know nothing of baseball know of Michael Jordan, people who couldn't scramble an egg know of Gordon Ramsay. Yes, one could say that he had undergone a spectacular change.

And that was the tale of Gordon Ramsay's Mom and the big, bad, fussy eater.

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"Fine, I'll eat my asparagus next time," little Katy said, yawning.

"That wasn't the point of the story,"

her dad replied, pulling the covers up to her smooth chin.

"Okay, I won't eat asparagus."

"Eat your asparagus, but the moral of this bedtime story is to find ways to reduce your negativity and use what's left for productive pursuits."

"Too many words. Not eating asparagus. Goodnight dad."

Dad stood up, his knees cracking in ascent. "Okay, Katy, how about: use negative energy —"

"If you keep talking and keeping me up I'll be cranky tomorrow. Turn off the light. Thanks."

Dad sighed and stood by the light switch, hesitating. He switched it off, and in the darkness a blurry blue lightbulb faded away in his eyes. He yawned. The moral of the story is that children are merciless.

"I love you, Katy," he projected into the darkness.

Katy's snoring echoed back, and that was good enough for Gordon.



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# AMAUROTIC NIGHTINGALE

Shaun Phuah

It's raining again, a light spring sprinkle turning the ground muddy, and Rylee's run out the front door and onto the lawn. She leans against the trunk of a pine tree and dry heaves. She's wearing a black dress, and I watch as the rain dots the fabric with darker black spots.

"It's cold out, Rylee," I say, standing below the protection of a roof, "you're gonna get sick out there."

She dry heaves again, her back lurching up like when a dog's eaten something bad, and its body curls in on itself purging.

"Nothing's coming up," she says.

My legs feel soft under me as if I've stood up for the first time in months.

I step out into the rain, and the wet lawn is porridge under my feet. I walk up to Rylee and put a hand on her shoulder.

She dry heaves against the tree again, and I can see her whole body shaking, and there are dandelions growing out beneath us, their bright yellow heads the first things showing up in the early spring.

"You haven't eaten anything to puke up," I say.

She wipes away at the thin stream of spit that's collected by her lip with the back of her hand, and she says, "I can't go in there."

"It's okay," I say, "we can stay out here for a little bit."

I don't think I've looked at his body yet either, laid out in the casket with his eyes closed, and that strange smell, coating the walls of the room and hanging heavy in the air, some pungent sweet scent hiding something bitter just below the surface. I've seen his black suit, a size too big for his small body so the shoulders are puffed up, but I had to look away before I could see the rest of him.

"I can't cry," I say, "feels like I've got something stuck up in my sinuses or something."

"Yeah?" Rylee says, "I've been crying all morning."



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## Amaurotic Nightingale



The dandelions sprout around me, fuzzy yellow heads bright and uncaring, and soon there are other flowers growing as well, the bright colours of their petals swaying gently in the wind.

I guess I'm not really here.

I must be somewhere in my branches, or down in the roots, eyes looking away from the open doorway of his home.

"We can't avoid him forever..." Rylee says, and suddenly I feel the weight of my clothes, heavy with cold rainwater soaking into my skin.

"You mind helping me up?" She asks, extending her hand.

I nod and pull her up off the damp ground, a muddy patch left in her place.

"This is for us, you know?" she says.

"Yeah?" I say.

"Yeah. He's just a body now. Why should he care about anything? For him, there's nothing to worry about anymore. Funerals are for the living."

She puts an arm around my back, and I wrap mine around hers. I can feel her take a deep breath, and we head back to the open doorway.

A few steps into the house and his casket is there, black wood with the top open.

We walk right up to where Phoelix is, and I see his face. He's got long black eye-lashes, and big cheeks, and short black hair, and his skin looks perfect with all that make-up on, and I just start crying.

And I grab a hold of Rylee, who's started crying again too, and we're both standing by Phoelix, sobbing in each other's arms, wishing he were still with us.

Outside the birds are singing, chirping to one another in the cool spring breeze.

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# MEMOIRS OF THE VACANT

Spencer Wells

“Watch your step, there’s some rusty nails sticking out that plank.” I said, in an admonishing tone against the wood.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’m wearing my hiking boots, remember?” She replied, playfully.

I was filming our break-in on my camcorder – couldn’t be any more cliché, but then again, we were well under the impression that either this abandoned building would be demolished by a demo crew or crushed under its own decrepit weight. Either way, these kinds of things make for good entertainment.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Did you bring the tetanus shots with you too?”

“We’re not going to get tetanus so long as we don’t touch anything with our bare skin.”

In a way, that sounded like a script from a television show.

“Yeah, obviously. I meant if I accidentally cut myself on something.”

“Don’t cut yourself, then.” Her enthused sarcasm turned into a tone of petty annoyance, though I tried not to think about it too much.

“Gee, thanks. I’ll be sure to tell the window shards to stay away while we walk over them.” I joked, though her expression warranted that my humour

wasn’t within a gold standard.

“Relax, I got some hand sanitizer in my purse.”

When I first got to know this girl, she seemed impious to all forms of conventional ‘safety’. The daredevil, the wild-card, all of that in one. Thriving off uncertainty and living as carefree as she could. I guess you could say that I am the opposite in some ways but not all; I love the thrill of a good adventure, but my intuitive adherence to routine and regiment could never allow me to be a free spirit like her. I guess that’s what she likes about me – the impression that she will savour the journey as I would the destination. If that makes any sense.

“When do you think was the last time someone came in here?”

“About two minutes ago. It was me.”

“No, smartass. I meant this place looks like its been empty since the 50’s. Look at the books and the furniture. They’re all withering so much.”

That was a fair question. Whoever lived in this house probably did so until they died, or the housekeeper. Yeah, I think they had those back then.

“Sucks how everything is broken too. If any of these electronics worked, I bet I could make some money from them.”

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Memoirs of the Vacant

"I seriously doubt that you'd be able to get anything here appraised."

"Unless we find something rare and repair-able."

"That's not even a word."

"You think I care about grammar right now? I'm looking for my little goldmine."

"I wish you the best of luck. Just to let you know, I'm leaving here with the car before midnight, with or without you."

"Yeah, whatever, I'm bound to find something before then, I just know it."

"Let me know if you find any reading glasses. Maybe if you put them on, you'll be able to see that there's literally nothing of value here."

"Hahaha, you should write that one down somewhere."

"It really wasn't that funny, but okay."

"Jeez, lighten up a bit"

It was starting to get a bit out of hand.

"Sorry, its just that I'm in a bit of pain right now."

That was an answer I honestly did not expect.

"What happened?"

"I hit my head off the crack in the floor we came up through. I think I have a bump and it really hurts."

After what she said about injuries earlier, I would've expected myself to

laugh in irony. But it looked like she was serious, and my humour wasn't making anything easier for her before.

"Can I take a look?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't think I'm bleeding, though."

"Why didn't you tell me before when it happened?"

"I don't know. I guess I didn't think it would hurt as much later as it did when I hit it."

Fair enough. I parted through her hair to find that it was swelling badly.

"Are you sure you hit the foundation?"

"I think so, yeah. The basement is pitch black, so I'm guessing it was either the hole or something from the ceiling I hit on the way up."

"Do you feel woozy at all?"

"No, I'm fine. If I'm not bleeding, I got nothing to worry about. Lets just look around a few more rooms, then well go home."

"Sounds good to me."

We went upstairs to search through the bedrooms. The dust caked over the walls in a fine layer, and it was hard to breathe as we climbed the stairs. The first room we saw was a children's bedroom, with a broken crib and soiled blankets.

"Gross, children." She jested.

"Well, there's nothing particularly pretty about anything in this house" I added.

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## Memoirs of the Vacant

“Let’s go see what’s in the master.”

Surely enough, the master bedroom was just as disheveled. Broken glass, debris, dirty clothes on the floor and on the bed, rotting away with bugs crawling around. It was a reviling sight to see with one’s own eyes. In the corner of the room, I noticed that there was a door slightly ajar.

“I wonder what’s in there?” I asked to her, inciting that we should investigate.

“Maybe an office? Maybe a monster? The next level, perhaps.” Oddly cheery, perhaps I invoked her adventurous spirit again, despite her injury.

Carefully crawling over the cesspool of garbage in the room, I opened the door to discover a fully furnished study, with a nice bookcase locked in glass cabinets. There wasn’t as much dust in here as there was in the rest of the house, but it still reeked of wood rot.

“Hey, maybe there are some rare books in there, or something in the desk!”

“You may actually be right with that one. Look.”

As I turned around, she tossed me a key - inscribed with the same symbol marked on a gold laminate on the desk.

“Where did you get this?” I asked, turning the lock.

“It was on the nightstand by the bed. Hurry up and open it!” She exclaimed.

As if time had slowed down around me, the opening of the locked drawer had drawn me into an incredible state of suspense. The treasure at the end of the road,

the perilous quest through an ancient ruin. Its as storybook as it gets.

All that was in the drawer was a single note, faced down. I picked it up to read: *If you are reading this, then get the hell out of my office! P.S. If David is reading this, I don’t have your money here. Ask Margaret or Bill.*

“Well that’s a load of crap” she sighed. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“Agreed.” I admitted that maybe this house was abandoned for a reason. There was nothing worth saving here.

She stepped through a crack in the wall to go outside. As I followed, the creaking in the floorboards turned into cracking, and the roof came crashing down as I stepped out into the grass. Through her screaming and my coughing as debris kicked up from the rubble, I needed to finish our misadventure with one final comment: “I guess he was serious about us wanting to leave.”

Based on a somewhat-true story.



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# OUR TEAM

TYLER HOLT  
DIRECTOR

ZACHARY  
BARMANIA  
EDITOR - IN - CHIEF

SAID JIDDAWY  
GRAPHIC DESIGNER

REMI AKERS  
WRITER

JAMIE  
BOYD-ROBINSON  
WRITER

KAVYA CHANDRA  
WRITER

MELCHIOR DUDLEY  
WRITER

KELSEY GUINDON  
WRITER

BRAYDEN KNOX  
WRITER

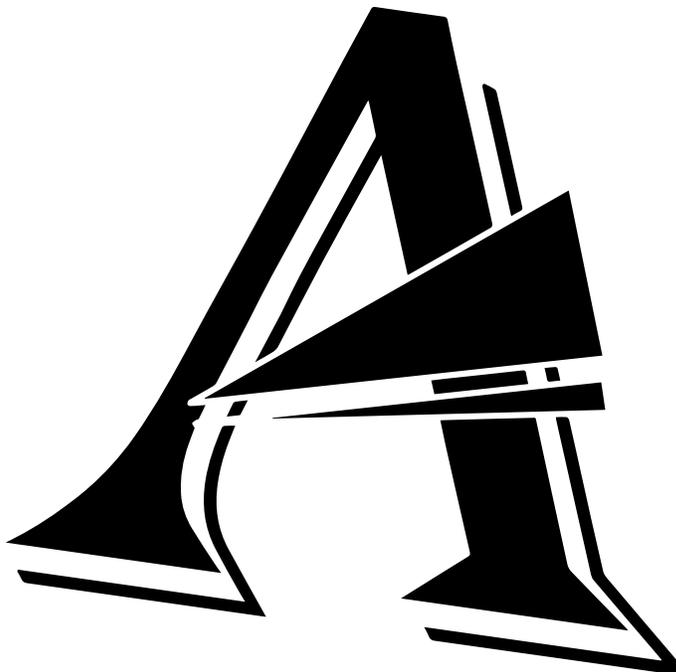
TYLER MAJER  
WRITER

JULIE MUSCLOW  
WRITER

SHAUN PHUAH  
WRITER

ZACK WEAVER  
WRITER

SPENCER WELLS  
WRITER



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