Foreword

Hamid Asiayee


However and never and maybe and now. Sooner or later.

Last and lust and lost. Looking at and away. Far away and near. Close and intimate. And a smile. This is a happy end.

Here are our stories.

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“I am Berit, a Cognitive Science student and writing enthusiast! I see reading and writing as a way to create a whole new world where your imagination has no limits - and as a nice change of scenery when you are spending the whole day in lectures.”

An uneventful day
Berit Reise

Expectations will be your end. That is what my mother used to say. But standing beside her tiny bed in this tiny hospital room, I think, death will be her end. Death will be everyone's end.

It is surprisingly hard to look at her now. I always thought that is doesn't matter how a person looks because their presence, their energy, this indescribable feeling of them just being in this world, is what you actually see. For me that made sense, since I could never remember what my friends' clothes looked like yesterday, or which eye shadow graced their eye lids but I could always tell in which mood they were and what we felt like together; happy, angry, sad, excited.

But now, I see the physical appearance of my mother and I am sure I will never be able to forget it. It is strange, but I wish I didn't have to look at her. I want to be able to remember her presence and not this false mask of certain death.

“Don't expect me to survive this. Expectations will be your end, remember this.”, my mother says. “Don't worry, mother, I will never expect anything from life.”

I try to make as many promises as possible to her, because I think she can only go in piece when she knows I have my life together. And having your life together apparently consists of promising your mother to follow all of her rules even when she is dead.

When I have agreed to enough rules, I leave the hospital so that we can both get some rest. Although it is always uncertain what kind of rest it will be for her.

I walk through the park and try to breathe in the air that has not been contaminated by sick people. The sun shines too brightly for my liking but I don't expect the weather to represent my bad mood.

I don't expect anything.

The squirrels have a great time jumping from tree to tree and I wonder if squirrels have any expectations. Do they expect the earth to change with the seasons and provide them with food or is it just a convenient coincidence for them? Maybe I should just try to be a squirrel,
run through the park and enjoy the fading green of the trees that prepare themselves for 
autumn. Maybe it is nice to jump around - almost fly through the air. And maybe it is great to 
not worry about anything else than finding food.

I leave the squirrels behind to get to my actual destination: the huge lake that is calmly 
waiting in the center of the park. I am not sure why but water is and has always been my 
favorite place. It doesn't matter if it is a lake, the ocean or a river. It only has to be clear blue 
water. It feels like I can drown all my thoughts in the depths of the water, emptying my brain 
until there is only sweet nothingness left. As I stand at the lake's shore, watching small 
waves move the first fallen leaves across its' surface, the imagine of my mother's face slowly 
fades. I can finally relax.

That is until an elderly man approaches me.

The day started like any other of my days. I wake up when the sun touches the horizon and 
I get up because there is no use in lying in bed all day. I make myself some breakfast, just 
toast with butter, because there is no joy in having a big breakfast when there is no-one to 
share it with.

After that I read the newspaper to inform myself about the world's current crises and then I 
visit my neighbors to discuss the current crises. They are a lovely pair of retired teachers, 
very intellectual people, yet they are always interested in some gossip as well. And since I 
lost my wife Jody last year, they are especially fond of me, because they pity my lonely 
existence. Or at least I think, that this is the reason.

Next on my daily agenda, I get lunch at our local nursing home. I can't cook so I have to go 
there but even if I could I can't eat every meal alone. That's too lonely – even for me. Lunch 
is exhausting since all old people talk about is how close they are to dying and even though 
I am not the fittest myself, I don't really expect myself to die anytime soon, or at least I don't 
think that talking about it, will make it any better. So after the never changing conversations I 
need some fresh air and usually go for a walk. I like the noises of birds sitting in the trees 
singing their last songs before escaping the winter. I enjoy bird watching in general and I 
even own a little spyglass to get a better look at them.

I watch a crow that tries to drink some ice-cold water from the lake when my view is 
disturbed by a young women approaching the lake's shore. She is dressed like she just 
came from a business meeting but whatever business it was her face looks like someone 
stole all of her money.

I watch her through my spyglass standing there and starring at the lake. One could get the 
impression that she is thinking about drowning herself in the water and that is exactly why I 
leave my position to carefully approach her. “Excuse me, Miss, are you alright?” The look
that I get in response is probably the definition of suspicion. I try to ease it by saying: “I don't want to bother you. You just seemed very ...”. I search for the right word. “Troubled”. That is the best I can think of. I didn't believe it would be possible, but her look got even more suspicious than before. “And why would it be any of your business how I look?”, she asks me angrily. “It is not! I was just worried”. My defensiveness seems to make her even more angry. She hisses: “Why would you be worried?” It is like I opened her personal box of Pandora and all harsh feelings are streaming out of her. I am worried about my own safety now and decide to leave before she starts screaming. “I am sorry. I will leave you alone now.”, I say as I walk away from her slowly. She opens her mouth to what I think will be even more unkind words but the whole world goes black.

This day sucked. First, my alarm didn't work and I was running late to the job I just landed yesterday. And I seriously couldn't afford to be late. Then, my bike decided to have a flat tire and I had to pay my neighbor's son to borrow me his bike. And as if all of this wasn't enough, my girlfriend Penny wrote me a text message stating: “We have to talk.” Nothing good ever happened after these words. Although, I wouldn't blame her, if she broke up with me. I was a terrible boyfriend: I didn't like her friends, I was always late and I didn't have a job most of the time. I would break up with me as well.

Fortunately, after the stress of the morning, my day got better at lunch. One of my friends called me with a job. I had to deliver some legal documents for him to a client on the other side of town and since traffic is always horrible, he hired me as a courier. I ride my borrowed bike along main street when I decide to take a shortcut and make my way through the park. It is a pretty nice day outside so there are a lot of people walking and soaking in the last warm sunshine rays. I love the lake located inside the park which is why I take a little detour to enjoy the scenic view. The sun illuminates the usually dark blue color of the water and the whole lake seems to glow today. I am captivated by this picture so that I nearly collide with an old man. Thankfully, I see him a few seconds before I would have driven into him and I am able to circle around him. “That was a close call!”, I think before I continue on my way to finish the job.

“I hate sport”, my nephew declares as we walk down the street. “Good”, I answer, “That's why we don't do sport right now.” I try to override his declaration, but I have to admit it is extremely hard to argue with a 5-year-old. I don't know how my sister does it. Or how any parents do it. “Walking is also a kind of sport.”, Kyle disagrees. I let out a deep sigh of total despair because it has been 10 minutes since we left the house and I am already exhausted. Again I wonder what my sister actually does with a child that considers walking an active sport activity.
“Walking is not sport, Kyle. It is what your legs are made for, like how your lungs are made for breathing. You don't consider breathing a kind of sport, do you?” Kyle has to think about that. I use the few seconds of silence to consider our options for the next few hours. I wanted to go to a playground but seeing Kyle's state of inactive being that would probably be exhausting for both of us. Especially for my nerves. There is always the cinema, but I don't want to further support his laziness. Maybe I could go to the library with him, where he could sit down but would still do something useful with his brain.

“Kyle, do you want to go to the library?” “What is a library?”, Kyle asks and I sigh again.


“How about a stone?”, I tell him and get a big gray stone with soft edges from the ground. I present the stone to Kyle as if it was the most precious thing in the world that one could own but Kyle was momentarily distracted by some squirrels running around. “Or one of this”, Kyle points to the squirrels that are now climbing up trees. I sigh. Why do people get children again?

“No, Kyle, look at this amazing stone. You can play with it.” Kyle takes the stone into his hands and inspects it carefully. I should have known that the stone was a bad idea. “Can it fly like a bird?”, Kyle asks. But like any 5-year-old he does not wait for my answer but instead decides to throw the stone with all his strength across the footpath. I feel like I am in one of those movies where everything plays in slow-motion and you try to prevent the thing that is about to happen, but you know, deep down it is already too late. I watch the stone sail through the air and expect it to hit someone in the head but thankfully Kyle is still a 5-year-old who has arms as thin as sticks and the stone lands on grass with a soft thud. I sigh. This time out of relief.

The people around me are way too happy. I only have this day left to finish my photography assignment and the sun shines as if to mock me - me and my assignment to collect the world's daily ugliness. I have been walking around for hours without inspiration hitting me. Actually, the closest thing of something hitting me was the stone that a little kid threw in my direction. This day was simply too beautiful to reveal any ugliness. Even the squirrels seemed to be in a good mood. I decide to sit down on a park bench and observe people. “If the world is not showing its' ugliness, the human race will surely do”, I say to myself.

A lot of moms pass by me with their kids running around screaming and laughing. The moms look stressed but the happy smile of parents who love their children is drawn on their faces.
An even more stressed man races through the park on his bike but he is too fast for me to take a photo. Some more people wander around, mostly old ladies gossiping about the neighbors. A few joggers try to compensate the pizza they probably ate yesterday and some business men speed-walk through the park having very important conversations on their very expensive blue-tooth headsets. It seems to be the most boring day of all times. That is until two paramedics run past me. The world just got ugly.

I lay on the grass and marvel at the clouds above me. I should probably do something efficient or at least more useful than staring at the sky but I can't bring myself to get up. “And isn't it one of society's biggest issues that we value a human-being's worth by its efficiency and work-capabilities.”, I ask the sky. I believe looking at clouds is the best way to bring out the inner philosopher. Even when there are only few clouds to look at and the majority of the sky is shining in a brilliant blue. The ground beneath me is a little bit too cold to actually lay on it but the sun above me is trying its best to warm up my skin. I feel small. Very very small and insignificant compared to the eternity above me. I wonder if I will ever feel eternity? Can humans even feel something like that? Or is death maybe eternity itself? So many questions, so little time. I roll onto my stomach to stare at humans as well. They run around – everyone seems to be in a hurry- and I wonder why everyone always feels like they are running out of time? Isn't time itself just a human concept as well? Do we actually have to measure anything? Wouldn't it be nice, if everyone just lived? I watch some squirrels; even they seem to be busy. Busy running around and jumping from tree to tree. Do they have to do this or is it their choice to spend the day exploring nature and searching for food? Do squirrels even have a free will? Do humans have a free will? The old man that is carried away by some paramedics does not seem to have a free will right now. And what about all these worried faces of total strangers around him? Is it their choice to feel sad and shocked about the shortage of life? Or is it the social construct of being a polite person with an appropriate response even when it has nothing to do with you? Or is it honest empathy? So many questions, so little time. I roll onto my back again because the human race always makes me sad. I rather stare at the clouds again. They look like they don't care about time. They don't have to follow any unnatural rules that a cloud society once invented; they just are. They pass each other by – sometimes touching slightly, sometimes colliding, sometimes having no contact at all – either impacting each other's form or just being a fleeting appearance on another cloud's horizon.

Now that I think about it, maybe clouds do have some things in common with humans. Only one thing I am certain about: My joint was freaking strong.
"I am Eileen Schwanold and I am currently studying Intercultural Relations. I write because nothing compares to creating your own world by letting your thoughts and emotions flow onto a piece of paper."

A sailor’s legacy
Eileen Schwanold

I am a sailor. She is a harbour.
When I first saw her from off the shore, I had been away for so long, so naturally, I wanted to get a little closer. As my boat approached, I saw a single candle burning in the window of the little white cottage that stood on the coastline. It was her light reflecting in the dark water. The shimmering surface reminded me of what my life could be like if I wasn’t love with the sea. Suddenly the thought intrigued me, and I decided that it wouldn’t hurt to sleep in a warm nice bed, have some human company, a good conversation, and then return to the spirited life that I adored so much. The wind seemed to turn and as I listened closely, I could hear that music was playing in the little white house. A woman was singing along to it and I wondered if her exterior could possibly match the beauty of her voice. Then, for a split second she appeared in the window.
Her smile was a vision and her eyes were a promise. A promise of warmth, a safe haven, the one place where you can reach for the stars and become happier than you ever thought was possible. I knew instantly that this girl would be a life changer and so I got out of my boat and walked up to that very house.
Later that night, her lips made me question the laws of science and the more I kept kissing her, the more I started to resent the storms and ruthless waves that kept crashing into me in the open sea. I had found heaven on earth. Eventually her late-night whisper made me forget why I ever loved the ocean in the first place.
As a kid, I had books talk to me. They made me smile, they made me giggle, sometimes they even made me cry, but first and foremost they taught me about the world that I was going to live in. I remember the night I decided to build my first boat. They were there to help me. They took turns holding the torch for me, illuminating the beach where I was standing between hundreds of different pieces of wood that I would use to piece together a future of my own. The life of my dreams.
When we were done, and I was ready to start my journey, they sat me down in the warm sand to give me what was supposed to be my most important life lesson: To be on the lookout for the sirens. Not to get drowned and strangled by these dark spirits lurking in the deep. They would lure me into my doom with their voices and sink my ship if I wasn’t careful enough…And as I sat there and listened I got scared. But I was even more overwhelmed
with warmth and gratitude. How lucky I was to have them prepare me for the perils of the life I chose. So I promised to always be on the lookout. We fell asleep on the beach that night and when the first sunbeams touched our sleepy faces the next morning, we bid each other farewell. I finally set out for the open sea. There were no tears. Just hope and excitement, equipped with their wisdom, I felt invincible.

There are times in life when you wish your judgement wouldn’t have been so clouded and when you wish you had known all along. Over the years so many of my people have been taken...not by the sea, but by what was waiting for them by the shore. My friends were wrong after all, the greatest danger of all had not been lurking in the deep dark sea, it had been a shape shifter, a fatality in disguise. A harbour that promised a home but ended up being a hell.

It’s been three years since I decided to change the course of my boat and approach that harbour. It’s been three years since she took my soul. She wanted to own me, but only to break me and then release me into a world, where my freedom is no more than a distant memory. She burned my boat so I couldn’t get away. And when she kissed me, in that very moment, she sucked my true hopes and dreams out of my fragile little heart. I am damned to a life of a shape-shifter. A harbour in the night that is anything but a harbour in the daylight. A broken promise by the shore.

She was a harbour. I was a sailor.
She kissed me.

We are sirens.
This is my warning.
Do not let me get you.
"I am Julia Wippermann, I study cognitive science and I write because my mind is full of strange worlds and quirky characters that I need to put on paper to make space for other things; like even more characters."

Atlantis
Julia Wippermann

Cassie hated Atlantis. She hated what it had done to her dad and she hated that it had taken the only thing that it had ever given her and most of all she hated that no matter how far she went there always was more water that she couldn’t escape. The few things she did like about the city included Felix Lee Barnabas, because he understood that she liked things, but didn’t force her to show it. It included writing film reports for an edgy magazine that she would never read herself. And although she would never admit it, she also liked the frogfish surrounding all the domes and lighten up like stars before the night began. "They always come at dawn to watch how the humans walk home and slowly fall to sleep.", Felix had told her once at the Eastern market ring. "They think it’s a dance and they wonder who choreographed it and then, when we’re all asleep, they go home and try do dance it themselves."

"You’re crazy. They’re ugly fish, not some fucking artists.", Cassie had responded. And still she hadn’t got rid of the idea that glooming swarms of fish were dancing home each evening, imitating a whole city going to bed. And Felix knew she liked that picture, but he wasn’t mean enough to say it aloud and force her to deny it. He kept it a secret and it made her feel precious and respected. Cassie wished she could visit him. Instead she was waiting in line without him to get her final certificate. "Congratulations, Cassandra.", Professor Barnabas whispered as he handed her the certificate. For a second she was sure he would say something else. Something that wasn’t the headmaster, but Felix’ dad.

"Thank you, Sir." Maybe she should have said something instead. But should she make him feel better or just tell him what she thought or was it the wrong moment for any of that? Without having anything to say, she got back in line. What the heck did she think? What could she even had said about him?

She could see her mom’s stiff pine within the audience on the tribunes without even looking. If they had stayed in Alberta, her dad would probably have made one of his embarrassing signs that had her name on it and cheered and make her blush and hate him for it, like he used to do at her football games. But if they had stayed in Alberta, they would have drowned eight years ago and their bodies would now get eaten by the frogfish that lighted up Atlantis Stadium. Cassie looked up to them and wondered if they were watching them.
They think it’s a dance and they wonder who choreographed it and then, when we’re all asleep, they go home and try do dance it themselves.

Maybe what Felix had seen was still somehow true. In a weird, tangled way that only existed inside his mind and that he decided to share with her.

The UnderGround was full of celebrating students, some going to after-parties in the Fifth, some excitedly talking to their families or impatiently messaging their peers where the heck they were. Cassie sat silent next to her parents. Her dad had leant his head against the window and closed his eyes, while Cassie’s mom stared straight ahead.

When they had moved to Atlantis, her dad had pointed to the glassy ceiling of their tunnel and told his daughter, "Look at all the water. It’s going to be be like diving through the ocean, whenever you go to school."

But Cassie had never really liked diving. Or water. It was boring and it made her feel cramped. Not as much as it would make her father though, she had learned only a few months later. There was no university in Atlantis yet, so he had been transferred to a pediatrician office, which was the closest thing to a professorship of neuroscience the town could offer. It wasn’t very close.

"Aren’t you going to any party?", her mom asked, not even adjusting her gaze.

"No, mom. I don’t have any friends."

"I thought you found someone new. It’s already some time since Felix left."

Cassie only stared at her. "You know, everybody agrees with you. Everybody thinks I’m a weirdo and that I hate people."

"Don’t you?", she finally turned around to look at her.

"Whatever." Cassie mumbled and faced the window again. She wished she could talk to her dad instead. At least he congratulated her, even though he was tired as fuck and even though she barely got through the exams. It’s strange, Cassie thought, that he has a professorship and he’s the one who doesn’t care about my grades.

The UnderGround stopped.

"Professor Barnabas should have said something about him.", her mom continued staring straight ahead. She only tried to be nice. Cassie repeated that in her head. She only tries to be nice and she thinks it makes me happy. "Felix was his son. He should say something, just as a parent he …"

"Shut up, mom. Just shut up. Don’t act like you understand any of that bullshit." Cassie got up, ignoring that her dad had woken up and was watching them. "I’m walking." And without a good-bye she left the UnderGround.

Instead of heading home, Cassie turned eastwards. Her mom could celebrate all by herself that she had raised such a dumbass.

She walked over an hour through the tunnels, while the frogfish slowly left their feeding stations and the fairy lights were turned on. Slowly, even the last pedestrians disappeared into the UnderGround and the tunnels cleaned up. There was nothing to see but the wide, dark water. Close to her, she could see an orange and pink coral reef, completely covering
a five floor building on the outside. Behind that there were other streets beneath glassy, round ceilings, other fairy lighted domes and very far out you could see other water turbines and the never ending importing towers reaching as high as the sea itself. But behind all of that, there was more water and there would always be more water. You could never escape it, just like the mountains back in West Alberta - only high pressured and ready to kill you at any instance.

Cassie leaned against the tunnel. She was constantly wishing to escape them. To just break the damn glass and float the damn city and swim upwards towards some goddamn fresh air that hadn’t been filtered a hundred times and pumped two miles down to some freaking artificial city consisting of glass and tunnels and that was supposed to be the eights world wonder, but ended up being a depressing refugee camp for everyone who held a degree. She crossed the coral bridges that lead to the Eastern districts. Two boys were kneeling on the floor, their noses pressed against the walkway to watch the clown fish swimming through yellow-pink sea anemones, lighted up by the fairy lights that were installed in the bottom of the bridge. "Get up, pigs", Cassie mumbled as she crossed them, but the boys got too excited about the little rainbow that formed in the balustrade to even notice her.

There was nearly no one at the Eastern Ring, everybody had streamed towards the centre, to the party places and the restaurants that were working the whole night through. In the office, everybody would be up late, blogging and preparing articles for the Morning Tabloid about yet another generation of dumbasses partying their way out of school. But since Cassie was one of them, she had her night off. She remembered the magazine that her dad had once shown of his graduation, a thick brooklet printed with ink and featuring colourful selfies instead of perfect gifs. He even had most of the photos signed by his classmates, in blue and black and red pens and at the backside his teacher had written a congratulations letter in her own handwriting. Cassie had been so excited to hold her edition when she graduated. But now paper was as rare as leaves or sunlight and by the morning everybody would like and share and comment the next posts und within a few weeks their graduation articles would have drowned in all the other selfies, just like the rest of the world had drowned in melted ice.

Cassie stopped at the edge of the dome, where doors lead to apartments built on the outside. The houses all looked very similar, doors of metal or glass leading to apartments, hidden beneath colourful, artificial reefs. There wasn’t anything special about number 7-71, but Cassie couldn’t stop looking at it. This was were she should be. She imagined Felix and herself, covered in blankets and holding her favourite stuffed animals, a penguin called Salamander. They would be drinking coffee without milk and eating his dad’s sea-salted crisps, while making fun of yet another movie. Maybe they would have headed somewhere in the city to make fun of drunken students instead, while drinking coffee without milk and eating burritos.

The speaking system of 7-71 clicked and Cassie could hear Professor Barnabas voice. "Cassandra? Do you want to come upstairs?"
She hesitated, but she couldn't just stand here and keep watching her headmasters flat like a creepy-ass stalker, could she? "Thank you, Sir."

The door opened and she made her way upstairs until she reached the highest floor. Outside of the windows, some leftover frogfish swam against the gentle stream, but they weren't enough to light up the dark floor. Professor Barnabas was awaiting her at the door. He was wearing the usual dark green turtleneck that he always wore when Cassie had visited Felix. She could see a half-emptied bottle of red wine standing on the kitchen counter.

"Do you want some? To, you know. Celebrate?", Professor Barnabas offered.

"No, thanks."

An awkward silence fell over the room. "Well ...", the professor started again. "You must be hungry. Do you want some ... some crisps?"

"No ... yes. Please." It seemed impolite to refuse again. He put a bag of sea-salted crisps in a wooden bowl. "You must ... I don't know. Do you just want to stay here?"

"Professor Barnabas?"

"Yes, Cassandra?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

He hesitated, because he knew what she was about to ask. "Of course.", he then said.

"What exactly happened?" She looked him straight in the eye, knowing that refusing the crisps would have been less brazen.

Professor Barnabas kept silent and so did Cassie.

"I am not sure ...", he finally started, but stopped himself immediately. "Do you want to take a seat?"

She didn't. "Yes, thank you." He sat down in the opposite armchair. It had the same dark green as his turtleneck. He waited if Cassie would say anything.

"I suppose your question is understandable", he finally started, avoiding to meet her eyes.

"When we moved here, Felix' mother didn't deal very well with the change. Like many others, she got more and more depressed. I think you know what that means." She knew bloody fucking well, thank you very much. "She knew bloody well, thank you very much. "She wanted to go back and didn't stop talking about how we could live in the woods and everything would be better than here." He finally looked at her. "I'm sure you know that that's not true." Cassie didn't respond.

"You know what happened. The floats destroyed the world's cities, but after we left - those of us who were lucky enough to get a place - after that, there were thunderstorms and tornados destroying nearly all nuclear power stations. Everyone who was still out there, got killed by catastrophe after catastrophe. Atlantis is the only safe place left that we know. I told Vineeta that again and again. It was very hard to get accepted for Atlantis. We were very lucky, because Vineeta was a famous nuclear physicist and I ... well, I was a good teacher. But she didn't listen to me, but kept talking about going back outside." He paused, until he added in a very low and sad voice, "She was very desperate."
Cassie thought of taking a crisp, just out of politeness, but the Professor had forgotten he put them on the table anyways, so she decided it wasn’t important anymore. "A month ago, Vineeta and I had a big fight, because she kept talking to Felix about her ideas. It were dangerous thoughts." He looked at Cassie again. "I hope you understand that, Cassandra, it’s really important. No-one can live outside of Atlantis except for a few manufacturing robots. Vineeta was sick."

He waited for a long time. "I understand that.", Cassie ensured, so he would continue talking.

"However. After our fight she left the flat. She did that a lot when we were arguing. But this time …" He took a long pause and Cassie didn’t interrupt him. "She left Atlantis.", he then said.

"Where’d she go?" Only when she had already pronounced the words, Cassie realised that they might be inappropriate.

He hesitated for a long time. "Outside.", was all he answered.

"And Felix?"

Professor Barnabas wiped his face. "Like I said, Vineeta told him a lot about her fantasies. Felix always liked stories that sounded magical and as we all do, he missed his home. After his mother was gone, he said it was my fault, because I didn’t believe her and that we should go after her. That she was right." He paused once more and Cassie supposed there were a lot of emotions that she couldn’t read. "He believed every word she had spoken. So he went after her. At least, that’s what I believe.", he added with a bitter tone in his voice. Cassie remembered that Felix had once asked her about the Outside. "What do you think it looks like now?", he had asked.

"I don’t care. We can’t go anyways.", was all she had answered. Maybe there had been more on his mind than she had figured out."I am very sorry, Cassandra. He was just as sick as Vineeta." His voice got up as he said the words he wanted to believe so desperately.

He wasn’t fucking sick, you asshole, she wanted to scream. He had dreams and hopes and he liked to go to school, he laughed about stupid stuff and let me bitch around and he drank coffee without milk and that’s none of the things my dad does. He wasn’t sick, you idiot.

Instead, she only said, "Can I go to his room?"

Professor Barnabas nodded. "Of course. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks."

She got up and left, before she remembered that she should probably have thanked him for telling everything.

Felix’ room looked mostly like she knew it. The bed was made and at the wall, there were digital photos of landscapes hanging around. She recognised the Scandinavian mountains, the polar lights, a lake in Patagonia and a bunch of frozen waterfalls from Iceland. As far as Cassie knew, his mother had taken those photos on holidays when Felix was a child. Vineeta Barnabas. There was only one picture that didn’t show a gorgeous landscape. Instead, it had captured a small dog that looked like peanut butter and chocolate sprinkles.
His coat was so fluffy that he couldn’t be very old. Cassie’s mom had never allowed any pets, but with hindsight it might have been the best. They already had to leave enough behind.

The desk was perfectly tidy except for a few single Geography notes and one of the old-school Messengers that they had used to feel like home, because they reminded them both of the WalkieTalkies they had used as children. They had soon become unnecessary, considering how the whole world had gotten free wifi before it sunk on the ground.

Next to the bed, there lay the book he had been allowed to take with him. It was a collection of short stories and was probably the only thing in the room that Cassie had shown open interest about. Most of the stories she didn’t like, but there was one about a plane crash and a dead dog that she couldn’t read enough, even though she never understood what happened.

She took the book and lay down on the giant beanbag that she had slept on a few times. Even holding the paper calmed her down a little. She opened the pages to reread the plane story, when a single paper and a shopping card fell out of it. Without any thought, Cassie unfolded it.

Dear Felix,

I am going to the Outside and prove that we are right. I’ll take one of the old Messengers with me and tell you when to come. I left you my old ID cards. Take one and go to the abandoned ImPipes in 8. Hope to see you soon.

Love, Maan.

She looked over to the Messengers on the desk. Was that the reason he followed her? Incoming message on all devices. Message cannot be loaded. Please try again.

The error stayed, no matter how often she refreshed. Was that Vineeta’s call from outside? Or was it just one the kids playing around with the channels?

Cassie held the Messenger tight. Whatever this message was, wherever it came from. Felix must have believed it was his mom’s. Maybe he had been able to receive it on another device and then deleted it. And even if not … would it be enough proof for Felix to take the risk and follow his mother? Felix, who told stories about dancing fish and the happiness of corals and asked her if she believed in the Outside? She did not, but did she trust her crazy best friend and his depressed mother?

Cassie took the letter and put up the shopping card that had been in the book. It was a security ID. Dr. Vineeta Barnabas. Scientific Consultant, ImAge Engine Corporate. Maintenance of ImPipes.

She took the ID and the Messenger and left without even thinking about Professor Barnabas.

The neon lights of the day were already turned off and in Eight there wasn’t any place to party. Even though the abandoned importing towers might have been a great location, Cassie thought. She put Vineeta’s ID through the controller.

Dr. Vineeta Barnabas, maintenance. Access granted.
One beep and the heavy door opened. The building lay in complete silence. Only Cassie’s steps echoed from the thick walls of metal. She wondered if they were covered by corals as well. The muffled sound of water lapping against the hollow steel walls indicated otherwise. With each step she made it seemed to get louder and louder. They are singing a song of loneliness, she could nearly hear Felix explain it in her mind. They sing it for you, because you came to visit them in their exile.

Great. A song of loneliness just for me, she thought. Thanks, buddy.

Vineeta’s ID granted Cassie access to the pipes like she had only opened an apartment door. It was so easy. Was that what Felix and his mother had also done? Had they been here and climbed all those rungs? And what had waited for them on the Outside?

She wanted to know. She wanted to go outside and breath some real air again and she wanted to see her friend. She gripped the first rung. The latter was definitely not made for climbing. If at all, it was made for building those damn things in the first place. After two-hundred metres she made the first stop. There was no end in sight. Was this really a good idea? She looked back. Her mom would freak out if she new what Cassie was doing. If that wasn’t some motivation.

She reached the five-hundred metre mark. Seven-hundred. One kilometre. Something around half a mile, she reminded herself. Slowly, she continued to climb up.

It must had been two hours until she had reached the top marker. 3.3 km. How many miles that was, she didn’t remember. Two maybe? Scant of breath she sat on the upper rungs for a few minutes. What time was it? She didn’t even know when she had left Professor Barnabas apartment.

Cautiously she opened the hatch for only the fraction of an inch. The metal was thick and heavy and for a second Cassie feared she would loose her balance and fall to death. There was no water dropping in in from outside the hatch. No thunderstorms rolling over her head or bestial creatures attacking her on first sight. Instead, fresh, cold air blew in her face as she fully opened the hatch. A small platform of iron surrounded it, which she climbed upon. There was nothing to hear except for the wind and the soft ripples of water against her fingers. This was something entirely different from the tons of water pressing against Atlantis. This ocean was just as giant and deadly, but it couldn’t stop her from breathing. Or leaving. And with a smile she stood up and figured out, that now it was also out of Atlantis’ reach to stop her either. She closed the hatch.

She slipped on the wet grid and cut open her left palm. “Damn it.”, she muttered, carefully standing up again. She could barely see her own feet, which - now that she thought about it - wasn’t too fortunate considering that she didn’t even know where the heck she was. Maybe she should have stolen Felix’ Geography notes from the desk. Or just a fucking torch.

Her steps ruptured the silence as she slowly walked down the grid bridge. There was nothing to see of Atlantis beneath the black ocean anymore and while it was scary being all on her own, it made her feel powerful and free. The only problem was the cold. In Atlantis
she had never needed a jacket or sweater, so the only clothes she could wrap around her shoulders was the oversized, beige cardigan she always wore. At some point the bridge changed to wood. Wet, rotten wood, overgrown by slippery algae. She tried not to think about what would happen if the planks broke and instead tied her cardigan tighter around her shoulders. Vineeta and Felix also walked here and so far the bridge had survived that. In the distance a tiny light was flickering. A lamp, she thought hopefully, but about twenty yards later the light was gone again. Irritated by the sudden disappearance Cassie stopped and looked around for a second. All around her was the quiet, dark water, swapping against the wood and from time to time also splashing her feet. Above the ocean, there hung the completely dark night sky and only a fraction of the moonlight got through the ever existing clouds of dust. But right in front at the end of the path there seemed to be a shadow of an island. Cassie started walking again, as fast as she possibly could on the algae tainted planks. The wound in her hand was burning in the cold. The light flickered up once more before she finally reached the beach. It was quite small and moving hectically. As she came closer, Cassie recognised them as two birds. "What the -"
The birds circled each other, but she was right. They were also glowing in the dark. As far as she could tell, it were only their feathers that left yellow and orange streaks wherever they flew by. *They were stars that fell in love, but they couldn’t be together*, she could hear Felix creating his absurd stories again. *So they wished to be reincarnated as birds, but when the night comes out, their extrastellar souls shine the way for strangers.* "Bullshit", Cassie would have said. *That’s two fucking radioactive birds. In the most literal fucking sense.* But she still wished Felix was here to tell his corny fairytales. "Felix?", she whispered, but only the birds chirped as an answer, higher and softer than she was used to. Water swashed over her feet. "Damn it." She stepped away from the shallow flood, course sand sticking to her wet soles. "Damn it.", she repeated once more and looked around. Felix must have been here. If anything, this place had his name written all over it. Where would he have gone? Looking for his mom? But she had probably waited here for him. Cassie held her left hand and wrapped it inside her cardigan, hoping it wasn’t bleeding. Now that she thought about it, Cassie doubted if she even was welcome here. Vineeta had given her son instructions on how to find her, but Felix hadn’t told Cassie about it. She had cheekily went inside his room and searched his stuff. And when she had found something, she had just come upstairs without any thought if she was even welcome. She could be so stupid. Angry about herself, she trudged towards the forest. The trees were higher than any building she had ever seen in Atlantis, white and thin as human arms. In the dark she wasn’t sure which color the leaves had, but what did she care anyways? The frozen leaves beneath her feet crackled with every step and with every step the cold crept deeper into her skin. This was a fucking bad idea. She should just turn around and go home … And explain to her mom where she’d been all night. No, thank you. But it was so damn cold.
After what probably was fifteen minutes, but seemed like ages, Cassie decided that it wasn’t worth freezing to death and that she was better off being yelled at. Or just staying in Felix’ room. How much cold could a human stand anyways? Probably not very much when said human was only wearing a cardigan. From time to time, other birds crossed her way, most of them being everything between yellow and orange - like flying sunsets, Felix would say - but a few times she realised turquoise and blue creatures shining through the pale leaves. Fucking birds, was all she thought. At least she couldn’t feel the pain in her hand anymore, thanks to the cold. After another hour, Cassie decided that plan B didn’t work either and that she had been lost.

At some point, she found old railway tracks, overgrown with thick layers grass and moss. Cassie didn’t dare to trip on the rotten planks, scared that they would break and let her fall half a metre in the whole of some radioactive murder rabbit. Instead, she decided it was safer to walk on the rails. When she couldn’t feel her fingertips anymore, she had reached an old highway, whose cement had burst from giant trees sticking their long roots through it like pale fingers in a horror movie. She decided to follow the road, hoping to find something to stay at. Possibly with a heating system, but she didn’t have high hopes.

As she walked the uneven ground, the darkness slowly began to crawl back into its caves. That’s were the darkness lives, afraid someone might find out and burn her with a torch. "Shut up. You’re not even here." The sun hadn’t risen yet, but the sky turned into a brighter version of greyish blue. The dust clouds stayed where they were, but instead of keeping the cold out, they only stopped the warmth from making its way inside.

When her legs refused to walk any longer, Cassie decided to give up, to just crawl up in the forest and wait for some warmth or fucking death. There was a pretty big copse just another few metres in front of her. But as she wanted to cleave through the underwood, she realised that there actually was a car buried within the scrub. And not only a car, but a whole bus. Where the tendrils hadn’t claimed the vehicle for themselves, the dirty yellow of an old school bus was still visible. She was too tired to even wonder about it, and instead just climbed inside through a broken window and crawled up on one of the tattered banks. She only hoped there were no poisonous spiders attacking her in the sleep. And if, that she at least wouldn’t wake up from it.

"Wake up! Do you hear me, Cassie? Hey, please wake up!"
"What the hell?", she murmured and tried to sit up. Her back was screaming at her to stop it, to hopefully just stop existing for a day and she wouldn’t have had any objections. But apparently there was someone else in the bus and that someone was talking to her in a soothing voice. "Hey, slowly. Just wake up. Are you okay? Are you cold?"

It took a second until she realised where she was. The sun was shining through the tendrils that held the bus and even though it wasn’t very bright in the bus, it was actual sunlight. Sunlight that her eyes hadn’t seen in over eight years.
"Hey, are you okay?", the soothing voice repeated and as Cassie turned around, she stared straight into Felix’ face. He had a few scratches on his cheeks and his hair was just a little longer than it used to be.

"Are you okay, Cassie?"

The weird thing was that he had gotten beard stubbles. But apart from that he definitely was her Felix. The light brown skin, the black curls, the worried look.

"Cassie? Are you okay?"

"I … don’t know." She could only stare at him. At the abandoned driver’s cab behind him. She sat up and a blanket fell off her lap. "What …"

"It’s okay." Felix got the blanket and put it around her shoulders. Cassie wondered if now that the sun was shining, if the air outside the copse would also warm up. "But … could I ask how you got here?"

She looked at him again and finally, all her emotions that she had been carrying around for the last month flooded back like the ocean over Alberta. "What the actual fuck, Felix?!", she yelled and his expression froze. "You just left? You just fucking left and didn’t even think of telling me anything? You think you can just go and leave me behind and just … the fuck?!

Guilt had found its way onto his face. "I am sorry I didn’t tell you anything. You didn’t … you were never interested in the outside."

"I fucking hate Atlantis."

"I know …" He looked up. "But you didn’t believe in the option. I wanted to call you, when I found out if it was true, I wanted to send you a text or get back and … tell everyone."

"And why didn’t you?", Cassie asked as he didn’t continue to speak.

Felix took a look over his shoulder. "Before my mom went upstairs she had left me a note to wait for a message."

"I know."

"You … oh. Okay. So … when I got her text, it didn’t get through, but I was sure she was calling me. I … I just wanted to go outside.", he added in a low voice. "I wanted to look for her and then come back and tell you …"

"You already said that. So why didn’t you come back then, coward?"

"You can’t." He looked her straight in the eye. "The hatch is locked from outside. We cannot open it. Messages are obviously not getting through, so we didn’t send any, in case … in case someone was as stupid as me. But … how did you come here? Or, why?"

"I found your mom’s letter." Cassie wanted to lock herself in her room, crawl under a thousand covers and hold Salamander. She pulled the thin blanket tighter around her shoulders. "But isn’t there another entrance? The other import pipes, they have to have ladders too … and the official entrance … we could knock there … they know that we belong to Atlantis. Also … why do we have to leave anyways? There’s no problem up here, we could tell our parents and get everyone out and …"

Felix shook his head. "We’ve been walking around here for some time. It’s an island and the bridge to the land was flooded. It’s a road leaving the island, we can’t see anymore, where it
was supposed to end, but it’s snapped off like a paper plane, a few metres after the
beginning. It’s just a dead end leading down some cliffs like it’s given up on the rest of the
world. As if it knew there was nobody who needed it anymore."
"It’s just a bridge.", Cassie replied. "Don’t feel to sad for the damn thing."
"Yeah. Probably." A crooked smile made its way onto his lips.
"Okay, so … we’re here. We can’t leave and we can’t go back. But why can’t we sent
enough messages downwards and tell them that it’s safe again? Someone will understand
and they will send a searching troop and we can make a sign at the hatcher to …"
"Cassie." Felix looked at her very serious. "We cannot do that."
"Why’s that?"
"Because we don’t know for sure what’s out here. We don’t know if it’s safe. We don’t know
how much radiation’s left or how much even reached this land spot in the first place. My
mom is working on analysing the trees, but she’s not an expert on biology and there’s no
equipment." He took her hands and suddenly seemed very sad. "You shouldn’t have come
here, Cassie."

For a long moment they both rested in silence.
"There’s no way back? No way off this island? And a chance that we might all die a very
painful death up here?", she finally concluded what she had learned within the last minutes.
Felix nodded.
"And there’s nothing we can do about any of it?"
He shook his head. "Not more than my mom is already trying."
She wanted to crawl in her bed. She really just wanted to crawl in the blankets and cry in
her pillows and even hug her mom. She would never see her mom again. Neither her mom,
nor her dad, nor Professor Barnabas or the girls from the Tabloid. Not even the English
teacher who had called her vocabulary creative, which was just a nice version of "swears a
fucking lot". What the hell had she done?

Cassie took a deep breath. "Okay."
Felix raised an eyebrow. "What, okay?"
"Okay like all of this sucks and I hate my life, but I’m still cold and I suppose you have some
place where it’s warmer because you’re not a fucking ice king yet. So, I would really like to
go there and … and drink some water." She tried to breath calmly as Felix put his hands on
her shoulders.
"Don’t panic, stupid."
"Don’t … don’t call me stupid." He smiled and took her hand. "Come on, I’ll show you something."

When they left the bus, the sunlight was overwhelming Cassie’s eyes. She blinked a few
times, but the white and grey marbled bark of the trees on the opposite side of the road
didn’t help. Most of their pale leaves were lying on the floor, but some light red ones were
still hanging more than ten metres over their heads. Between the branches, Cassie could
see yellow and orange and blue birds hopping around.
Felix pointed at the annoyingly twitching creatures. "At night their plumage lights up in the most beautiful colours. It looks like they are fallen stars, reincarnated as birds, so that they could fly wherever they want to."
She smiled a little. "They're only fucking birds."
"And see, the crooked road? That's the forest trying to breaking free and see the sunlight, just as we did."
"You're so stupid."
"I know.", he gave her a long and warm hug. "But somehow I have to offer resistance to your genius."
"Haha."
She was too tired to fire back and just leaned against her friend's chest. She really hoped they wouldn't die too soon.
“My name is Carla Lembke and I study cognitive science. I write to explore possibilities and viewpoints other than my own.”

Awake

Carla Lembke

Lydia woke up like she had done all throughout the past years. She didn’t need an alarm clock to abruptly stumble into wakefulness every day at 4 am sharp. Sometimes she thought it was because her body remembered this exact time from her dancing classes and practice early in her life and, later on, from the lessons she had taught herself. Other times, she suspected the nameless doctors in countless clinics had been right about her slight symptoms of insomnia.

Not wanting to spend any more time evaluating her crumbling psyche, Lydia pushed herself up from her old, musty mattress. The bed frame groaned in protest, its creaking echoing in Lydia’s own bones. She eyed the walking stick leaning on her nightstand with wariness and then quickly decided against using it.

“I can walk perfectly fine by myself” she said to no one in particular; or perhaps rather to everyone all at once.

She limped to the small window on the far side of her bedroom and stood there, watching as the clouds over the city changed from a dreary and colourless gray to vibrant shades of purple and pink as they chased the sun in its daily ascent to the sky. The silhouette of a small bird darted through the sky, its weightless wings keeping it airborne with a few small flaps.

Lydia sighed. She had felt like a bird herself, once. When she danced, she had been as graceful as a beautiful, white swan gliding over still waters. When she jumped and pirouetted, she had been as quick and sure-footed as a great eagle soaring above endless expanses of fields and forests. But now she was left to stand by the sidelines, watching as all the sparrows flew above her land-borne form with its dress of worn-out feathers and its beak parted in a sorrowful, soundless song.
Lydia stepped away from the window and made her way to the kitchen. Her knees and ankles ached dully, and, after she made herself a pot of coffee, she sat down into the single chair next to her dining table. While she sipped the coffee, she took her time mixing her battered deck of tarot cards. Drawing a tarot card every morning made her feel grounded as the day began. Most of the time, she didn’t even pay much attention to what the cards might have been trying to tell her. She just needed the daily touch of their crumbling edges and the mystery of pulling up a card and connecting it to its supposed meaning.

When she was satisfied with the amount of mixing, she fanned the cards apart into a big half-circle on the table. With a careful finger, she softly pulled out one of the cards and turned it around to see what she had drawn.

“Oh my.” she said aloud to herself. The card she had chosen showed a mass of people stretching out for heaven, responding to the trumpet call of an angel. They all stood there ready to be judged for their lives, which was something that Lydia was definitely not ready to do herself. Lydia’s life hadn’t been easy. She had made some difficult choices; some of them haunted her until this day. The Judgement card told the story of a life on the brink of change. It promised release from the past at the price of an assessment.

“It looks like I have a choice to make.”

The day had begun outside and Lydia impulsively returned to her bedroom to gather her walking stick and the scarf she had finished knitting last night. She pulled her unruly, curly hair up in a tight bun and stepped outside into the brisk morning air.

As she walked among the deserted streets, most houses seemed empty and dark, almost as if no one really lived there this early in the morning. Some apartments were shrouded in a hesitant light; their inhabitants as unlucky as her when it came to sleeping in.

Amongst the calmness of the morning, it was the little things that really got to Lydia. The smallest hitches in the world’s breathing that put a tentative smile on her lips.

It was an office building’s front lawn covered in morning dew that remained invisible until the sun broke out of the cloud cover to make it glisten in a myriad of colors. It was a baby’s cry coming from an apartment with an open window and the immediate light behind it in a silent response. It was the deep hum of the few cars that glided beside Lydia as she walked; their pitched roars and wails reminding her of a very peculiar kind of music.

In the distance, Lydia saw her neighbourhood coffee shop and bakery, the Café Nightingale, which had the world’s second best apple pie on its menu. The only apple pie that tasted better was the memory of her own mother’s pie.
A young man dressed in a sharp shirt and tie crossed the street towards the café, his hands nervously fidgeting with his tie. Lydia saw him take a deep breath in front of the door before throwing it open and walking inside. As the door slammed shut behind him, the stranger winced in surprise before he once again straightened himself and walked on. As he stepped further into the café, his individual features melted away from Lydia’s view. From this far away, he almost looked like the man she had once loved.

Lydia lost sight of his silhouette amongst the other patrons and redirected her gaze back onto the sidewalk. She took her time putting one foot in front of the other and dragging her cane beside her. As she continued on her way to the farmer’s market, the city around her continued to wake up. Each soul getting ready to face another day.

There was never a day that Felix didn’t plan through from beginning to end. He had too much to do to let the day simply take its course as time passed.

Monday through Friday he woke up at 5 am and took care of all the house chores his mother wasn’t able to get done before her night shift at the museum began. Most of the times it was chores like emptying out the dishwasher or putting up clothes to dry or tidying up his little brother Evan’s toys in the living room.

Then, at 7, he woke up Evan and made sure that he ate breakfast, brushed his teeth, and packed the lunch Felix had made for him before Evan sprinted out of the apartment to get to school on time. A few minutes later, Felix himself would go out the door of their small apartment and make sure to lock it behind him.

During the weekdays he worked at a used-book store owned by an elderly couple that always let him borrow some books about business and the occasional biography free of charge. He didn’t always have the time to read through the books entirely, but they still adorned his makeshift plastic-box turned nightstand for the better part of the week. It made Felix feel like he had at least some control about where his life was going, instead of having to face the fact that his life was quickly going nowhere while his dreams slipped away from him one day at a time.

Once he was done with work for the day, he drove the bus to the cheap supermarket at the other end of the town so he could get the groceries his mom would ask for throughout the day. By the time he got home, his legs felt like lead and his head like a massive stone pulling his entire body down. He would get home to his mother leaving again and then it was time for dinner. He would heat up whatever leftovers his mom and Evan hadn’t eaten and then he would clean up whatever messes had been left behind in the kitchen.
On Saturdays, like today, and on Sundays, Felix used to work at a cleaning salon. The job had been easily done. He just had to sit there and watch people do their laundry, occasionally helping a young university student or exchanging some bills for the coins that the machines accepted. Usually, Felix would bring a book with him to the salon and spend his time studying up on different business concepts. When the shop had been forcefully closed by the bank, Mr. Rosta, the owner, had let all of the employees go with a gift card to a local family restaurant and wishes for their well-being. For Felix it had felt like the end of his restful days. Since then, he had spent the last two weekends applying for different jobs, going to interviews, or going to one-day work trials, but he hadn’t found anything to fill the hole that the cleaning salon had left in his schedule and in his wallet.

Today, Felix had woken up early so he could iron the one dress-shirt he owned and try to tie his tie in peace. He was as silent as possible as he slid out of bed and tiptoed through the room that he shared with his brother and towards the bathroom. Just as he reached the door, Evan woke up. He tossed away his blanket and blinked up at Felix through tired eyes.

“Where are you going?” Evan asked with a voice that betrayed how sleepy he still was. “I have another interview today.” Felix ruffled his brother’s hair and then smoothed it down again in an attempt to bring some order to his curls. “It’s at the coffee shop down the street.” Evan perked up.

“If you work there, can I come visit you?” Evan asked excitedly.

“Of course,” Felix said. His mouth split into a wicked smile. “You can do your homework there while I work.” he teased.

“Ugh! Homework.” Evan groaned loudly and dramatically flopped back onto the mattress.

Felix picked up the blanket and tucked Evan in again. He kissed his little brother’s forehead, wished him a good night, and prayed that there would never be a day for Evan when his biggest worry wasn’t homework.

Later on, in the bathroom, Felix tried to tie the tie his mother had given him for his 18th birthday last month. He kept making mistakes and whenever he thought he finally had it, he looked into the mirror and realized that the knot was a total failure and that his tie sat askew. He was tying it for the sixth time when his mother walked into the bathroom.

She was still dressed in her museum guard uniform, but her feet were wrapped in the bunny slippers that Evan and Felix had given her for Christmas about three years back. She smiled up at Felix, who had grown to be taller than her after his last growth spurt, and then she silently reached up to tie his tie.
After a while Felix asked her how work had been.

“Oh, you know. Same as always,” she answered softly. She smoothed down his tie. “Well, you’re ready to go now, hon.”

Felix bent down to kiss her cheek in thanks.

“Get some sleep, mom,” he said and walked out the bathroom door. His mom followed him to the entrance and watched as he put on his shoes, took his backpack, and opened the door. Then he walked out.

“Felix,” his mom called after him.

Felix turned back. His hand still rested on the doorknob and tapped out a nervous rhythm. His mother’s eyes were drawn to the movement and a small smile spread on her lips.

“Dad would be proud of you.”

On the way to the coffee shop, Felix thought about his father. It had been a long time since he had died. At that time, Felix had been nine years old and his father had been his hero. Every day, he would imagine him rushing to people in danger of being swallowed up by fire and then valiantly jumping into the danger himself to save them. When, inevitably, his father had been lost to the very flames that had made him who he was, Felix hadn’t really understood. He had always known fire was dangerous, but not to his dad. His father was a phoenix; he always rose from the ashes unscathed. It wasn’t possible to think of him as the ashes. It felt wrong to know that he had always been so much and then, suddenly, had become nothing.

Evan had been two years old back then. He had understood death even less than Felix, but then again, he had never understood his father’s life to being with.

Sometimes Felix wasn’t sure what was better. Having known his father and now living with the knowledge that he would never come back, or never having known him in the first place.

With a forced shudder, he shook off the memories of his father, now wasn’t the time to get lost in them. He straightened his back and hardened his eyes as he stepped into the bustling café. Inside, the rich aroma of roasted coffee beans wafted through the air and with it came a hint of cinnamon from whatever was baking in the oven.

With a slam the door closed behind Felix, making him jump at the harsh sound. Already this early in the morning the café was full to the brim. Two tables had been pushed together to accommodate a group of elderly ladies who had looked up as one when the door had shut behind Felix. They all looked vaguely accusing, and Felix quickly mumbled an apology.
before stepping further into the café. Some of the tables were occupied by lone people sipping on their coffees or teas and reading newspapers, or idly playing with their phones. Some tables had the occasional couple or a group of friends sitting around them, their excited chatter filling the room with a welcoming atmosphere.

Felix lined up behind two other men waiting to place their order. As the first one finished his order and stepped aside, the man right in front of Felix swaggered over to the counter, taking his obnoxious cloud of Axe body-spray with him.

The lady at the counter already looked vaguely annoyed just by his appearance.

“Hello and welcome to Nightingale Café what would you like to order today?”

“Oh, just the usual, Nora. A nice black coffee and a date with a nice black beauty such as yourself.”

The cashier, Nora, rolled her eyes.

“Björn you’re getting the coffee, but you already know the answer to the date.”

“Oh come on, baby.” Björn leaned over the counter. “Gotta keep trying, right?” He blew an air kiss over the counter at Nora.

Her face froze. She turned around, her apron whipping around her with the sudden momentum.

“You really don’t,” she whispered as she walked to the coffee machine. With skilled movements she took two take-away cups and poured coffee into both of them. For the first one she added some cream and sugar and the other one was left bare.

She handed one of them to the man waiting by the side and brought the other one over to Björn.

“That’ll be two fifty please,” she told Björn with a tense smile.

“I’d pay much more for you, sweetheart.”

Finally, this had gotten too much for Felix.

“Ehm, Sir.” He politely tipped the blonde on his shoulders.

Björn turned around with raised eyebrows. He looked clearly pleased at being called Sir.

“What’s up, my dude?”

“I really think you’re crossing a line here.”
Björn’s attitude changed instantly. “Excuse me?”

Felix cleared his throat. “Well, I mean, she said she isn’t interested. You should learn to take no for an answer.”

Björn’s face turned as dark as his coffee. “Sir,” Felix added belatedly.

“Well I’ve got something to say to you, boy.” Björn pushed a finger into Felix’s chest. Felix stumbled back with his hands lifted. “You should learn to keep your stinky nose out of other people’s business unless you want to keep wearing those cheap clothes for the entirety of your miserable life.”

With a final huff, he handed the money to Nora and left the café.

Felix was left standing to look down at his ensemble of the dress-shirt he bought on clearance and the worn-out slacks he had picked up at a thrift store some time ago. He hadn’t thought that it looked bad or unprofessional when he had left the house, but the stranger’s remark had singlehandedly destroyed the confidence he had built up. With a sigh, he smoothed down his tie and stepped up to the counter.

“Thank you for that,” the lady, Nora, said. She cleared her throat.

“Welcome to the Nightingale Café. What can I get ya?”

“Actually, I’m here because of the job opening,” Felix began. “I have a meeting with the manager for an interview today.”

“Oh, I see,” Nora said, a sincere smile lighting up her face. “Well you can just step through the door here behind the counter. Maria’s office is the last door to the right.”

Felix knocked on the counter twice. “It’s for luck,” he said when Nora cast a confused look his way.

“Oh, don’t you worry, co-worker.” Nora winked at him. “You’ve got this. I’m already looking forward to working with you.” She offered her hand for a handshake and Felix shook it.

“I’m Felix,” he said.

“Nora,” she answered. “Also, don’t worry about your clothes, you look dope. Björn is just an ignorant child who’ll never recognize his own privilege, much less do something of importance with it. People like you and me, we can’t let him get to us.”
Felix nodded and thanked her before stepping around the counter and into the corridor behind it. As the door closed behind him, he turned around to Nora enthusiastically showing him two thumbs up.

With a smile, Felix waved goodbye to her and made his way towards the manager’s office. He was going to rock this.

Felix really tried to be silent, Evan knew that, but he still managed to always wake Evan up way before it was time for him to actually get up. Not that Evan minded, he actually loved seeing his brother in the mornings.

“Where are you going?” Evan asked.

“I have another job interview today.” He let Felix mess around with his hair as he talked. “It’s at the coffee shop down the street.”

Evan sat up straighter. Finally, Felix was going to work somewhere interesting!

“If you work there, can I come visit you?”

“Of course,” Felix said and smiled in a way that Evan had learned early on only meant trouble. “You can do your homework there while I work”

“Ugh! Homework.” With a groan Evan let himself fall back into the bed. Really, who had ever thought that homework was a good idea? He spent enough time in school why did he have to do work at home too?

Felix found the blanket Evan had tossed away during the commotion and tucked him in once more. Evan allowed him to press a single kiss to his forehead before Felix left.

“Good night,” Felix said in lieu of a farewell.

“Good luck today,” Evan said back, but Felix was already gone. Evan really hoped that his brother got this job. Maybe then he would stop looking so worried every time Evan saw him.

The next time Evan woke up, the sun was streaming in through the window and illuminating his face. He tried to cover himself entirely with the blanket so he could keep sleeping, but after a while it started to feel impossible to breathe, so Evan tossed the blanket aside and started climbing down from the bunk bed he shared with Felix.

When he reached the corridor, the smell of pancakes greeted him. Giggling, Evan ran down to the kitchen.

“Hey! No running in the house!”
Evan slowed down to a walk the rest of the way to his mom’s side.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning, pumpkin,” his mom responded. She tried to bend down to give him a kiss, but Evan ducked out of her reach and went to the fridge to get some milk.

“The pancakes will be done soon. You want to set the table for us?”

Evan pretended to think about it for a while.

“No!”

His mom turned to him with a devilish smile and stretched out her arms towards him, jiggling her fingers as if to tickle him.

Evan scrambled to find his footing and ran off before she could reach him. Eventually, his mom caught up with him and started tickling his sides, making Evan dissolve in a fit of giggles mixed with joyful screams. Suddenly, she stopped and smelled the air around her.

“Does it smell burnt?”

Without waiting for an answer she ran off into the kitchen again. Evan followed her just in time to see her flip a blackened pancake onto their growing stack.

“Alright, that’s it,” his mom said while shutting off the stove. “What about setting the table, pumpkin?”

Once Evan had put everything they needed onto the table, he and his mom sat down to eat.

“Did anything interesting happen at the museum last night?” Evan asked as he began attacking his first pancake.

“Oh, well, apart from the T-Rex bones coming back to life to fight the whale skeleton, not really.”

There was a time when Evan had always fallen for those stories. He would sit on the edge of his seat and hang onto every word of the stories her mother spun for him. But he was 11 now; he didn’t believe in those kind of things anymore. Still, sometimes he played along.

“Who won?”

His mom sat up and stuck out her chest. “I did, of course!”

The response startled a laugh out of Evan and they ate in silence for a while, letting the sound of their chewing and the scraping of their forks against the plates fill up the room.
“What are your plans for the day, pumpkin? Anything to do?”

“I have homework,” Evan said. “We have to talk to one of our grandparents and ask them about their lives. Like, what they did and their experiences all of that stuff.”

“Well, that’s going to be a bit difficult to do.”

“I know,” Evan said. “I told Miss Fersken that I don’t have grandparents, but she said I can ask any old person for the assignment.”

His mother thought for a while before coming up with an idea.

“Maybe you could go visit Felix at the café and ask around there? I’m sure there’ll be a lot of folks there.”

Evan perked up at the suggestion. He wanted to see how Felix was doing and maybe he would even get some free food.

“That a good idea?” his mom asked.

Evan nodded enthusiastically and jumped up from his chair, taking his plate back to the kitchen. His mom followed after him with her own stuff and with the leftover pancakes. Together they rinsed and dried all the dirty dishes.

“Alright, pumpkin. I’m heading off to bed for a while. Wake me up when you get back, okay?”

“Okay, mommy.”

This time Evan was too excited to avoid his mother’s kiss on his head.

When Evan stormed through the door into Café Nightingale, the resounding slam of the door behind him alerted every one of his presence. Evan didn’t care much for the accusing looks sent his way, though. At the counter, Felix was currently putting new slices of cake into the display.

Evan walked to him, waving his arms widely back and forth all the way.

“We really ought to fix that door at some point,” Felix said. Only after that did he acknowledge Evan’s presence.

“What’cha doing here, pipsqueak?”

Evan crossed his arms over the counter and rested his head on top of them.

“Mom sent me here for my homework.”
“Your homework?”

“Yeah,” Evan said “I have to interview an old person and mom said I would probably find someone here to ask.”

He looked around and immediately saw some possible candidates. There was an entire table full of old ladies in the corner talking excitedly amongst themselves and an old couple sitting in silence while sharing a single piece of cake. One lady was sitting all alone by the window watching the streams of people walking by outside. She suddenly turned around and caught Evan in the act of watching her. Evan quickly turned away his gaze and felt his cheeks warm up.

When he turned back around to Felix he was handing him a mug full of hot chocolate with a mountain of whipped cream on top.

“Go ahead and sit down somewhere, I’m sure you’ll get someone to tell you their story.”

Evan took the chocolate and headed straight for the lady at the window. He sat down on the table next to hers and looked out the window too, trying to figure out what had entranced her before. It got pretty boring after a while though. It was just a bunch of strangers walking by, talking on their phones, or lugging bags full of groceries around, or just walking straight ahead while looking at the ground. Being old must be really boring, if ladies like this one spent their free time just sitting around watching people.

Evan turned his eyes to her instead. She was gazing outside again, her half-eaten piece of apple pie sitting forgotten on the plate in front of her. A plain-looking cane was leaning against the table by her side and there were two paper bags by her feet full of all kinds of vegetables. From where he was sitting, Evan could see some leeks, salad, potatoes, and a bunch of tomatoes. He shifted his attention back to the lady. She was sitting straight, like she had an invisible string holding her up by her head. Her hair was tugged into a bun at the nape of her neck, but even so Evan could tell that her hair was as curly as his own. From where Evan was sitting, her nose looked like a proper witch’s nose, all lumpy and hooked at the end.

The lady turned and caught him staring once again. Her eyes were bright blue, a color that reminded him of how his father’s eyes looked in every picture they still had of him back home.

“Everything okay, kiddo?” she asked.

“Could you help me with my homework?”
She furrowed her brows. “Sure, I'm no good at math, though.”

“Oh, it's not math,” Evan assured her. “We are supposed to interview our grandparents for school so we can write an essay about the past.”

“Well, I'm not your grandmother, though.” The lady said, her voice rising at the end so that it kind of sounded more like a question than a statement.

“Yeah, I know you’re not. It’s just that I don’t have any grandparents, so Miss Fersken, my teacher, said I should talk to another person who might have been their age instead.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “What would you like to know then?”

Evan dug around his backpack and emerged triumphantly with a pen and a sheet of paper so he could write along with what she told him.

He cleared his throat when he was ready and began.

“How was the world when you grew up?”

“Well I was raised as a single child on a farm. Only having one child was pretty uncommon back then, but my mother had a lot of trouble getting pregnant. She eventually even died while she was pregnant a second time after me. She died, but she took two lives with her, my brother or sister didn’t make it either. Medicine wasn’t as advanced then as it is now. After that it was just my father and me running the farm.”

“What did you grow on the farm?”

“Oh, all kinds of things. We had a small garden that was for our personal use where we would grow only our favourite vegetables. There we had carrots and tomatoes and spinach. On the big fields we were growing wheat and corn. We also had a big orchard with apple and pear trees and some strawberry bushes - oh, I loved the strawberries!” She laughed a bit. “Do you like strawberries too?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Well ours were just wonderful. They had the most beautiful red color and, when the sun had ripened them enough, they were sweet enough to give you a toothache! One summer I snuck out with a boy at night and we ate all of them. Right off the field! Oh, my father was so mad after that.” Her eyes had a wistful look about them.

“Was the strawberry boy your boyfriend?”
“Oh, no not really. We were the best of friends, though. We used to do everything together, getting into all kinds of trouble. I always thought I would simply marry him one day and then we’d take over the farm together. Continue with our simple lives and fill our stomachs with strawberries every day. But life got in the way, as it always does.”

“What happened?” Evan asked. The lady sighed.

“My father died a few summers after that. I was 15 at the time and suddenly I was all alone. And I had a choice to make.” She leaned forwards to Evan like she was about to tell him an enormous secret. “You see, I had a dream,” she whispered.

“What was it?” Evan whispered back, entranced.

“I wanted to dance. I had seen a show once, for my tenth birthday. My parents had splurged and gotten tickets to see a famous ballet company in the city. After that, I fell in love with dancing. I used to walk around the farm, turning around and around with chickens in my arms until they squeaked and hurried away from me. My mother even sewed a tutu for me. It’s the only thing she made for me that I still have to this day. Anyways, I’m getting off track here. So, I had a choice to make.”

“Being alone had one single advantage. I was no longer tethered to anyone or anything in my life. For the first time ever I was truly free. And when you’re free, you have to make choices for yourself. My first choice was to either keep the farm and continue life as I knew it or to sell the farm and try my luck. If I chose the farm, I would be safe. It would be a lot of work to keep it running on my own, but I knew that the other people in my village would always support me. I already knew my future if I stayed.”

“The strawberry boy,” Evan said.

“Exactly, the strawberry boy. But also everything else. I knew my future because it would be my past. Chasing my dreams though, that was a big unknown. I would have to sell the farm to even begin my journey and then I would have nothing to fall back on. I would have to leave my village and all the people I ever knew. And even if I made it to a city where I could learn to dance, I would still have to be good at it so I could make it anywhere. It was the scariest thing in my life, but I had to make that choice.”

“You chose dancing,” Evan guessed.

She nodded solemnly.

“I chose dancing. And it was the best thing I have ever done. I loved dancing and dancing loved me too. I worked very hard for it and soon I was getting offers from dozens of ballet
companies to join them. I danced in Paris, Saint Petersburg, West Berlin, New York, and so many other places. It was an exciting life, traveling from city to city, never stopping. But it was also lonely. I only had the girls in my troupe and some of them didn’t even speak my language! But then again, I never learned theirs either, so I guess we were all to blame for that.”

She paused for a while as if she was trying to gather her thoughts, sorting through her memories to figure out what to tell next. Evan waited patiently.

“In Rome, I met a man. He was like no one else I knew before. He was brave and foolish and he laughed so loudly that all the birds took flight in surprise. I fell in love with him, and I was so sure that he loved me as well.”

“Was it different than what you had with the strawberry boy? Love?”

“Yes, I suppose it was. Although I’m not sure what I would have felt for the strawberry boy if I had met him again back then. Maybe I would have loved him the same way, or maybe he had changed since our strawberry eating days, who knows? But it was different with Daniel, that was his name. Daniel.” When she said his name, it sounded almost like a prayer and a curse at the same time.

“Daniel was the second choice I had to make in my life. Or well, not Daniel himself, but because of him I had to make the choice. We were all the way in Beijing when I noticed that my body was changing. After a while, I was certain of it. I was pregnant.”

Evan looked up from his notes at the change of tone in her voice. Her eyes were looking out of the window again, but Evan had the feeling that she wasn’t seeing any of the people walking in front of it.

“You don’t have to talk about it Ma’am,” Evan said.

Her gaze snapped back to him, back to this moment. “Oh no honey, please, let me tell you. I can’t stop now.” She cleared her throat and began her story once more.

“I was pregnant and I knew it had to be Daniel’s baby. So I went back. I told my company that I was quitting and I traveled back to Rome all by myself. I thought that a new period of my life was starting. A life with a child of my own. I knew that I would be happy. I felt ready to leave behind my dancing for this miracle growing within me. I found Daniel again three days after arriving in Rome. By then, my pregnancy was quickly becoming obvious.”

“He took one look at me and I saw recognition in his eyes. Then he took one look at my belly and I saw fear in his eyes. And then he turned around. And he just walked away. I was
furious. I ran after him, screaming and shouting for him to explain himself to me, to talk to me about this. He turned to me and, right there in the street in front of everyone, he told me that he had never loved me. He had never meant for our relationship to be a serious one, to last longer than my days dancing in Rome. He wanted me to become a memory and nothing more, a story he could tell to his son at night, about the ballerina who pirouetted into the lonely sailor’s life only to leave again like a dream.”

“When he left after that, I didn’t have the strength to go after him again. That was when I had to face my second choice. I had already made it there, on some busy street in Rome with so many strangers watching me in a way that was so very different from the looks I was used to on stage. I knew that I wanted to keep the baby. I wanted to give birth to my child and to protect it from the cruelties of this world. To watch it grow into a formidable person, a real human being. Someone who saw a helpless, pregnant woman crying in the street and who’s first thought would be to help. I decided to move back home and raise the baby myself. I would buy a small cottage with the money I had saved from dancing, it wasn’t much, but it would be enough. Then I would plant whatever we needed. And my child would grow up strong and determined, like myself. My plan worked out well at first. I was able to buy a house for us with a beautiful garden. I had enough seeds to plant in the spring that would get us through the year and beyond. I had even met old friends again who I had long since forgotten.”

“Did you meet the strawberry boy there again?” Evan asked.

“Oh yes, I did. Although he was a strawberry man by then. He had a wonderful wife and three healthy sons and five horses. He didn’t eat strawberries anymore, though. His wife and children were all allergic to them, so he had given up their sweetness long ago; life is ironic like that sometimes. It likes to take away the things we love most. In December my baby was born. I called him Thomas.”

Thomas. That had been his father’s name too. Evan thought about his father. His father who had been taken away from him way too early. Evan didn’t remember anything at all about his father. The only ways he had to get to know him were the pictures around the house and the stories that his mom and Felix would tell him if he pestered them long enough. Sometimes he felt like his father hadn’t been a real person at all. He felt more like a superhero out of a comic book. A man with a heart too big for his own good. A man who would climb trees to help lost kitties and who would valiantly brace deadly flames to save lost strangers. A man who eventually died because of his heart, leaving behind his wife and sons to fend for themselves.
“It wasn’t easy to raise Thomas myself all while keeping the farm running and keeping myself alive as well. But I made it work. Jacob, the strawberry man, and his family helped me a lot. I grew quite close to his wife, Katherine. She would always tell me stories of how her own sons had behaved when they were as small as Thomas.”

“When Thomas was a year old, we had our first draught. We lost over half of our plants, which meant that we lost over half of our food for the year. For a while, we could count on Jacob to help. But that fall, he fell gravely ill and eventually, he died. Katherine was inconsolable. Her boys would come to me, telling me how she hadn’t gotten up from her bed in days, how they would hear her yowl in pain and sorrow at night, and how she had stopped eating. One day, she stood in front of my door, her bags were packed and her sons stood at a distance behind her. She told me she was leaving. It was too painful to live there, where Jacob’s memory haunted her every second. So she took everything she had and she went to live with her sister in the city. I never heard of her again after that.”

“The next year, we suffered another draught. This time, there was no one left to help us. Everyone was suffering just as much as us, and they had their own families to take care of. Sometimes I went up to four days without eating anything at all. But Thomas. Thomas was a growing kid. He had begun to eat real food, and I tried to give him something every day, but I couldn’t. There was nothing to give him, and he grew weaker and weaker even more quickly than I did. Eventually, he caught a fever and I knew this was it. I knew this was what would take him from me.”

“I took the last meagre bit of savings I had left, and I rode to the city, cradling Thomas in my arms in the hopes that I could protect him at least a little from the cold. The doctor saved his life. Even though my money wasn’t enough to pay him, he saved my baby. When I walked out of the clinic, I had a choice to make.”

“I made the choice that broke me. I went to the orphanage. I couldn’t care for Thomas; I couldn’t even give him anything to eat. I knew that, if he stayed with me, he would die. I loved him more I had ever loved anyone else. I loved him more than myself, even. So I knew I had to give him his best chance at living. And I knew that that meant I would have to step out of his life. So I did.”

“It was the hardest choice I ever had to make. I knew I couldn’t go back home anymore. I finally understood why Katherine had left. The memories of Thomas were too much to bear. At night, I would sometimes wake up to his screaming and crying, and I would hurry to his room only to find it empty and to remember all over again what I had done. Everywhere I turned, I only saw his ghost. I left soon after giving Thomas away. I tried to sell the cottage, but no one would take it. I went in search of a job once again.”
“My old dance ensemble wouldn’t take me back. They said I had been too unpredictable, too unreliable, running off like that in the middle of a tour. They were right, of course. So there I was, after my life had ended already three times, and I knew that I had to begin anew. I applied for many other companies, but after the pregnancy and the starvation during the draughts my body was not the same. I also hadn’t practiced for over two years, so my body wasn’t used to dancing anymore. Eventually, I was taken in by a small troupe in Poland. I began dancing once again, but I didn’t feel it in my veins anymore like I did once upon a time. I grew careless and eventually I hurt myself. I wasn’t paying attention, lost in my memories, and suddenly my leg was broken. It never healed right, still bugs me to this day, actually. I spent the rest of my days working as a teacher there. I watched other dancers ascend to heights that I myself had never reached, and, in a way, I was happy then. When I had my fill of that, I quit the company and I returned here, to the city where I had given Thomas away so long ago. And now, here I am, still trying to live my life as best as I can.”

There was a pause as she let the story settle in the air between them. Evan was still trying to process it all, trying to see the sense in it. Maybe there wasn’t really and sense at all. Like his dad being taken from him, this other Thomas being taken from her had not been fair. It hadn’t been right, but it had been nonetheless.

“Oh my, that really all came out now, didn’t it?” She asked, laughing a bit at herself.

Evan was stunned out of words. What could he possibly tell this lady? That he was sorry for what she had gone through? For the choices she had to make? For all the unfairness and heartbreak she had encountered?

The lady looked at her wristwatch.

“Already so late, eh? I’m sorry, hon, but I’m afraid I have to leave now. There is a horse race on TV that I would love to watch today.”

She stood up and reached for her bags and her cane and she began walking off.

“I-“ Evan began. But he still didn’t know quite what to say. “Thank you. For helping me with my homework. For telling me all of that.”

She smiled at him.

“I’ll see you around, kiddo.”
She left after that, not giving Evan a chance to say goodbye himself or to ask her if she would come by again some time to keep him company or help him with his homework. The door behind her shut soundlessly.

“My name is Thekla Duengen. I study Cognitive Science and I write because, to be honest, who wouldn’t like to be a pirate, a dragon, a magician or just someone else from time to time.”

Colourful blindness
Thekla Duengen

There are two big things in my life that scare me to death if I think about them. The one is that I am going to be blind and there is nothing I can do about it. In other words, there will be a moment when I see the faces of my parent for the last time. The second thing, a secret, is about an ability of mine. If people found out what I am able to do my life would change completely. No one will ever find out about it; or let’s say that the things I described years ago are true.

When I was younger I told my parents and a few kids from school about my special “ability”. Well now I know that people can be really mean when they don’t understand things or in case of my parents when they are worried. When I was eleven years old I spent one whole year in a mental facility arguing with the doctors about my condition. I argued with them because I deeply believed that everything I told my parents was true. I was able to see colours. All right, that doesn’t sound special if I put it that way because, let’s face it, a lot of people are able to see colours. But I didn’t only could see colours like the green leaves of
the trees or the shining red of a tomato. I was able to describe the personality of a person even though I didn’t know him by the colour he had inside of him. In the beginning, I didn’t know that this was special. That I was the only one that could see them. But eventually I got to that point. Especially when I told my parents that our new neighbour wasn’t a nice guy even though he seemed to be. I told them that I think the dark red within him was not a good sign. When they looked at me in confusion I wondered if red showed that someone was a good person and that I perhaps just didn’t know that. But I found out that the interpretation of the colour wasn’t the problem in this scenario when I ended up seeing psychiatrist after psychiatrist one week later. The problem was that I could see the personality of a person. When I still talked about the beautiful and scary colours of some of my classmates or my teachers, months after starting to go to therapy, my psychiatrist and my parents decided together that there was something seriously wrong with me and that I needed more help. So I had to go to a mental hospital. Don’t get me wrong, today I understand why my parents did that to me and I know now that they just wanted my best but at that time I was devastated.

My world started to collapse 7 years ago. I had been swimming with my parents and my little brother who was 5 years old at that time. It was a sunny day and my brother and I got both sunburnt. I was still laughing about one of the silly jokes my father used to make when we entered the house. My headache started coming back. This morning before school I woke up with a pain that seemed to be located somewhere behind my eyes. I have had that pain before but never as bad as it was that morning. The pain woke me, and believe me, when I am asleep almost nothing can wake me. My mom always used to joke that a rock band could play right next to me and I would still not wake up. She always said that I would probably turn around and start mumbling in my sleep trying to sing along. I didn’t want to miss school that day because I knew my parents would never allow me to stay at home from school but go with them to the lake that afternoon. So I decided to get up. After the breakfast the pain was almost gone. But right now after that day in the sun it was coming back. I hoped that it was just because of the sunburn or because I was so hungry.

My mum went into the kitchen to make dinner. Half an hour later we were all sitting at the table ready to start eating. “Bonny please don’t make such a face! You know today is your brothers turn. You decided yesterday what we had for dinner. So please just eat it and don’t make a scene”, Mum said. I looked at her in confusion. What was she talking about? Then I looked down at my plate with spinach, mashed potatoes, and fried eggs. Ah now I know what she was referring to. “I wasn’t going to.” I said moaning. I hate spinach, but until my mother started talking I didn’t even realize that we were going to have spinach for dinner. I could observe a change in her face. She went from irritated to worried: “What is it then?” “It is the headache again!” I mumbled while putting a fork full of mashed potato into my mouth.
That was the moment when the pain reached its height. My fork dropped and hit the plate with a loud noise. I squinted my eyes and pressed my fingers against them. Ten seconds passed without anyone doing anything. Then everything happened at once. My mum jumped up and reached me in two big steps. She grabbed my hands and pulled them away from my eyes. Then she told me to open the eyes and look at her. At the same time my father jumped up a little unsure what to do. He ran into the kitchen took a pain killer out of one of the drawers, ran back and put it in front of me on the desk. “Honey, open your eyes and look at me”, my mother said again. I opened my eyes and everything was blurred and almost immediately the pain got even worse. I closed my eyes again because I hoped I would feel better then. That was when I passed out. Someone must have called the ambulance because I woke up from a beeping noise next to me and when I opened my eyes I could see a white ceiling. Well at least I thought it was a white ceiling because everything was a little blurry. It smelled like disinfectant. I turned my head and looked at my mother who immediately wiped away her tears and started smiling. My mother had never cried in front of me or my brother before. So that was when I knew something was seriously wrong.

When I talked to the doctors that day they threw a bunch of very complicated sounding words at me. Like every normal human being that never studied medicine, I didn’t understand a word. So they told the easy version of it: Basically I got sick and the nerves in my eyes started to deteriorate. I was told that there was nothing anyone could do about it. The odds were very high that I would lose my complete sight during the next 10 years.

Well I came home from the hospital a few days later and got some medication that helped me with the pain. The hope was that it also slowed down the sight loss. I was still adapting to the new situation and recovering from the shock. So I was sitting in my room and staring at the wall, then at the clock on my bedside table, and at the wall again. And every time my eyes moved everything was blurry for a few seconds. So this was going to be my life now. Just that; this blur would be constantly there and not disappear when my eyes focused on something. I was doing this for almost 10 minutes when I heard the voice of my little brother Tommy. “So can you still see me?” he asked curiously. When I looked at him I needed all my strength to hold back the tears. At that moment my brother gave me so much strength back that I had already lost through these past days. I didn’t want to admit it but everyone around me was acting weird. When my parents talked to me they looked worried, sad or utterly exhausted. But this little boy with his curly dark hair, his cheeky grin and those bright blue eyes looked at me in curiosity. There was no sign of suppressed worries or exhaustion at all. He was just being my little brother asking one of his questions. The only difference was that I was actually able to answer this one. “Yes, but since when do you have red
“Hair?” I asked smiling. At first he looked confused but then he realised that I was grinning, ran to me, and jumped into my arms. I caught him on his flight through the air and theatrically stumbled backwards fell onto the bed and was rolling around with him in my arms. He was squeaking out of joy and we still laughed a minute later when I sat down next to him. His cheeks were red because of laughing so much.

And while I was looking at him I realised it for the first time. It seemed as if there was a yellow glow inside of Tommy; located in his chest. Just the look of that colour made me feel happy and it was like having my own little sun sitting in front of me. But it was like watching the stars. When I tried to really focus on that light it just disappeared. But when I looked at a point close to him I could definitely see something from the corner of my eyes. It was later when I realised that those colours within people showed me their personality. But not only that. This colour never stayed the same. It was constantly changing which had a lot to do with the mood the person was in at that moment.

The strange thing was the worse my sight got, the better I could see those colours. Soon it began to be normal for me to see those kind of things. It felt familiar and that was the reason why I started talking about this ability as if it was something normal everyone could do. Well, unfortunately it was not and so I ended up in the mental hospital.

But before that happened, all my friends started acting out weird around me. At first, they thought it was some kind of joke when I talked about the colours of our teachers. But after they found out that I wasn’t joking they started to separate themselves from me. My former friends started making fun of me because they thought I was crazy. They had enough problems with me becoming blind but they could not handle the part where I was insisting on seeing everyone’s colours. This was a tough time for me because soon I had no one left. In the breaks I was sitting alone. No one wanted to work with me when we had to do a group project at school and even after school I stayed at home almost all day. I had no one that wanted to do stuff with me anymore except of my little brother Tommy.

But he also started to become strange. He was still nice to me but he started getting into trouble. He was fighting a lot with my parents and when he came to school his teachers said that he was misbehaving. It was years later when he told me that he was acting like this because he was feeling like he had no parents anymore. He was jealous of me. Of course not of my situation but of the attention I got from our parents. And he was right. Ever since I woke up in the hospital my parents never left my side. They tried to help me with every step on the way. They drove me to doctor appointments and psychiatrists, helped me eat, and tried to teach me how to do things without seeing anything anymore. But because of this they had not much time left for my little brother. And while I was annoyed and had the
feeling they were exaggerating, my brother was feeling lonely. So his acting out was a cry for attention.

The time in the mental facility was the horror. I was at a point in my life where I already started to think that I was better off without people. The only exception was my family. But when my parents together with the psychiatric decided, without asking me, that it was best for me to be in an environment where I could get help during the whole day I also lost faith in them. I couldn’t understand why they would send me away. They taught me that I should always tell the truth and be open minded. I told them the truth and they thought I was lying. They were not open minded and they lost their trust in me. I could live with the fact that the people from school thought I was lying. To be honest I was not happy about that but up to that point I had a strong family that supported me. But when my parents told me that I had to go to a mental facility I was so disappointed in human kind in general. They never told me that they thought I was lying but they didn’t have to. While they were explaining me that the people in the mental health facility could help me figure out how to live without sight I knew that this was not the only reason why they wanted me to leave. I mean I already had a psychiatrist. I was working with him on that topic for months then. “Is it because I can see those colours?”, I asked to find out the truth. All it needed for me to know that I was exactly right with my assumption, was the brief moment when my mother looked at my father and back at me. “No honey of course not. Your father and I just have the feeling that you are at a point where we can’t help you anymore. We think it’s best for you when people help you that have experience in situations like yours.” Wow, situations like mine! She didn’t need to say that but I knew what she meant by that: Crazy people that claim to see colours that just are not there! So by sending me to this mental institute my parents broke two of the most important rules they taught me. They were not open minded because they decided I was lying and they actually lied to me.

Needless to say that when I arrived at the institute I was mad at my parents, my friends, that psychiatrist that was staring at me, this clinical smell, that light that seemed to be too bright, hell, even that stupid chair I was sitting on. In short: I was mad at the whole world. Weeks passed and I tried to tell the doctors that it was true that I could see colours. At first they were very interested and I was happy that I finally found some people that believed me. We talked hours about these colours and how they looked like and how they made me feel. Most of the people that worked here had different blue colours which had a calm effect on me. But after I explained to them what I could see and I was able to tell if they were in a good or bad mood by the change of their colour they started to ask the same questions again and again. They explained to me, in calm voice, that it was impossible to see colours within people. And the next day they would start all over again. My mood got worse and
worse every day. Don’t get me wrong; not everything was bad here but I missed my home and I just missed it to do whatever I wanted to do whenever I wanted to.

One of the good things here was that I learned a lot about my illness though. The people of the institute helped me to prepare for what was about to come. I started to learn braille, how to put on clothes, how to eat, and how to pour out a drink without seeing anything.

In the beginning my parents visited me every day. But soon the doctors told them that I would perhaps make better progress if I wasn’t around my old environment that often. So they visited every other day. That was all they agreed on even though the doctors wanted them to visit me just on the weekends. I was still mad at them for not believing me but I still loved them and missed them very much. A few times they even took me out on the weekends and did a little trip with me to the lake or the cinema. At that time, I was still able to see well enough to do that. Those trips helped me and I was happy. But as soon as I had to come back I was in a bad mood again. I actually started to think I was crazy. I started to lose trust in myself and as much as I wanted the colours of my imagination, like the doctors said, to disappear they never did. And this was a problem because if this wasn’t getting any better I wasn’t allowed to go home permanently and that was all I wanted.

Well at least the food here was quite good. The cafeteria is where I met Camille. She was thirteen and was here because she had an eating disorder. I liked Camille from the beginning. She had short blond hair that was always flying around her head. She told me once that she was just not able to tame it. I didn’t know if that was true or if she was just too lazy to work on her hair but I didn’t care because I loved it. With her everything was easier. I liked her from the beginning, but on the other hand I didn’t even have a choice. With an apple in one hand and a coke in the other hand she looked at me and said: “Hey there, I am Camille. Look I know where we can eat and have the best view. Just follow me”. And then she started to walk away without looking back. It was not a question she just decided that I would come with her and so I did. After I met her everything got better. But even though she was always honest to me about her disease I wasn’t able to tell her the reason why I was here. I was so ashamed and just wasn’t sure about anything anymore. Camille just asked me once why I was here and when I started mumbling something she looked at me with a smile. “Hey it’s ok. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. Just know that I am listening; all right?” That was the sweetest thing ever. At first I was scared that things would change after that, but they didn’t. She was still the same and soon we became best friends. When I told her that I was also here because I was going to be blind. Camille was quiet for a moment, but by then I knew that wasn’t a bad sign. Normally that means, that she was planning something. After a minute she looked me in the eyes and said: “Okay then. My aunt gave me a camera for my last birthday, so we are going to make a lot of pictures.
Every day we are going to make a funny new picture from things that went well that day. And then we put them on your wall. Every time you pass one of those pictures you stop, look at it and then close your eyes and try to remember all the details. So you will have the pictures for now to make you happy and the memorizing part is for the future when you can't see anything anymore.” She nodded and was obviously proud of her idea. And she was right that idea was awesome. And so I had something fun to do. After only one week we decided that daily pictures were too much, so we made one picture every week and I loved every single one of them. In one picture we were outside in the beautiful garden of the facility and both were sunburnt. In another one we dressed up like old women. One picture was of Camille who was almost falling down because I tied her shoelaces together without her noticing. I loved to plan what to do during the next week. So I stayed busy.

But despite all of that there was no sign of improvement on the other front. And my sight got worse and worse. I had good and bad days. But at one of my bad days I accidentally put my finger in the mashed potatoes when I tried to grab my plate, poured too much water in my glass and almost dropped it on the way to the desk. During the whole way to the desk I was cursing. Camille laughed at me but stopped when she watched me avoiding all the people that were running around during their break to get something to eat. When we reached our table she was still quiet. “What is it?” I asked. “Well … You know, I have been watching you now for a while. But first, can I ask you a question?” “Eh, sure.”, I was a little nervous because she sounded so serious. “Ok. So today is one of your bad days? Today you have troubles with seeing right?”. “Yes” I answered honestly. But I still didn't know what she was aiming for. “You have problems with seeing all kinds of things but especially moving things are very difficult for you because you can’t focus on them that good”. This time it wasn’t a question but I answered anyway: “Yes, that's right. So what is it? What do you want to tell me?”. “Actually it is more of a question. So how come today you are not able to grab the plate or pour your drink but have no problems avoiding all the people that are running around in no particular order? Shouldn’t that be even harder for you? I was prepared to help you so you wouldn't crash into one or two of them but you didn’t need my help. On the contrary, it was as if you were able to see them all.” Now I was the one that was silent. This had two reasons. First of all, I was surprised that she had noticed all those little details about me and second I was shocked because she was right. For the past few months I was worried and thinking that I was actually losing my mind and only imagining all the colours but Camille was right and because of her I had proven now that I wasn’t crazy or lying or just trying to get attention. I knew that still nobody would believe me but I needed that proof for myself. And then I told Camille everything about my ability. “Oh wow, what is my colour?”, she asked me without hesitation when I finished. I immediately started crying. “You
believe me?” I sobbed. “You actually believe me!”. She smiled at me and gave me a paper tissue “Of course I do. But don’t even think for a minute that you are getting away with not telling me my colour just because you are crying right now!” And so I told her that today was one of those days where I was able to see not only colours but also patterns. This has just happened to me a few times but before I have always ignored it because I thought it was my imagination tricking me. So now was the first time that I actually paid attention. I described to her how there were bright green lights inside of her that started at her feet and went up to her chest. It kind of looked like grass. But in her chest were also blue waves that reminded me of the wind and the water. And when I took a closer look I was able to see a few yellow sparkles that reminded me of her freckles. She seemed to be happy with what I just described and I realised that I loved the overall picture of her own specific pattern. It was special and still beautiful. And it suited her well.

After that day Camille and I worked together to come up with a plan on how to get me out of here. First we thought about running away, but let’s face it, we were too young, had no money, were probably not able to break out and that way I still wouldn’t have been together with my family which was one of the main reasons why I wanted to get out. But after a few weeks we had a solid plan that soon started to work. Before that I was always so confused about what I was able to see and what was just imagination. But now I knew exactly how my abilities worked and that they were real. Now that I knew who I was it was so much easier to handle the meetings with the psychiatrists. Camille and I had the idea that they would let me go if I was cured and wasn’t seeing the colours anymore. But we both knew that they would become suspicious when I told them I don’t see them anymore too early. So I had to make it look real. They had to believe me. I needed 5 more weeks to convince them that the colours where gone except for very stressful situations. The psychiatrists and my parents decided together that I was able to leave the facility. And from that day on, I never told anybody about my colour sight again. Camille was the only person that knew of it. And only one week after I left she was also allowed to leave the mental hospital. We stayed close friends up until now. Because of Camille I know now that I am not better off without people. No one is. You just need the right person and everything changes.
“I am in love with London, already prepping things for Easter, domiciled in the North, while completing my Acrostic being a picky eater. I write about situations found in everyday life, while trying to seize the irony of every potential awkward moment.”

**From March to June**

Lena Feldsien

June

“Josie... I don’t know what to say.” - “You are not supposed to say anything, Mark! Don’t you get it?! We are standing here in god knows where in the middle of the night, only hours away from your wedding! There were so many times, more than I could count, where I wished for you to disappear out of my mind for good! There were days on which I wished, just for once in my life that I could stop thinking about you that I could just turn it off, but every time I see your face I can’t act normal, I can’t breathe, I just can’t! I am feeling like a damn prisoner in my own freaking mind and the only way out is to push you away, to slam that door shut for good and to just never look back at you, your family or this bloody town, but the truth is I am thinking about you all the time! I can’t go on like that Mark! You are about to marry her! I can’t keep acting like your best friend around her, just because you are a coward! Tell her or leave it, but I am done. I am done with this wedding, I am done with this stupid town and most of all I am done with you!”.

March

“Josie Sophia Lynn! What are you doing here?” Josie turns around. An elder woman with a yellow dress, rosy lips and curly blond-grey hair is walking towards her, smiling, her arms wide open. “Aunt Silvy!” Josie smiles back. “My lord, look at how you have grown, I can’t believe it! Your mother is inside; she will be so unbelievably happy to see you! Oh Matthew!” Before Josie could even respond to aunt Silvy’s happiness, Silvy was gone greeting Matthew and everyone else, who made the mistake of parking directly in front of the house. Everyone knows that aunt Silvy is always waiting in front of the porch to welcome everyone, who is arriving. Josie walks through the old, but new white painted door straight to the big
green painted kitchen, her mother is already waiting for her. “Hey mom, happy birthday!” Josie gives her smiling mother a big hug. “Sophia! Oh, thank you, honey. I have missed you, you know that?” Josie’s mother gives her a serious, but at the same time grateful look, since she finally sees her daughter again. “I know mom, I know, but now I am here, am I not? So, tell me what is the new hot gossip in town?” Josie said slightly ironic. “Yer, yer, you do your jokes, but there is actually plenty going on here this summer!” Josie’s mom says defending her small hometown. “Like what? Did uncle Andy win another bacon and beans contest?” - “He did, indeed!” Josie starts laughing. “But… believe it or not we actually have even more interesting events this summer. Cassy, Heather’s daughter is getting married.” Josie stops laughing immediately. “Cassy Jones?” Josie asks her mother, hoping she misunderstood her. “Yes, Cassy Jones and what was her boyfriends, I mean fiancés name again?” - “Mark mom, his name is Mark.” Josie says, getting quieter with every word. “Oh yes, you are right! Didn’t you two had a thing once, as well honey? Or whatever you kids used to call it?” - “Yes mom, we did.”

Josie looks out of the window remembering the last time she thought about Mark…

“Oh Sweetie, I got your text, are you alright?” Kate asked her, as she was walking through the door. Josie looked up from the bar table: “Right now? I am in a good place!”. Kate started staring at Josie for a second, before she decided to reply: “You are drinking in a bar in the middle of the day, are you sure?” – “I never said emotionally, just you know, in a place with loads of bottles, helping me to forget about the last three years.” Josie took another sip of her drink. “I would literally rather get hit by a car right now, than going through this crap!” Kate could relate to Josie’s situation more than anyone in town. Her version of flirting was looking at someone she thinks is attractive multiple times, hoping that this person would be braver than she was and start talking to her, but more importantly she has been Josie’s best friend since senior year in high school. On some days Josie is still impressed by how Kate seems to surprise everyone around her, including herself with what she says and does, while on other days Kate tries to get out of her car with her seatbelt still fastened.

“I’ll tell you why this still hurts. I am way too sober!” Kate took the seat next to Josie: “Well, I can help with that. Bartender!” She was pointing at Josie’s glass, while giving the bartender a sign to mix two more of whatever it is Josie has been drinking. “I need to get him back.” Josie said, constantly looking into her empty glass. “Did you fall down the stairs on your way here and smacked your sweet little head on the street? Going back to your ex is like reheating McDonalds fries!” – “They taste cold, as well….” Now, Kate seemed to be the one needing a drink, since this seemed to be going to be a long night. “I bet one day, when you are 45 you will run into him again at the grocery store and laugh, cause he is bald!” Kate said, trying to cheer Josie up. “It’s just.. I thought I’d go to college with the love of my life,
crushing it there and embrace new hobbies." - “Yer, and I thought unicorns were real until I was 15.” Kate laughed. “No, honestly, Mark left me, my job is a nightmare and cherry on top, I had to get two pigeons out of my bathroom this morning!” Kate tried to stay serious for as long, as she could, however, the second she started picturing Josie fighting against two pigeons in her pyjamas she bust out laughing. "Alright, you can stop laughing now, it wasn’t that funny.”, Josie said, while making her Grinch-face. With the Grinch-face on top, it was even more difficult for Kate to stop. “Oh hell yer, it is! Look at you, your life seems like a less dramatic and of course younger version of Bridget Jones. Hey, that was worth three movies, I bet this would...", Kate stopped laughing and talking immediately, as she saw Josies Grinch-face turning into a smile. Not a good smile, more like the kind of smile you get, before someone punches you in the face for stealing their last piece of chocolate pie out of the fridge at the office. Half an hour later, after a few more drinks and loads of comments and bad jokes about every happy couple in the bar, Kate headed to the ladies’ room, even though she knew that leaving Josie alone at a bar table has never once been a good idea.

As Kate got back, Josie was standing at the bar, trying to flirt with a guy in a lumberjack shirt, who was at least five years older than her, while he ordered a burger and soda for lunch. “Did you know that, apparently, it’s not okay to order pizza for breakfast or to drink during the day? I mean, who knew, right?” Josie was about to lean over to him, when Kate took her arm: “Sorry, she is just a little…, let’s just say, she has a good reason. Enjoy your soda, bye!” While some people seem to have an inner child, Josie sometimes more seems to have an inner old, grimly lady, making her say inappropriate things or shout at school kids in the bus for being too annoying. Back at the table Kate handed Josie her drink: “I’m glad dinosaurs are extinct.”. “Why?” Josie laughed irritated and drunk at the same time. “Cause I’m pretty sure you’d try to ride it after a few more of these little devilish shots and I am just not qualified in any way to keep you away from that.” Josie started laughing even more. “What the heck did you drink, while I was over there? Is there a hidden minibar at the ladies’ room?” Even the bartender started laughing, since he had been eavesdropping the whole conversation. He handed them two more glasses, this time filled with water saying: “You’d better drink that, you’ll thank me later.” They were both staring at him for a second, then Josie turned to Kate: “Isn’t it funny how drinking eight glasses of water a day seems impossible, especially right now, but four cocktails and eight shots in two hours are going down like a fat kid on a seeswing.”. Kate corrected her: “You mean seesaw”.

- “Same thing.”

“Josieeee!” a rather annoyingly happy voice appears behind her. “Oh, hell no!” Josie whispers to herself, as she turns around. “Cassy! Heeey, how are you?” Josie says faking a big smile as best as she could. “I’m absolutely fun-tastic, if you know what I mean.” Cassy
laughs like some kind of high school prom queen, in her defence though, she actually was prom queen ten years back. Josie takes a deep breath: “So, I heard you are getting married. Con...”. Before Josie could say any further Cassy interrupts her: “I know, isn’t it just amaze maze?”. Josie was trying hard not to get sarcastic about everything that is coming out of Cassys mouth, but it was quiet a tough one. “Sweetie, in here!” Cassy starts waving and yelling through the kitchen window. “As if this wasn’t hell already...” says to herself quietly. Cassy managed to get her fiancé inside the kitchen within a minute to introduce him to Josie. “Sweetie, this is Josie, our mums were besties in College. Josie this is Mark, my adorable fiancé.” – “We actually ...” Josie starts. “We have met in Seattle, in College, I mean friends. We actually were friends in College.” Mark completes the sentence, acting rather unconfutable. “Right.” Josie smiles not mentioning that ‘being friends in college’ might actually be the understatement of the century. “So...” Cassy starts, while Josie and Mark are trying to avoid eye contact. “...you should toads come to the wedding. It’s going to be a huge party plus the more the merrier!” – “Well, ...” Josie starts. All over the sudden Mark looks at her calm and friendly saying: “She is right, you should come.” – “Sure...” Josie smiles back at Cassy and Mark, typing a message to Kate on her phone: “Damn it Kate! Nor is he 45 or bald! Mums birthday just turned into a freakin’ nightmare!".
“I am Jacqueline. I write to process, collect, and express my thoughts and opinions without limitation, while creating a journey to new insights for myself and potentially others.”

Happiness Board
Jacqueline Greulich

How I wish I hadn’t even gotten up. My entire day had to be scheduled since there are so many tasks to complete today. Usually the board only announces what has to be done within the next three hours, so today is probably going to be an extra busy day. I look over at my fluffy blanket and pillow which makes me want to go back in there and never leave again. I’ve picked blue sheets that smell like lavender to make me fall asleep faster, but maybe I didn’t think this through as much as I thought I did. Whenever I go near it, I feel as if I am suddenly getting tired again. Sometimes even in the middle of the day. And even more so today. Today’s one of those days where I wish I hadn’t committed to the board. This thought occurs to me from time to time, but I know that it’s stupid. I put it aside – I’m just thinking this right now because I didn’t sleep well and don’t have enough discipline. I’m very sensitive when it comes to that stuff, and I may also be a lazy person. Not a good combination. I’m not in the position to complain, though – not with my percentages.

After heading over to the bathroom, I wait for the water to be ice cold to then splash it in my face. I need to feel awake.

I’m focusing on the first task of the day. Category Health: Do a stomach workout for 45 minutes. I’m pulling up my t-shirt. I certainly do not have the flattest tummy in the world, but doing only stomach-related exercises for such a long span of time seems a little offensive to me. Not that I could ask my task-board to apologize or compromise. Might as well get through with it.

After what felt like two hours of sweating and shaking, I feel better. I do, I just don’t like the way to get there. I’d rather go for a hike or a run but that probably wouldn’t give my stomach the shape I want it to. Amelia, a friend of mine, goes running every morning. It has never been a task on my board but from what she tells me it must be amazing.
Apparently this was an important step in the right direction given the score update I get after checking my board. 23 points - I am a total of 71% in the health department. I almost feel good, until I see the next task pop up. And then five other ones. I guess today is the second Valentine’s day of the year given that all my tasks for the next 4 hours include some sort of romantic relationship finding attempts. Right, because the other tasks weren’t enough already. I’ll have to do dating related practice and chat with some random guys to then pick one to go on a date with. I’m trying to ignore the message in red capital letters but the board knows what it is doing – I can’t ignore what it’s telling me. “Recommendation for Kylee: Take test to find perfect partner” As if I haven’t thought of this before. I know that it works. It is how almost all of my friends have found their spouse. It’s just that once you take the test you can only choose one of the Top 3. Even if I were to meet someone in real life, I wouldn’t be allowed to pursue that person. But I mean let’s be honest – where am I supposed to just meet someone by accident?

My friends are mocking me for preferring swiping over taking the test. I tell them “What if I don’t want someone matching my wishes 100%?” to which Lara once said “Your whole life already matches you 100% - the only thing missing is a fitting partner.” She’s right. I don’t know what my problem is – everyone wants a perfect life and that means a life that fits your personality and lifestyle. Either way, it wouldn’t be worth it to give this whole thing up. Not if the only reason is that I don’t want to take the test. Eventually I’ll have to, if I don’t find someone. I can only take it until I’ve turned 24, so there’s not exactly much time left. It’s just an additional function of the board so why not use that as well. We all use the board because we don’t want a life without a job and without anything to do. A life marked by success. But we all also want people to share this life with. Especially this one person. The love of our life. Deep down I know that I’ll have to take it. I want to be happy and I know I will be. My scores are already above average in all the other categories, so once it peaks in this one, nothing will be able to stop me. I’ll reach the top levels. I will be happy and fulfilled and will have everything I want from life. Maybe not 100% in every area, but I’m aiming for the top. I will be in love, fit, social, educated and successful.

And I’ll be free. I’ll have one hour of free time every day once I reach that 90%. And I will reach it, that I’m sure of.

I have all the places I want to go listed up. With one hour of free time I should be able to travel around anywhere I want within the US. But once I have two or even three hours I could go to South America. One day maybe even Asia. Or Africa. Or Europe. I would still have to take out a loan but it would be so worth it. And doing extra sports and whatever tasks I’ll have to complete then is much more fun when being at the beach in Thailand, I
guess. I don’t want to complain, though. The tasks of the day give a lot of variety to my daily life.

I’m staring at my bed once again while chatting with Jim, who is 23 and cute, but doesn’t seem to understand that I’m joking when saying that Fish are my favourite animals (Fish is literally my last name – it’s not exactly a high-class joke that would be hard to get).

“Are you still there?” A text from Jim pops up.

“Yes. Where else would I be?” Too harsh? Maybe I should add an emoji to make it sound less forward. Instead I write “haha”. Because what he said is just too funny to me.

“I thought maybe you’d use your free time to chat with me.” Oh come on, you know I don’t have any, you can check out my score. Then it comes to me that that is not entirely true. He can check out all my other scores, but for him not to be put off they don’t show the rom-score. But since he’s been recommended to me, he and I must be in about the same range. His other scores are higher than mine, though, so he probably has about 15 minutes of free time per day.

“Are you?” As if. “using your free time to chat with me?”

“Sounds like you aren’t ;)” I hate the winking face emoji.

“You’ll have to guess for yourself ;)” Take that – I can use that one too. I wait for a reply. A few seconds pass. One minute. Two minutes. He doesn’t reply. Probably didn’t know what to say. I look over at the board. The time display is at 63%, so the session isn’t over yet. I’ll have to find someone else to chat with. This is my last attempt, if this doesn’t work out, I’ll take the test. I say this to myself almost on a daily basis, but today I’m not sure - I might really mean it this time. I switch from the floor as my working space to my desk. Tidier than it has ever been before. Yesterday one of my tasks was to tidy up my desk. I didn’t get why this would be important, but maybe the board already expected me to end things with Jim and therefore wanted to give me a head-start. Hah if it’s as clever as it says, I wouldn’t even have to take the test. It would just find someone for me from the information it has about me. I mean, who knows – maybe it is able to do this. But my overall score is still too low, so it’ll probably still take me a while to find out. For which I need a higher score. Which I only get by finding a spouse or excelling in another category, so I don’t even need to know.

I’m not really in the mood to chat with anyone else or swipe through potential partners, especially since the number seems to minimize every day. Ever since the test has been out. The board only tracks my time on the app, so instead of checking out the guys, I go on my own profile. Maybe I should change it up a little. Take some new photos. But with who? I
have my family meeting tomorrow. I could take a few pictures with them. Or my friends. Soon an obligatory meeting in person will come up on my checklist. I haven’t seen them in a while. I don’t really miss them too much since I am used to just seeing them once a month. Okay, mostly because they’re not really my friends. They have been assigned to me and everyone who’d see us together would notice. By trying to form diverse group of friends, the system just mixed together random people. The theory behind this is that friends only become friends because of the similar circumstances surrounding them. Basically because they’re the people that are available. It doesn’t really matter who you are friends with anyways, that’s what they must have been thinking. It’s also because finding a spouse is considered as much more important than good friends. Sometimes I’d prefer a friendship match over a love match, though. My “friends” and I don’t really talk about much apart from our day-to-day-life; which means the tasks on our board.

But when I told my sister about that, she said that it’s the same for her. Only difference is that she’s married and therefore doesn’t have as much compulsory time that she has to spend with them. I know it sounds harsh – it’s not that I can’t stand them, I’d just rather spend time on my own and I already do that the majority of the time. Working as a business consultant doesn’t exactly give me a social environment. So either I’m really antisocial or they’re just not a good fit.

I go back to check on Jim’s profile. His profile pictures are gone which means he either blocked me or had his profile deleted. It doesn’t take much thinking to know that it wasn’t the latter. Maybe my questions were too harsh. He’s no loss, I try to tell myself. Then again, I was really tired and in a bad mood while writing with him, it would be unfair to blame him, if I didn’t put any energy into the conversation in the first place.

“Beep. Beep.” I turn around. This is the sound the board makes when it wants to announce a change in plans for the day. Red writing. This is never a good sign. “Go out with the next guy that pops up” What? I’m rereading the task. Next to it I can see the “Take the test” ad, as usual. Only this time I take it more serious. It can’t force me to take the test though or can it? I pick my phone up. Just in that second I get a text by Amelia, a friend of mine. “So excited to meet up next week. I met the cutest, most perfect guy! Gonna tell you everything about it on Wednesday. See ya xoxo” Ugh. This can’t be real. I unlock the screen. And open the app. Please let the next guy be cute. Please. My aid plea didn’t help. I know I have lost the minute I open my eyes. The guy is my ex-boyfriend.

If that’s what you want to call him. We were a typical teenage couple, we just got together because the board suggested it. At least that was my reason.
This can't be a coincidence, but it leaves me with no choice. I will never go back to Luke, he’s a terrible guy. Fine. “You have won. Alright? Are you happy now?” I get up and look at the board. My nose begins to itch and my eyes begin to water. I don’t want to cry right now. It’s not even a big deal. I just always thought that I’d be the special one that didn’t have to take the test. I’m not special in any other way, why would I be special when it comes to this? An ad pops up: “Just do it.” Is this a joke? Or another, perfectly fitting coincidence? I don’t think so. Nothing seems to be in this world. But does it matter? Not really.

I’ll take it. I’ll take the test. The red button is right in front of me, I only have to click on it. I don’t have anything to lose, I say to myself. Nothing to lose and everything to win. I move the mouse and click on the button.

A new browser opens. On the screen I can see a number of what looks like animated versions of people. They’re forming a huge crowd so I can’t really make out anyone in particular. I’m trying to zoom in. Doesn’t work. Is this the pool of potential partners for me? This is more than I expected. A message pops up. “Hello Kylee, we’ve been waiting for you. The test includes all of the registered and single male population. You can use up to 10 filters to narrow the number of potential partners down. Afterwards you’ll have to answer a few questions about yourself. We’ll present you at least 5 potential partners, but be aware: you can only choose three to go on a date with. Good luck!” I’ll need it. Five people from this crowd? I’m wiping my palms on my pants. I can’t make the wrong choice now. I click on “Filters” and am presented with a variety of options. About a hundred, I would say. I’m not sure if that is good or bad, but I’m leaning towards bad. I don’t want the filters to be too specific. I don’t care whether you prefer fruit over vegetables. Or what your eye color is. Yes, I like blue eyes but that doesn’t mean that I don’t like brown ones. Sometimes I think I am too picky, sometimes if I’m not picky enough. But I have clicked on the button, and that means that I have committed to this. Maybe this is for creating the perfect man. Or more like finding the one that matches all my criteria. I can be as picky as I want to. I scroll through the filters. Hair color, fitness score, monthly income, favorite music genre. I click on Hair color. I like black hair. Just this thought alone makes me feel bad immediately. I also want to select blond hair, just to not be too shallow, but then try to remember that this is the point of all of this. I am allowed to be shallow.

Next is “Interests”. I scroll through the seemingly endless list and already want to give up but instead pick out “playing the guitar”, “playing sports”, “watching documentaries”, “traveling” and “ethics”. Almost every interest seems fine to me, who am I to judge what kind of interest is good and what is not? With every filter I add, the pool seems to minimize. Hopefully it won’t minimize to no one being left. It must be a challenge to find me someone who matches this. Age range: 20 till 26. Job: IT-expert, doctor, lawyer, architect or pilot.
What’s next? Qualities. This is easy. I pick: loyal, curious, intelligent, funny and honest. A picture starts to build together in my head. Sort of like a puzzle. I am excited and frightened at the same time to see who’s going to appear on the screen.

After clicking “next” an animated person shows up on screen. “Adjust facial features.” Then the body. And finally the personality traits and interests. I am kind of overwhelmed by adjusting the percentage but I just do it as it advises me to – I trust my gut.

After that I have to answer a few questions about myself. It already knows what I look like and apparently it has also collected a lot of information about me. I have to choose between options like “Stay in” or “Go out”, but it has preselected one option for me for every question already.

I click “next” again. “Congratulations! You’re done. The system will match your data with the potential partner’s data. This will take a few minutes.” I’m almost sad that it’s over. This was fun. My friends were right – this was a good idea.

I’m closing my eyes while the results are loading. Initially out of relief, but now that they’re closed, I begin to notice how tired I am. My board always sets an alarm for me and usually gives me 7 hours of sleep. This should be enough, maybe I just need to upgrade my diet and fitness plan in my free time.

I’m heading towards the kitchen to maybe prepare something for the cooking that I’ll have to do later when a high “ping” interrupts me. The results! I run back but then try to slow myself down a little. I’ll do this in a calm and collected way. “Click on the results if you want to see the seven men that match your wishes the best” Seven! That’s much better than what I expected. I click. The real profiles of seven men appear on screen. All black haired. All blue eyed. They all match my physical preferences which is…scary in a way. In the corner of each profile I can see the match percentage. It ranges between 97 and 100%. One of them has a 100%. “Your whole life already matches you 100% - the only thing missing is a fitting partner.” 100%. This is so weird. Someone matching all of my wishes. Very intriguing. I click on his profile. His name is Brian and he’s 22 years old. He works as a doctor in the neurology department. And matches all the other criteria I chose. Does he know he’s the result of my test? “Hey Brian – Either your board is perfectly efficient or you are if you can be a doctor, play the guitar and sports!” His reply comes immediately. “Not me. It’s the board” Hah. “You should give yourself more credit :D” “My mom already does that more than enough :D” Good connection with his mum. That’s a winner. And he seems to be funny. Well, I did select that as one of the filters but you never know what the system thinks is funny. I ask him about his hobbies. He seems to be widely interested. Pretty impressive. After chatting for a while, he asks me if we want to grab coffee tomorrow. A reason to have
coffee! And the board won't have any excuse for me. Not everything goes as planned, I think. And stick my tongue out at the board.

I set my alarm even earlier than usual. Normally the board would use the time to give me more tasks but since it knows that I have my date today, it seems to be a little more chill. It even gives me 45 minutes to get dressed and do my makeup – it tells me that I should try my best. I'm not sure what that says about my usual style and makeup skills. A text pops up. “I’m excited for today!” – Brian. My heart jumps. He’s awake and he’s thought of me already. My nerves start getting out of control but in a good way. I hope. I think. This is going to be great.

First thing I notice when leaving the house is the wind. I wasn’t prepared for this kind of weather. It’s freezing. The weather seemed perfectly fine yesterday and it’s the middle of spring, so I didn’t even bother checking the weather. Of course not. Why would I? It’s not like this is one of the most important days ever. I run back in and grab a coat. Great – I couldn’t have picked an uglier one. I didn’t have time to change completely and now I have even less of a buffer than before. I try to walk as fast as possible which leads to me bumping into several people of those few that are on the go. “Sorry!” I say to an old lady that is in the middle of opening up her umbrella. She seems to be angry and shouts something in my direction that I’m glad I can’t hear anymore. That’s when I notice a rain drop on my arm. No. Please. That’s why she was unfolding her umbrella. And I didn’t bring one. There’s one right at my door, I could’ve easily picked it up together with my coat. Shit! Can’t this go right? Just today? I hurry to find a spot I can take cover but then finally see the café we planned on meeting in.

I can do this; I tell myself while standing in front of the door. I open it and look for Brian but can’t see him anywhere. Maybe he’s a few minutes late, or he had even less luck than I did. “How many?” a waitress asks me. “Two. He’ll arrive a few minutes later.” She gives me a weird look, like she doesn’t believe me. I guess there are a lot of people that pretend not to come alone.

She leads me to a seat right next to the window. Finally, a good thing. We have a good view. The rain makes it look less fascinating but still – it’s nice. While checking my board – I have 1:30h for this date – I can’t decide between looking at the view or the clock. He’s already 10 minutes late. I tap my fingers on the table. Did something happen to him? I hope not. Maybe I should text him. I start typing “Hey Brian, is everything alright?” when the door opens and a guy with a winning smile comes right in my direction. That’s him. Oh shit. He looks great. That’s when I remember that I didn’t even go to the bathroom. I probably look like a wet poodle.
“Hi!” he says. And gives me a hug. “Sorry. Traffic, you know.” I just nod. Traffic? It's not exactly the time where there’d be a lot going on on the road. “Have you already ordered something? Don’t worry, I’ll pay for everything.” He gives me a wink. Oh no. “It’s alright. I can pay for myself” I say. He gives me a weird look but then smiles. “We’ll see.” He winks at me again. We sit down and from this moment on, I have nothing but regrets. He tells me about his activities as a doctor, about him having worked so hard to get over 90% in every area and that he's so happy to have found someone like me who’s okay with being less successful. Is he being serious? He didn’t ask me one thing, except for if I already ordered something. Also, he touches my leg with his the entire time even though I have already moved away as far as I can. This can’t be true. He can’t be my 100% match. What am I doing wrong?

That’s when I notice the silence. Shit, I didn’t listen to his last words. “Sorry, I’ll just go to the bathroom real quick.” He gives me a smirk but nods. “Of course.” I try not to look like I’m in a hurry although that’s exactly what I am. I close the door of the ladies bathroom behind me and let out a deep breath. All the stalls are empty. Thank god. How could I get myself into this? I should've trusted my instinct - I shouldn’t have taken the test. Why do I need someone anyways? If they all turn out bad, maybe I’m better off alone. Maybe no one really matches me 100%. And maybe that’s alright. I’ll just go back to him and tell him that my board changed my schedule for today. But before that I could really go for a pee. First I need to brush my hair, though.

I am looking for my brush in my bag when the door opens. It’s Brian. What is he doing here? My heart beat begins to fasten. He smiles at me but there’s something about the smile that I don’t like. “The men’s bathroom’s next door” I say. But something tells me he didn’t come in here by accident. He laughs. “You’re a quick one, I see. Didn’t expect that, but good to know.” His eyes darken while he comes closer to me. Oh no. No. This cannot be real right now. “I just really need to pee.” I say, giving out a fake sounding laugh. I sprint to the stall when I feel him grabbing my butt. “Sure” he says and laughs. But he doesn’t let go of my wrist. I didn’t even notice him grabbing it as I was so focused on him touching my butt. Oh my god. There’s only one way out of this. I smile. “If you let go of me now, we’ll get to the good part faster” His smirk deepens. He can’t be that bright, if he believed my terrible acting. But he does let go of my wrist. And I run. The door bangs so loudly I squeeze my eyes together. I run as fast as I can and almost fall over the carpet, but hold on to the wall in the last second. I run and run, out of the restaurant, over the sidewalk until I reach a traffic light. Breathe, just breathe. I feel like I am going to faint every second. “Hey! Hey, is everything alright?” Some guy comes up to me. I’m not looking up. I don’t want to face anyone right now. He sounds uncomfortable though. I can’t blame him I don’t want to know
what I look like. “I. I can’t talk right now.” Maybe running would have been good for me. Apparently, my board didn’t expect this to happen. That’s when I notice. “Where is your board?” I ask him and look up. Brown hair. He smiles. “I threw it away.” Green eyes. No. “Do you want to sit down over there?” He points at a bench. I nod. “Oh by the way – I’m Jim.”

Three months later

I am happy. Overall I am. We’ve been staying in Thailand for a couple of months now and I can’t imagine ever going back. I’m not entirely free but still more than I could have ever imagined. We couldn’t escape the system completely; one cannot just deactivate the board. We’ve managed to put it on silent, that’s the best we could do. Our tasks still pop up frequently and they’ve added up immensely since we don’t complete them anymore. I still feel stressed when seeing them whenever the screen lights up but I have gotten much better at ignoring them.

Now I just schedule what I really want to do. It still helps to get things done. But this time it’s the things that are good and necessary for what I want to accomplish for myself. Which is easy compared to what I was used to in the past. In reality, no one actually needs a lot of things. No one needs to be rich or famous. That alone is not going to make you happy. One should just do what feels right. Because deep down we know what that is.

I chat with my family to update them. Sometimes, rarely though, with one or two friends from home. But only the ones I liked. I don’t have to keep in touch with everyone. I have found new friends that I really love. I picked them out myself. People with whom I can talk about more than just my stressful schedule.

I spend a lot of time with Jim. Sometimes we really get on each other’s last nerve, but he really is the guy I’ve been looking for. Second impressions can really be life-changing. In our ‘old life’ it would have already been too late for him. He had turned 24 a few days after we met but had given up finding someone a few days before that. On his birthday his overall score dropped by a huge amount which would have led to him having to get new friends and a new job that would match his score. But he had already met me. It didn’t count for the board, but it did count for us. And together we changed the life we knew. We don’t let the board tell us what to do anymore.

I now go running because I like it and it is good for my health. And I don’t sit inside all day like I used to. Those things may not give my stomach and butt the shape that’d be considered as perfect, but it doesn’t matter what other people think of my look and my being
anyway. I am starting to not only learn this but also live by it. Someday it'll be easy, Jim says. He had already thrown away his board when he met me. Had already started to live by different standards. But the auditors found out and he had to get a new one, otherwise they would have come for him, he told me. In what way? I don't know – he didn't want to tell me so it must be bad. It's not easy to break society’s rules.

He works as a local photographer and travel agent. I teach at an elementary school three times a week. We both work as freelancers but we both know that if they wanted to, they could easily track us down.

“You want to go for a walk?”, Jim asks me. My first look still goes directly to the board but I avert my gaze from it immediately. I smile at him. “Yes. I'll meet with Julia and Ryan in an hour, but I can tell them that I'll be there a little later.”

Because I can do whatever I want, whenever I want.
“Hi, I am Anabel Afonso. I'm quite into German and English literature, which is why I study these subjects. I write because I feel a lot of things. You're very welcome to enter my world of creativity.”

Learning to Live

Anabel Afonso

Why the subconscious mind should never be ignored: The subconscious mind plays a very important role in affecting your behavior and shaping your personality. It is the part of your mind that contains information that you are not consciously aware of. So, it keeps your most secret hopes and desires and shows them to you, mostly in dreams, to make you aware of the fact that you need a change in life to achieve pure happiness. Ignoring the signals that the subconscious mind sends you will destroy your mental health! But don’t worry, it’s not too late: click here to learn more about how to have access to your subconscious mind through my newest meditation course for only 200 $!

Ben comes into the living room when his mother is checking her mails on the computer. He looks over her shoulder and watches her deleting a few. When she opens this one, he immediately frowns.

“How can a man write so much rubbish in one mail every single day? Come on, Mom, why do you still subscribe to this charlatan?”

Since she had subscribed to an internet guru two weeks ago, Ben's mother has become nearly obsessed with the guru’s daily life advices and “knowledge about the self”-news. Whenever Ben sees her opening one of these mails, he gets as excited as a child who opens its presents on Christmas Eve.

She now slowly turns her head in the direction of her son’s voice, but she keeps looking at the screen of her laptop. “Because he opened my eyes. All he writes is pure magic.”

“Exactly, that’s what it is: magic. It’s not real. He only wants your money.”

To Ben, internet gurus only exist for weak people who pay lots of money to receive worthless advices, through which they get lost in the belief that they suddenly live in a world
of inner peace and harmony when they follow these advices. Unfortunately, his mother has turned into one of them.

Standing right in front of her, Ben waves an arm until she eventually lifts her eyes from the screen and looks at him, slightly smiling.

“Listen, darling. Just because you can’t see it, it doesn't mean it’s not real. One day you'll realize that knowledge does not only come from books and research, but also from your own experience and feelings. You can’t control your emotions forever, and if you let go, you’ll become aware of your mind and your hidden desires. This is the moment when you achieve the power over yourself, and this alone is how you become a powerful man.”

At the end of her preachment she turns around to her laptop again, and as she clicks on the Buy-Now-Button, she sighs in satisfaction.

“Gosh, he infected you with his nonsense!”

Obviously peeved, Ben spins around and leaves the flat.

200$ for another goddamn meditation course! How can she be so stupid?! Still being furious about his mother, he pushes the entrance door and rushes into the university library.

Silence is ruling, says a big sign in the entrance.

The library is the perfect place to go when all Ben wants to do is avoiding other people’s stupidities. For him, everything has to be rational and explainable. He does never just follow his intuition or feelings; he thinks about every decision at least twice, because there could always be a risk he has not thought of yet.

Therefore, the young man studies natural sciences. This is a domain in which he feels comfortable and understood, because the focus lays solely on facts and figures and there are no emotions involved – or manipulative internet gurus.

Ben starts his laptop and opens the university webpage, when suddenly a huge advertisement pops up.

Do you ever feel like a bird locked in a cage, feel imprisoned in your life? Do you ever wonder where your happy days have gone? Get rid of that! The world is full of places that can help you to re-discover your inner balance and harmony.

Read how John’s travel experience to the Mayan temples in South America changed his life!
The corners of Ben’s mouth begin to twitch when he closes the advertisement. 
*Nice try, but I’m not that weak. You won’t get me.*

He ignores the uncomfortable feeling in his stomach and starts to work. Little did he know at that time that the wishes and dreams he hides so well could eventually drive him to a decision of a life-changing dimension.

It is a pure summer’s day. The birds sing their nicest melodies and the warmness covers every single inch in the park. Ben sits on a bench, reading *The Theory of Everything* by Stephen Hawking.

“May I sit next to you?”

As Ben looks up, he glances at a tall woman. She has pale blue eyes which immediately remind him of a frozen sea. Her long brown hair is slightly curled and half-covered by a gigantic beige hat. She wears a dark-green dress that softly swirls around her bare ankles. But what catches his attention the most is a belt made of long brown feathers which she wears around her waist. Her arms are covered with henna paintings – many exotic-looking figures and runes. Her entire appearance is of so much elegance that it makes her look like a gypsy queen. And although Ben has never met her before she is somehow familiar to him.

“While everyone here in the park finds a way to enjoy the beauty of this day, you are the only guy who does not seem to care about it at all”, she says while she sits down next to him on the bench, not waiting for an answer.

Ben looks around. Some people have gathered in the park to practice Yoga, some lay on the grass and enjoy the sun, others drink beer and dance to R’n’B music. She is right, he hasn’t noticed that.

“So? Why do you care about that?”, he asks.

“Because I can see that whatever you spend your free time with does not make you happy.” Ben starts to laugh. “I am happy! Who are you, a mysterious hippie woman who can read people’s minds?”

“I am a woman who can read people’s feelings by their body language. I can easily see if someone is happy or not by the way they look, no matter how much they try to hide their feelings. Does this offend you?”

“What?”

“Me telling you that you are so obviously unhappy with that book that it even makes me – a stranger – feel worried about you from afar.”
Ben tries to avoid the woman’s gaze by looking at the ground. “I like Hawking. His theories are so well-explained that I understand everything. And it has been a recommendation from a professor, so -”

“So, it is nothing you would read out of your personal interest if it was not to catch the professor’s attention. You’re fooling yourself.”

A mischievous glint grows upon her face as she observes him. He slowly puts the book aside and looks her in the eye.

“Well, then I have been fooling myself as long as I can remember. I don’t know what I like to do in my free time.”

She frowns. “This is very sad; don’t you think?”

Ben starts to feel uncomfortable. What does she want?

“Maybe. But how can I find out what I like?”

She laughs. “Alright, now we’re talking! You need to listen to your heart. Find out what you dream of, and what you wish to be. It’s never too late to change your life, as long as you are happy in the end.”

He leans forward and stares at all the people having fun around him. Thinking about what the woman said, he wonders whether he’s been as happy as them within the past few years. He can’t remember.

While he sits there in silence, the woman continues to observe him.

“I see that you listen to me. That’s a great first step. If you want to work on your self-awareness, take your time to think of any activity you would like to try out.”

“I want to get to a place unknown.”

The words come out faster than he expected.

“Really?” Even the woman seems to be surprised.

“I have been in this place for 22 years of my life. If I really want to change, I need to see something different.”

*What the hell am I saying and why do I feel comfortable with it?*

The woman raises an eyebrow. “Well, I really like your sudden enthusiasm about spiritual journeys. Where do you want to go?”
Ben knew that this question would come up, and he already knows the answer. "I want to get to know a culture that is so different from mine. It should be a country where I can grow and find myself. I think that the ancient temples of the Mayan culture in South America are a good place to go, but I need to think about that again."

The woman smiles and nudges his shoulder.

"Well done, I'm so proud of you! But if you feel like this is the right place, you won't need any further information. Let's buy our tickets."

"Our tickets? You're coming with me?" Somehow, he knows he could not hold her back. "Of course. I have constantly been by your side, and I will always be. Don't worry – you know me. Actually. You just haven't paid that much attention to me yet. We should start our journey as soon as possible."

Ben closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Can I really do this? He's still skeptic but something deep inside tells him he needs to do the journey. If you let go, you'll become aware of your mind and your hidden desires. This alone is how you become a powerful man.

He wants to tell the woman about his decision, but when he opens his eyes, she is gone. "Excuse me, Sir. We're closing soon."

Ben startles and immediately bruises his head on the desk lamp. "Shit!"

The old man smirks. "Well, it seems like your work was very exhausting."

He leaves when Ben runs his hand over his hurting head.

Did I fall asleep? Ugh, that usually never happens to me in the library. But that would explain this strange dream I had…

The laptop's screen is still on. Ben expects to see the university webpage, but he's surprised when he sees the same advertisement as before.

Do you ever feel like a bird locked in a cage, feel imprisoned in your life? Do you ever wonder where your happy days have gone? Get rid of that! The world is full of places that can help you to re-discover your inner balance and harmony.

Read how John's travel experience to the Mayan temples in South America changed his life!
I’m sure I’ve closed the advertisement before I started working. Why is it opened again? Might there be any connection between my dream and this internet advertisement? But that can’t be, I don’t believe in things like this, right? At least I refused to do so before…

In this dream I felt comfortable and strong when I made my decision. But could I feel like that for real?

Traveling on my own is risky and could end in horrible situations. Otherwise, it can turn out to be the best decision I’ve ever made because I learn new things and eventually find… my inner harmony, which I now clearly sense is completely lost - or has never even been there. What am I to do? I guess all I have to do is to listen to my body.

With no more thoughts, Ben clicks on the advertisement and reads John’s travel experience.
“I am in love with London, already prepping things for Easter, domiciled in the North, while completing my Acrostic being a picky eater. I write about situations found in everyday life, while trying to seize the irony of every potential awkward moment.”

Spotted
Lena Feldsien

I remember the first time I saw her quite perfectly. I just started my summer job at “Scudamore's Quayside Punt Hire”, where many of my college friends already had been working over the last two summers. We have little punting boats, in which tourists from all over can view all the famous Cambridge colleges from the riverside. She was wearing a bright vanilla, slightly yellow-coloured dress with little rainbow-coloured sprinkles on it. Since it was already July, the sun was shining bright and as she was tying up her long blond hair, I could even spot some freckles on her rosy cheeks. Sadly, I was too far away to tell more about her, however, I knew right then that I needed to get to know her. As the days passed by, she kept sitting and reading her books on the small lawn next to the river. It was not even allowed to sit there, but since nobody was saying anything against it, she kept doing so. I once thought about going over and telling her, but apart from the fact that I was way too shy to do so, I also did not want her to think of me as a muppet or even worse a muppet, who did not want her there, because her not sitting there every day, looking stunning and smiling into her books, was the last thing I wanted to think of. One day during the second week, I was standing on one of the punting boats, waiting for the costumers to get in, when I secretly took another look at her. She was waving around her books quiet hectically, as if she was chased by a bee or a wasp. It looked so funny and at the same time she looked even cuter than usual, trying to fight off those devilish creatures, who probably just misinterpreted her red-dotted dress with a flower or a ladybird. She always seemed so concentrated reading that I only saw her looking up a few times, but still she never seemed to notice me. During the next two weeks it would not stop raining, only a small number of tourists came by the punting boats and of course, she was missing, as well. I wondered, what she was doing, where she would be reading now, and would I ever get to see her again? Since there was no use in waiting for costumers, thanks to the weather, I got on promoting duty in the city centre. All day, I was walking through St. Mary's Street up to
Market Hill and down again through Trinity Street. I must admit I was absolutely lousy at this promotion thing, even in school I was never good at talking to people I did not know, especially here, in the middle of the streets. As I was taking a look on my watch I realised that I only had one more hour to go until I could finally go home, wherefore, I decided to just make the most out of this last hour by stopping by at the library, since firstly there are many people to hand a flyer to and secondly, the staircase in front of the library is sheltered enough for me to not getting as wet as I did over the last hours. I wonder why I did not think of this earlier. As I just found the courage to talk and hand over a few flyers to some people, who walked out of the library, I could catch sight of that vanilla dress again. Suddenly, she walked over. All I thought of was to try to stay calm. She came closer. I held my breath. “Hey, can I have one of those?” – “Sure.” I stumbled nervously, while handing over one of the flyers. “Thanks”, smiled she. Even though she kept staying in front of me, probably waiting for me to say something, I could not bring myself to do so. “I think I have seen you before, aren’t you also working down the river sometimes?” she said, trying once again to start a conversation. “Come on, Jacob!” I thought, close to punching myself for not answering her. “Yes, that’s right and you used to sit on the lawn next to it reading, right?” – “So, you did see me, huh?” she smiled ironically. “Jacob.” I said abruptly, even though she never asked. She laughed, with a look in her eyes, which almost seemed like she might actually not be frightened off by my stumbling and silence. “Nice to meet you Jacob, I’m Lilly by the way, but I gotta go now.” I smiled back, without saying any further. The next morning the sun finally decided to come back again. As I arrived at work around 2 pm, my colleague stopped me saying: “Hey, there was a girl earlier, asking about you. She was cute, mate. I gotta say I would not mind her fancying me. Still she did not say her name or left a message, do you know who she was?”. I started smiling immediately. “It had to be her” I thought to myself, daydreaming of her little nose with those cute freckles on it. Despite the fact that she was not around that day, I could not stop myself from smiling and wishing for her to come back or at least for me to finally find the courage to talk to her for more than two minutes without making a fool out of myself. Four hours later my shift was over and there still was no sign of her anywhere around. I sat down on the bench in front of the little bistro, still hoping for her to at least walk by. Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me: “Hey, I am exchanging a muffin for a seat.”. I turned around, staring. Indeed, it was her! I felt happy as one of those care bears inside. She took the seat next to mine and handed me a mini muffin out of her lunchbox and finally I overcame myself and we kept talking about how I watched her being chased by bees, whereas she told me how bad I was at my job, since there were at least ten times she thought I would fall into the water. I still wonder what would have happened, if she had not talked to me, but I am glad she did.
“I am Eileen Schwanold and I am currently studying Intercultural Relations. I write because nothing compares to creating your own world by letting your thoughts and emotions flow onto a piece of paper.”

The Little Blue Poet

Eileen Schwanold

As Ethan leaves his school building, he keeps his eyes fixated on the pair of shoes that cause him so much trouble. Looking down on his bright red wellies comforts him, reassures him that everything is going to be okay eventually. And it also reminds him not to look up too often. Experience has taught Ethan that even if you end up into the friendliest of faces, the face belongs to a human and humans generally have a hard time understanding him. To Ethan this is a universal truth that extends to everyone except maybe his dad. But his mum always tells him that life is about way more than just spending quality time with dads. For example, Ethan knows that being nice to other people is really important, even if they are not nice to you. He does not understand this rule and sometimes he finds it very hard to meet his mum’s expectations. That doesn’t mean that he is ever rude to people, he just doesn’t know how to reply with something nice when they call him a weirdo and a freak. One time he sneak into his mum’s home office. When adults do not know the answer to something, they use google. So he thought maybe this google could help him find out more about how to deal nicely with the mean kids. Well, google didn’t know either and after he had ended his research he just felt guilty because he used his mum’s computer without permission. Ever since then he stopped trying. He figured that going out of their way is probably the only nice thing that he would come up with. And so he did get out of their way and became even more fixated on his beloved wellies simply to avoid eye contact.

His wellies are his best friends. Even though he gets in trouble for wearing them every day. His teacher, Miss Greyson, always tells him that it is only appropriate to wear his wellies when the sun is not out and there is at least a little bit of rain. But the summers in his hometown are pretty dry and he just can’t bear the thought of abandoning his best friends over the summer. Who on earth would do such a cruel thing and abandon his best friends, just because something is or isn’t coming out of the sky? His classmates apparently
expected the same of him, because ever since he started wearing the boots the teasing and bullying had gotten even worse. They don’t understand. And there is little hope they ever will.

Today was just as bad as any other day. They had PE class and when he refused to put on trainers and insisted on keeping on his wellies, Miss Greyson had sent him to the principal’s office. The headmaster Mister Finch told him that if he explained to him, why wearing these wellies is so important to him, he might understand and let him off the hook. But Ethan knows better than to tell anyone his secret. It’s between him and his dad. Ethan can’t betray his trust like that. Being strong and honourable like that can be hard, especially if it means getting send home early with a note to your mum that says something about disciplinary somethings. Ethan is not really sure what that means but his gut feeling is telling him that he will get in a fight with his mum, again. It’s not as if they don’t already fight enough. Mainly about his dad.

Knowing what is awaiting him at home, he decides to take a detour to his favourite playground just behind the oldest, most run-down wing of the school building. Hardly anyone ever comes here, given how ugly the view is. But they have a working set of swings back here, which is enough for Ethan. He sits down and instantly lowers his eyes. He sits there for a bit, whispering to his friends about his worries, when suddenly, in the corner of his eye, he sees someone appearing on the playground. He quickly looks up, almost expecting it to be his mum. But it is just a girl from his class, he is not sure what her name is though. He has never been good with names. He looks back down onto his red wellies, hoping she is not planning on using the swing set too. The blood starts rushing loudly in his ears. Knowing someone might get so close to him makes him uncomfortable. He concentrates on listening to the girl’s footsteps in the sand. Are they coming closer? In horror, Ethan realizes that they are coming really close. He contemplates jumping off the swings and taking off quickly but by the time he has made up his mind, it is already too late. A pair of blue wellies have entered his field of vision. They are standing there, just inches away from his own boots. The blue and red makes a nice contrast, Ethan thinks and if they had babies, they would be purple. That is what he learned in arts class just the other day. His thoughts get carried away as he admires the girl’s blue wellies and wonders if children’s wellies are actually the kids of grown up wellies.

He almost forgets that she is standing right in front of him until she clears her throat. He hesitates for a few seconds, then decides to try and be brave for once and talk to someone.
After all this girl is wearing nice boots, maybe that is a good sign. “Nice wellies” he mumbles under his breath without looking up, “I didn’t realize you wore wellies too… I mean before today “.

“I didn’t”, she replies with a quirky laugh. “I just thought it would make you happy to see me in them after what happened to you in gym class today. I just walked over to my house and got them. We live right across the street.”

There is a long pause until Ethan finally looks up and looks at the girl. She is much taller than him, her long blonde hair is braided and she’s got a massive gap between her front teeth. Her smile is goofy, and freckles cover her nose and cheeks.

“So, what are you doing out here”? She asks him.

“Well… I am hiding. Plus, I don’t want to go home.”

“You could come to my house if you want”, she says, and her smile looks genuinely hopeful. She extends her right hand to him when she opens her fist, she reveals a wrinkled piece of paper. Ethan takes it, hesitantly, and reads it. He smiles and nods slowly. “I guess I would like that. You want to go now?”

She jumps up and down giddily and takes his hand. Ethan is overwhelmed by the sensation. He is not exactly used to other kids being so close to him. But he starts to enjoy the feeling and follows the girl to her house.

It is a fun afternoon and she is so nice to him, even after she took her wellies off, she never makes fun of him for not taking them off. They have ice cream and play board games, which he hasn’t done since the last time he saw his dad. When he gets home later that afternoon he is expecting serious trouble, for being so late, and because of the note from the principal of course. But weirdly enough, his mum is not mad. When she learns that Ethan made a friend she seems to get sad, because Ethan sees tears in her eyes. She gives him a Mama bear hug. One of those hugs where you are not sure if she is ever going to let go and you wonder how you will be able to breathe for much longer. After she lets go of him, she dries her tired eyes and tells him to go into his room until dinner is ready. Ethan is happy to oblige.

As he sits down on his bed, he thinks back to the day with Lucy. It seems very unreal to him that she really wants to be his friend, and he wonders if she will also be nice to him in class tomorrow. He can only hope. Because he would really like to have a human friend. It felt
good to spend time with a friend who talked back. And she is a very understanding friend. Maybe, if they keep hanging out together, he might even tell her all about the wellies. How they are a gift from his dad. How dad said that as long as he wore the wellies, they would never be apart. How the next morning he got up and his dad was gone. His mum was crying and explained to him that dad had a new family now, but Ethan could visit if he wanted to. It’s been 5 months since then and Ethan has seen his dad once. So he never takes off the wellies to keep him close until dad is less busy and they spend more time together again. He never told anyone that because dad said it’s their special secret. But he also knows that it is okay to share a secret with a best friend. And if Lucy can become that person for him, he might tell her. He takes the little piece of paper out of his back pocket and puts it up on the pinboard above his bed. He reads it again and smiles. He hasn’t smiled like this since dad left. He likes the feeling. Maybe he’s going to do it more often from now on.

Your wellies are red,
mine are blue,
I want to be friends,
How about you?
“A small Colombian with a big smile studying European Studies, who uses her words to free her loud imagination and goes by the name of Adriana.”

The rain in my dreams

Adriana Medrano

I saw him again and nothing had changed. The birds; the flowers; the steps; the beach.

I don’t think it was just me, I inspected the room. There is a woman in front of me and the smile from the beach is not here, I can’t help but to want to come back.

Birds chirping despite the windy weather, they always reminded me of my mother, my father, my sisters, home. I sit on the front porch trying to imagine a life beyond this house, the cooking of my mother, my father playing his beloved guitar every time that I was sad or for the pleasure of doing it, my loud sisters and their peculiar way of helping around, just the thought makes me cringe.

“Hey sweetie, thinking much?” said my father while he carried a large bag to the car parked in front of me. He was looking funny. He always dresses the same every time we go to the beach house. Red sporty shorts, flowery T-Shirt, a sheer blue cap that is a million years old and his idea of comfortable shoes: white socks with sandals.

“you know that I always do” not another word was said but he smiled and kissed my head on his way back into the house. I could hear my mother in the background talking with my sisters, Sofia and Elena, but not loud enough so that I could understand what was being discussed.

I can’t help but notice a strange sound coming out of nowhere. It sounds like wails and sadness just wrapped around it. My heart wrinkles as if it understood and a few tears were company to it. I hear someone unfamiliar and yet no one is around. My body starts to hurt, and I see how everything starts to be blurry in front of me. I can’t open my eyes but I’m conscious. The atmosphere is the same, sad. A deep, male voice stops and a female started asking questions; her voice breaks while she speaks. “When would you know?”. I can’t help but wonder: What?
Our last trip together before going abroad for a year, I have never left my family that long.

We used to go to that house at the beach every two to three months and met the entire family there; my grandparents, my aunts, uncles and cousins. But as we started to grow up, the usual became rare, unfamiliar. Everyone was busy. My father interrupts my thoughts “Lily we will take two cars. Your sisters want to stay more with your aunt Kathy. she will stay there for 2 weeks”.

“What?” I interrupted him. “Wasn´t this supposed to be a just us weekend trip? To say goodbye?”

“You know your mother. She commented that we were going and suddenly everyone tagged along. But hey; don´t be sad”. He paused and took a deep breath. “You are going to experience one of the greatest adventures of your life. I remind you, my little Lily always saying that as a grown-up she would travel the world”. His eyes were just shining. “Is not like we won´t see each other ever again. For instance, with your mother we are already planning to go and visit you on vacation and hey don’t think for an instant that I don’t want to know your daily plans. I´ll need to be checking whose ass I´ll need to kick”. “Language!” Interrupted my mother smiling on her way to the car. My father laughed, and I followed. “Ok, ok maybe I´m being a little dramatic” I said. “Yes, but this I figured years ago” said my father while laughing. Then he hugged me before standing up and commenting “come on, we share the car! Your mother goes with your sisters and hey we can make a quick stop” He blinked and all my worries were carried with that promise. He disappears and everything with him.

The room looks empty though I´m not alone; a woman sits next to me half asleep. I don’t want to wake her up. She looks familiar. She had been crying. On a side of the big grey chair that she was sitting on was a small white table with a half-drunk glass of water on it and what seems to be relaxing pills. Nonetheless I´m no doctor to judge what those might be for. She is waking up, I have a better view of the face, wait...mom?

The traffic is crazy on the way to the beach house. Almost before leaving civilization behind us, a small ice dealer is located on the left side of the road. It wasn’t much to admire but four sky blue walls with big, almost washed letters letting you know the four kinds of ice cream they offered; the basics: Chocolate, Vanilla, Strawberry and a house combination of nuts. We would always make a quick stop to buy ice cream at the same and only place near the house and right after we would go to the beach, just to enjoy the company of each other before meeting everyone else. We would take a look at the families and people and how every umbrella described them in a way that their looks wouldn’t give away so easily; or well, that’s what we used to do.
I always wondered how there was a park on the right side of the road, so close to the sea. It had the most beautiful flowers. The grass was a combination of deep and emerald green; always full of life. My father takes me out of my mind “Do you mind going to the park? We have some time while we wait for your mother and sisters”. “I’m not sure. I’d just like to wait here” I replied. I was just being lazy. “Come on Lily. We can sit there. Like we used to do” I couldn’t say no; not to him. We start walking and he suddenly tried to push me away from the road. I couldn’t hear anything else. My hands were feeling numb. My eyes felt heavy. “D... Dad”. My mouth couldn’t articulate any other word.

The birds were trying to tell me something; trying to share a secret. They were there for me or so it felt. The wind was in a rush, almost trying to hush my company; trying to hush me. The sun shone careless. The grass was just dancing and with it the flowers asking me to join them. The nature ball, I like to call it. I hear steps.

A familiar feeling welcomed me, like a known place ignored by my consciousness. A salty smell shook me for a moment, how? I think where is the following thought. It sounds mad, but I hear seagulls and a guitar. The steps are closer.

I inspect around and almost where my vision can’t go further I see a few shades of blue, cheer brown, and what it looks to be big colourful umbrellas. I’ll inspect. I don’t hear steps anymore.

It is a beautiful sea; a few boats can be barely distinguished and with them the blurry image of fishermen. The beach is like a desert and yet I still hear a guitar playing and people talking.

I had almost forgotten about everything; even about myself when someone sits next to me. He doesn’t say anything but then again that familiar feeling. He smiled without even noticing and in that second, I ignored the danger that could come with it. He muttered something that I couldn’t understand. He wasn’t talking to me. There was a girl next to me. She looked lost, long hair, big lips, kind smile, imperceptible freckles around her nose and brown eyes. She was talking about singing birds, dancing flowers, hushing wind, a careless sun and ice cream. She smiled and for a reason I automatically followed. I felt, in a way, close to her, as if that lost girl and I where one. I was in the middle and yet it didn’t bother them. I was invisible to them.

“It’s crazy huh? How you can love someone that you just have dreamed of” he said. “And the soothing felling that comes with it when you see them for the first time, so small, so innocent, so perfect”. He hushed for a second. “Now is time to go but I’m feeling nostalgic” the girl cried a little and I with her. He stood up and stretched his arm towards her. “I could
use one more hug with my Lily, one for the way”. They hugged and she cried. I felt it; he was hugging me. “Why?” I asked while crying. “Because my family was my biggest adventure and you, my Lily, haven’t lived yours yet”.

The sunset had begun, and the noises were clearer. The sound of machines, murmur, telephones and a deep voice through what I think is a speaker.

My eyes are open, but I see blurry because of the waterfalls in my eyes. Everything hurts. The big chair is empty, although the glass is still there, and a small black purse was left on it. I’m in a white room connected to different sorts of machines. I do not know what they do.

It wasn’t just me; I inspected the room. There is a woman in front of me and the smile from the beach is not here. I can’t help but to want to come back. She is voluptuous, dark curly hair, medium high and smiles at me. She checked a few things before she spoke to me. “Welcome back”. She came closer to check me. “Everything is fine” she added and smiled. “Your mother will be back in any second. In this scenario I would like to wait for your mother before anything”.

My mother leaning on the threshold of the door with tears running down her cheeks. I asked about my sisters while she was still processing the picture of me in the bed and cleaning the tears with the right sleeve of the jersey. It’s not easy to understand her but they are ok with my aunt. I asked about my father and I saw her world disappeared. She ran towards the bed, towards me and hugged me. In a muffled, sad mutter tears flood my eyes and my heart feels like it stopped for a moment “Of course I don’t mind going to the park”.

