

# TEXT 1

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## The Floor is Lava - Liz Anastasiadis

The rain dropped incessantly as my feet splash through the puddles, step after step. I squint up at the sky, where the white fog mists into a thick layer. My hands are clutching my lunch box, where Hannah Montana's smiling face stares at the ground. My backpack is heavy on my shoulders, and I run into a boy, his shoulder smacking mine and I almost fall over. People snicker as I walk by, their acne-written faces scrunched up, red and furious. I grab the handle of my mother's green Jeep Liberty, the handle nearly rusted off. The door opens with a creak and I jump in, shaking the water off my rain jacket.

I smile at my brother Michael in the back seat, eyes closed, bottle dripping on his shirt. I reach back and pick up the nearly empty bottle, putting it in the cup holder. I study his face, which looks soft and innocent in the car that suddenly feels dark. I play with the cuff of my jacket and wait for my younger brother Chris to get in the car.

Through the crusted window, I see Chris approaching. He's holding his ninja turtle lunchbox, Donatello glowing through the fog, purple bandana and all. He waves at us furiously, wind blowing back his hood as he runs to the car. He tries to open the back door several times before shuttering it open. Hair dripping wet, he shakes off like a dog, and starts laughing.

I look back at him and put one finger on my mouth, and he giggled more quietly. I smiled and messed up his blonde-brown streaks of hair, turning back around to face mom.

My mom's eyes lock with my own as she softly nods, and puts the car in drive. Her nail bitten fingers turn the wheel as we drive out of the lot, moving through to some backroads.

Tires scraping over the gravel, we pull into the parking lot of *Midview Middle School*. My brother doesn't have a coat, an umbrella, or a poncho. There is a bang of thunder. He walks up, his brown hair plastered over his eyes. He opens the door with one fluid motion and jumps in the car. I nod in the direction of my brother, and he doesn't respond.

She pulls out of the lot, and we get on the highway. I take a book out of my bag—a beat up copy of *the Magic Treehouse*. In the static of radio silence, I flip through the same chapter three times. The rain drops run down my windows.

"So, have you guys talked to your father lately?" my mom says, eyes looking blank and cold at the ongoing road.

"Not since we saw the man in the suit," says Chris, fidgeting around in the back seat.

William sighs heavily, and says "Well, I talked to him on the phone yesterday. He's really upset that he hasn't seen us for two weeks."

Mom sits there, and her eye twitches. "Was that before or after you told the lawyers that I'm a horrible mother?" I blink and realize that I've read the same line six times.

Electricity fills the air, the small space of the Jeep pushing in on us. Our car starts to slow down, 65, 45, 35, 25 miles on the freeway. I look up from the pages, my eyes darting back and forth between the road and my mother. Although we are miles from our destination, the car is now completely stopped, and she unlocks the doors. I set the book down, putting my hand on my mom's shoulder. She pushes my hand off her and stares at me—eyes glossing over.

She quietly observes outside the window, and starts to relentlessly whisper “Following me... They’re following me...”

“Mom,” I say, gathering my backpack in my chest, “Why did you call the police that day dad was taken away?”

The fog wraps around the long, empty stretch of road. She turns to me with her eyes glossier than ever before.

“I called because you will always choose dad, not me,” she whispers. “Hey guys! Raise your hands if you don’t want to live with me!” We all remain silent. She screams and starts honking the horn, and passerby on the highway honk back.

“Give me my phone back,” she barks while turning, open palm snapping towards me.

I move my fingers into the soft fabric of my pocket, unsteadily take it out, and hand her the phone she bought for me a month ago for my tenth birthday.

“Get out of my car!” She says, and reaches across my torso to open my door violently, shoving me out of the car and locking the door. I tumble over the asphalt, knees scraping, hair soaking. Her eyes glare out the window and I look up at the still parked car, sitting in a puddle, knees bleeding. I am still holding my copy of *Treehouse*, the pages stained with rain water and my blood, my blood, my blood. My mom sits completely still, continuing to stare out her window, as if she is waiting for an animal to jump out of the shadows.

I can hear the echo of Michael crying, Chris and William bang on the glass and throw open the door. William pulls Chris out with him, turns to my mother and screams, “This is why we hate you!” and turns away, face scrunched up. He slams the door and runs to enclose me in his arms.

“Wh-where’s Michael?” Chris says, shaking and holding his purple Donatello backpack.

William sighs, and says, “We can’t carry him in the rain, buddy. He’ll be okay.”

Her Jeep is still loitering, the engine vibrating it, dusted orange falling off. Mom sits there in silence, holding her head in her hands. Her blonde hair glows through the misted window, and she starts to shake. I enclose Chris’ small hand within my own and turn to the blacktop, rain flooded road and start walking. I rub my knees, wincing, and one warm tear trails down my face. You wouldn’t be able to tell with the rain.

The car zooms in front of us, old engine riffing, and her tires lift water from a nearby puddle to enclose us. I remember the last moment where I stood with Chris this way, in our old house, 221 Finch Drive.

The walls of our house were painted beige, a crowning of fruit bowls filled with green grapes, apples, and faded pears etched close to the ceiling. Photos of me on the jungle gym with my dog going down our scratched yellow slide hung on the wall. Photos of me and Will in our red mini-jeep with hot rod flames aligned next to those, my smiling face holding a fairy wand with a fuzzy pink and sparkly tiara lacing my head.

I fell off my couch, and Chris rang with laughter saying, “The floor is lava. You just died!”

My cat Muffin walked by my face, tail smacking me as I got up from the floor and made my way to the couch again. “I’ve got another life!” I said.

My pink small-footed socks were stark against the couch, that not-quite-black-but-green color. I was wearing a shiny white feather boa and my old tiara, pink fuzz getting in my eyes. Chris was wearing a cowboy hat and clutching his new Indiana Jones whip he got for Christmas in his small hands.

Mid jump, Chris screamed, “WAIT! TIME OUT! I want to tie this to both couches so I can balance on it. PLeaseeeeeee?????” he whined. I nodded, laughing, and he jumped from the couch to the floor. He put the rope on the arm looped around, and tried to do it on the other couch arm. He lifted it, and it falls. He tried again, but to no avail. His lip started to wobble, eyes welling up with tears, and I silently got up and picked up the rope. I held his hand over my own, and loop the end under the circle twice.

“See? We can do it together. Now, pull both ends really realllyyyyy tight,” I said.

He pulls them as hard as he can, his face turning red. When both sides are tied, I tested the new tightrope by putting one foot on it.

“Seems pretty sturdy to me,” I said, flipping fuzz from my eyes.

He got back on the couch.

He put one foot in front of him, shaking for balance. Arms held out, his blue pacman t-shirt riding up, he took another step. Shook a little, and almost fell. I jumped up and down in anticipation—I wish I could take him off his tightrope, cover the whip with ductape so we can balance and stick forever in place, so he won every time. He put one foot, then another foot, and finally, his sockless toes hit the sofa edge.

I jumped on the rope and began my balancing act. Facing him, socks off, I made my way backwards, sliding my foot to locate the small rope. Focusing on my feet, I make it close to the edge. A loud crrrrch sound erupted through the room. I looked up and found there was a shiny and steel end protruding from the cushion, right in-between Chris’ feet.

Screaming, he scrambled from the couch rubbing his toes, his body frozen on the floor, curled up with his hands covering his knees. I yelled and fell off our makeshift tightrope, face first into the brown carpet full of cat hair.

“What is going on?!” yelled dad as he ran into the living room, holding a wooden spoon with its end covered in pasta sauce, glasses half off his nose.

He ran a hand through his black hair, and stood frozen for a second.

Then he looked behind him and screamed, “Becky!”

Sirens blared outside.

“Becky!”

Jazz music flew in from the kitchen, the saxophone solo proceeding.

Dad unfroze and ran to Chris, picking him up off the floor and hugging him, and moved forward to examine the couch.

He picked up the cushion and gasped. I ran over to get a closer look, knees picking me from the floor. I stood next to dad and saw that in the couch was enough knives for an artillery set—hunting knives that were carved from makeshift wood, steak knives from the knife block.

Mom walks in and gasps, saying “What are you doing Steve? We need those in case a burglar comes in the house!” She rushes forward and snatches the cushion from his hand, placing it gently back on the couch.

“Liz, Chris, go to your rooms so I can talk to your mother,” said Dad. “It’s bed time.”

He puts Chris back down, and I walk over to him. We go to our rooms, and when my head hits the pillow, my head is dancing with silver knives.

The next afternoon, my hands held open the cover of my *Magic Treehouse* book. The waft of mac and cheese lifted through the air, the kitchen sink ran with water, and all I wanted to do was jump in the pages. I looked up and exchanged a funny look with Will and Chris, who tapped on my book, gesturing to my bookmark on the table. I put it in my book and looked up at Mikey in his seat, clapping his hands while holding a pastel colored green spoon. Light shined through the tall, sliding glass door-windows looking over our back porch illuminated the room, and my dad who was mixing the mac and cheese spoon in the pot, eyes fixed out the window.

My mom silently walked in from under the arch of the living room and messed around with stuff on the counter. Her blonde hair was clipped up, red painted lips pursed, her hands in coat pockets. She walked out and sat on the couch near the mahogany and glass front door. She crossed her hands with a phone in her lap and stared at our grandfather clock. It was half past one.

“Kids, foods ready,” said Dad. “Come and serve yourselves while I talk to your mother.”

The boys raced to the stove, but I remained and stared at the white ceiling. A hint of gray still stained it from the time Will got his *Spider-Man* web shooter on his tenth birthday two years ago. The

lines and tracing of the web were as familiar as my palm. I watched the running faucet at the sink under the window overlooking the backyard. Dad caught a garden spider once and put it in a jar sitting at the windowsill. The spider stayed in the jar until it suffocated. For a second, I was the spider in the jar. I shrunk down, lid closed over me, and I could no longer look at the ceiling. No longer play on the monkey bars, or jump rope. No longer read and sing to *High School Musical*. A heavy knock at the door made me grow larger again.

Will and Chris, who were digging into their mac and cheese, froze mid bite.

My dad got up from the living room couch and made his way to the door. It creaked open for him to find a tall and hefty police officer. My mother cheered, hands held in the air, and said "This is him!" pointing to my dad.

I was frozen in my seat, feet not responding to my internal plea: *get up get up get up*.

Mom picked up and examined my dad's favorite *the Smiths* record. It you could see her face off it, but warped and slightly unrecognizable. "Take this piece of shit and get out!" she screamed, handing it to my dad. "Officer," She gestured to the man, "Officer, this is the knife he threatened me with," she spat, holding up the carved hunting knife dad found in the couch.

"Ma'am, you will have to calm down, everything's going to be fine." The officer sighed, turned to my father, and said "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the premises."

Am I in a body? "Your stuff is on the porch, so you can leave right now. You're welcome," she spat to dad. My fingers curled around the bottom of my chair, nails digging into the carved wood. Mikey started to cry and banged his spoon off the table.

My dad was silent. He didn't move, but whispered, "Why Becky?" His face was scrunched up more than I've ever seen. Mikey continued to cry.

The officer repeated his mantra, and my ears started to ring. My vision started to become spotted. Dad walked over to us at the table, holding a backpack and his guitar case. He examined us for a moment, and started to shake. He put down the guitar and engulfed us all in a hug. Dad held on, squeezing so hard I could barely take in air. When he pulled back, my shirt was wet from where his face was buried on my shoulder.

"I'm coming for you guys, don't worry," he said, "dad will get you back."

Will nodded to dad, and he clasped his shoulder and bent down to pick up his guitar case. Mom watched the clock with her hands wrapped around herself. It gonged twice, and with each gong, dad took another step near the door. The officer tapped his foot. The Police must believe that they are the good guys in every story, ah, a lucky savior! I never liked the police. I could still hear the faucet running. I am still clutching the bottom of my seat.

I unfroze and clasp on tightly to Chris' small hand. We ran to the window overlooking the driveway and stand there. Dad got into the car, waved to us, and drove away with the officer following him. Mom remained in front of the grandfather clock, whispering to herself. My face was hot, my vision blurry. We stand there until mom fell asleep, long after the mac and cheese was cold.

My feet hit the driveway of my grandparents' house, with the crunch of gravel under my pink sketchers. My body feels like it went through a hurricane. My glasses are spotted with rainwater, and I could barely see my brothers as they walked beside me. They are in a similar state, water dripping from their hair, soaked into their shirts, making them look like different colors than they really are.

We reach the front door and William uses his key to unlock it. We walk in and stand in the foyer for a second. It looks the same as I was here before. I look to my right to find Grandpa on the couch, reading *the New York Times*. I slowly walk over there, finding my feet again.

I sit down on the beige sofa. The room has old printed wallpaper, with gold framed versions of the DuBois motto *Don't Give Up the Ship!* plastered around. The grandfather clock gongs five times. I knit my fingers together on my lap.

Grandpa snaps his head up and says “Ah! I didn’t know it was five. You guys are home rather late.” The newspaper crumples, and I hear steps from behind in the foyer walk upstairs.

I nod and he cranes his neck back to the paper. “Where’s mom?” I say.

“I thought she was with you,” he says while thumbing the newspaper.

I shake my head. I continue to shake my head. He doesn’t look up. “No,” I say. “She wasn’t with us. We walked home.”

He looks up then, glasses hanging on his hooked nose. He sets the newspaper down on the coffee table. “Well, why didn’t she drive you guys home?” he says.

“She was upset about the lawyers,” I say. “And dad.” My hands tighten, my nails biting my palms, and I wince.

He sits there holding his chin in his hand. “Steve needs to be out of the picture. It’s causing Becky too much stress,” he says. He reaches to pick up the newspaper again, opening it.

“Dad is already gone. He left when we left the house,” I say. I unknit my fingers and feel the cold wetness of the couch.

He looks up again, kind eyes shining. “Yeah. Grandma and I were happy about calling the police that afternoon.” he says, turning the page of the newspaper. “We were scared for you kids when Becky found knives in the couch.”

## TEXT 2

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### Coffee Strong Enough to Raise the Dead - EB Bordow

The intense grey surrounds you as you lay in your “final” resting position. You’d died only a day earlier, but you are already prepared, dressed in black tie, and put into position in the casket your mother ordered with such sorrow. Do you like seeing your mother like this? Her eyes are as red as yours when you took that final noseful of Colombian Marching Powder. You now plead to be buried with a fifth of your favorite whiskey, or at least a few packs of cigarettes and a scandalous magazine, and who could blame you? How the hell else are you supposed to pass the time in here? Hopefully by now you know that death is not your final reward, that was not the case with anyone. The DA had been founded hundreds of years ago, tasked with keeping the brains of Da Vinci, Einstein, and Mozart “in circulation”, as they called it. Every person who has ever died has been through DA, and if you are lucky enough to make it through “sterile testing” (hint: you are not lucky enough to make it through “sterile testing”), then your significantly cell-deficient brain will be put back out there. How are you going to do it? What can you possibly come up with that will impress Death and convince him to let you keep going? You absolutely do not deserve to be put into this mythical category with the likes of a Hendrix or a JFK. But you will give it your absolute best, your 110 percent, not because you want to, but because you have to. That is how it goes when you die, so stop complaining. Please remember, the coffee is certainly strong enough to raise the dead, but it sure seems like you will be getting tea.

There’s no preferred path for you to take. How ignorant of you to think that Death himself sticks to a specific regiment. There’s no method to his affairs. You should have noticed that during your very first Dead Anonymous meeting. No one cares about your name; here you are Overdose21. That is the only detail that matters here. For Christ’s sake, the person standing in front of you is called

HippoAccident37. Do you see how many ways there are to die? This man, well maybe a man, now he is just simply there, was killed by a fucking hippo. Do not assume for a second that death has an organized timeline and color coded schedule. And please do not suggest that to him. He will send you away with a cup of tea before you even have time to decide if you would rather have honey or raw sugar. Suicide33 welcomes you to your first meeting with a purple button as you pass through the door. Maybe you're still getting acclimated to being dead, but it seems like you're not occupying any space. The closest real word it could be compared to is virtual, and for that case, virtually not. This place only exists when you and the rest of today's batch are here. When you leave, this grey room disappears into unbeing.

As you take your seat, you are greeted by the "woman" next to you. She introduces herself as Janet, but is quickly reminded with a sharp pain to her wrist that her name is Stroke63. Whatever you do, do not follow her lead. She is going to try to seduce Death in order to sip on that wonderful cup of coffee, but it is guaranteed to fail. The only one who could pull that stunt was Marilyn (Overdose36), and Stroke63 looks like a failed painting of Overdose36's cancerous cat. Sorry, but stay away from that idea.

Suicide33 switches roles from hostess to "head trainer" of your small group of death siblings. She tells you that your group of 20 will train, test, compete, and attempt to win the heart of Death. Suicide33 has taken the ultimate sacrifice in remaining dead to train you, so you should be very thankful of that. She does not get the chance to come back, but you do, you lucky bastard. Her first assignment for you is to take the rest of the "day" to think of the five best qualities about yourself, or rather, the alive version of yourself.

If you were to list the 5 greatest traits about yourself when you were alive, they would probably go something like this: 1. Drinking 2. Objectifying women 3. Watching porn 4. Yelling obscenities at people who do not deserve it whatsoever 5. Joint rolling. Now this is a great list if you are first and foremost alive, and a college douchebag. Why don't you ask the infamous AlcoholPoisoning20 about his plea to Death? Well since he is not around anymore maybe you should take that as a word of warning.

Just please do not challenge Death to a game of beer pong. It's like the "head trainer's" instructions just go in one ear and out the other with most people. Death wants individuality for god's sake.

HeroinOverdose27 (Kurt) brought only a guitar with him, and played Death a song about living a full life. That was the only time in his history of existence that Death cried. You are absolutely nowhere near as talented or inventive as he was, all faith in you is already lost. At least you fit in, no one has hope here. There has to be something truly spectacular about the way you once were. Come on think! It will literally save your life!

"Hey, what are you putting down for your 5 traits?" You ask a wrinkled and worn "black man".

"Yu knows, wen I'r wuz bout 22 I wen an' get taken by de military," Dementia83 exclaimed with great pride. His dialect was one of extreme slowness. It was obvious as to the extent of this thing's dementia, but you take note of his peacefully quiet, long-drawn voice. Before you can go and complete your assignment, you must listen to this man's story. "32nd Vermont infantry. I dun spend wut I reckon ter be my entire live up til' den on mi urnncle's ranch. I had ben' raisin de cattles in the mawrning, and done de hunted in de afanoon. One day I wuz out in de woods real deep, so fars that i reckon I had to star turnin back. Az I star makin my wayz back, i start heerin de strangist beetin of what i think to be certin deat. Nex thing i knows' I's bein lift off de groun wit some grimmy lookin muder fuckas yellin at me, an' handin' me a autermadic rifle."

"Uh huh... So what are you going to put on your list?" You ask impatiently.

"Well I sup-osing I put on my fierce loyal-ty to awl de causes, i'z a damn good huzband to my old lady Maria, I can pud together a fine lookin' stew having almost anyting dat could be avail-able..." You anxiously thrash your leg up and down out of boredom. You are obviously turned off by this old being, so leave if you want. It's all up to you. This man is a coffee drinker, but you have decided to go occupy some other meaningless space. Good for you, an independent mind is something you want in your scenario.

You have created your list, but you replaced #3 with "I am a loving sibling." Oh, you seem to think you are a loving sibling, how amusing. Interesting that you put that as number 3 on your list, as there is no doubt that you habitually watch porn. Under what guises do you think you are a loving sibling? You pushed your little sister off her bike countless times, and your favorite prank to pull on your older sister was to put a tack on his seat when he got up during dinner. So you took care of your sister's hamster a couple times when she was away at a swim competition, that is just what good people do for each other. You can put that down if you want, but it's doubtful that anyone will actually believe it. Everyone up here knows every detail about the whereabouts of your life. There are no secrets here, everyone has been watching you forever.

# TEXT 3

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## SHEDDING LIGHT - Kellon Patey

### A Portrait of Small Town Ohio's Earliest Mornings

Chris Wills' alarm went off at 3:00 AM, his first waking breath began as a long groan that broke into a sigh. His voice is deep, and gravelly after smoking for nearly all of his forty years. "Rise and Shine Tippy Toes" he calls from the second of the two rooms in his apartment in his slowed-down small town twang—a nickname that refers to my dance class the past semester. We don't speak words to each other for four more minutes, but there is a call-and-response rhythm to our yawns. His bedroom lights are still off as his bedsprings creak and he gets his feet under him.

When the silence is finally broken, the voice asking me if I want coffee not once, not twice, but three times in the next fifteen minutes is a regular contribution to the early whispers that begin before the sun in Newark, Ohio. From the dark, they speak of gas station coffee, empty freeways, light switches, and pay clocks. For those who tune in, there is much to be learned about responsibility and about sacrifice.

Chris only turns one light bulb on at a time so as not to strain his blue eyes. He looks for two matching socks and stuffs his stiff limbs into old blue jeans and a Cleveland Browns sweatshirt. For a man that looks only about five foot eight, 165 pounds, he sounds heavy on the laminate floor, and between gulps of his second cup of straight black coffee, he finds his keys, a fish oil pill for his back, his hand-written essay for a writing class, and one of his Bibles.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 65% of American workers are still on the clock at 3:00 in the afternoon. By 9:00 at night, that number has fallen to 12%. With us awake now at 3:30 to see the

full moon is only 3% of the American workforce (Torpey). As we walk across the parking lot of his low-income apartment complex, it looks like the brightest light on in the county.

Jupiter is not far behind, low and left in the first hours of a spring morning, and the air is the coldest and most quiet it will be all day. While his second-hand Impala warms up, Chris texts his son to say good morning, and calls Matt, one of his co-workers who's late for their carpool.

Matt and Chris work at Denison University as members of the maintenance staff. Both men have histories of substance abuse, addiction, incarceration, and separation from their families, but of the two, Chris is the only one with a car. Though Matt is far bouncier and talkative than his friend, both are quick to say that when considering their pasts, they are lucky to have found steady work. As we cruise down empty, unpainted streets, we pass two homeless men wandering—most likely meth addicts given county statistics. Chris and Matt don't turn their heads, but conversation slows, and we find ourselves in a moment of silence. Knowing Chris, I imagine he's thanking either God or his son, who's name is tattooed on the back of his fist.

Counter measures to defend against falling asleep on the job begin on the car ride to work. The first line of defense is a lump of chewing tobacco the size of my thumb. Chris says he knows it may kill him, and he's said he's trying to give up tobacco four times since last night, but a little tar better than methamphetamine—each man's drug of choice from "another life." Compared to the fertilizer, paint thinner, lithium battery juice, and three-year prison sentence often found in bathtub meth, a jumbo morning chaw seems pretty benign.

The second sleep-deprivation measure is a 24oz paper cup of Duchess black coffee from the last gas station before we turn onto the highway. 24oz is a conservative estimate too. Behind my bloodshot, crusty eyes, the cup looks like it's the size of a roll of paper towels. Quantity is prioritized over quantity at this hour.

On Denison's job posting site, while there are no preferred qualifications listed for Building Services Assistants, only shifts for early mornings and weekends are available. The hourly wage for these jobs is between \$10 and \$11 an hour, only marginally above the minimum wage of \$8.30 ("Building Services Assistant..."). According to MIT's living wage calculator, someone like Chris, an adult with one child, needs to be making \$23 per hour in Licking County to be safely above the dark waters of poverty ("Living Wage Calculation...").

While Matt isn't seeking custody of his girls like Chris, he too tries to provide what he can. "I was blessed with good mothers for my children," he says. "But I take them out when I can. It feels good. It's what I love."

Not far behind the two men, Sierra, a cook in the Denison Dining Halls, starts her day with a short workout at 4:00 AM. She's young, with orange hair and bright eyes, probably about the same age as the college students she's frying eggs for. From an even smaller Ohio town to the east, her drive to work takes over half an hour with open roads, and she leaves for work not long after six, and clocks in at about a quarter till seven.

Much like Chris and Matt, she says that she's grown to appreciate the feeling of productivity that comes from front-loading her days, and clocking out around 3:00 PM. "I feel like most Americans get up around the same to get into work," she says. According to TIME Magazine, this actually is far from the truth.

First of all, of 20 peer countries surveyed, American men are the earliest to wake up on average, rising to shine between 6:45 and 7:00 instead of Sierra's estimate of between 4:00 and 5:00. American women are the fourth earliest group of women behind Danish, Belgian, and Swiss women. All four however, fit into the same time frame, just marginally closer to seven (Kluger).

I asked all three whether they would take a later shift if one were offered. All three said no. Lying awake, writhing out of a horrible sleep on a lumpy couch, that claim is hard for me to believe. Having

tried out these schedules myself, waking up at 3:00 then 5:30 twice each for interviews and ride-alongs to work, I can share without hesitation that these wakeup calls are dizzying. Even for someone that has grown accustomed to an average night sleep of five and a half hours, these physically hurt.

Since the early sixties, near the tail end of the Ohio's industrial prime, the poverty rate in Ohio has increased by six percent, and one in ten Ohioans are currently under-employed ("Ohio Poverty Report"). In 2006, Ohio voted to increase its minimum wage each year only by rate of inflation. So while the minimum has gone from \$6.35 to \$8.30 in ten years, Ohio workers in low-paying jobs like the service industry aren't gaining any ground ("Ohio Minimum Wage...").

When Chris and Matt arrive at work, there is a clip board mounted on the wall by the normal sign-in sheet. "Mandatory Overtime." Chris and Matt's supervisor comes out of his office.

"Mandatory Overtime the day after graduation," he says. "You can chose one, two, three, or four four-hour shifts, but you have to come in an do at least one."

Automatically, Chris enlists for a sixteen hour Saturday, choosing to clock in at 4:00.

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# TEXT 4

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## The Secret I Don't Tell - Sara Abou Rashed

Two days ago, I was standing next to my grandmother as she checked the mail. It was around noon and the sun had casted its rays on our doorsteps, forming a star-looking shape with the arms of shadows of nearby tree branches.

As promised, her letter has arrived. Leaving the door ajar, my grandmother grinned at the neat envelope with big blue writing in the top left corner. Her name was all she could spell out, so she handed it to me, Arabic words coming out of her mouth like timed fireworks:

“Read it, Sara! Read it! Who’s it from?”

“Wait a second, Grandma. Probably just some insurance ad like usual.”

It wasn’t an ad. It was from the government. In her 73-years of life, I don’t think my grandmother had ever wanted anything as much as she wanted this letter. I couldn’t understand why, how could it matter this much. It was from the citizenship office, congratulating her on a successful interview and inviting us to the swearing ceremony a month from now.

My grandmother’s blue eyes watered behind her glasses as I translated the letter. She asked me too many questions, none of which the few words on this page could answer: *Why do you think they accepted me this time? Do they accept a lot of people for citizenship? Does it say we miswrote something the last time, that’s why?* I had to say “No, Grandma, they just really are happy to give you citizenship,” I had to pretend like this piece of white paper against my skin was the warmest text I had ever seen, that it didn’t at all contain robotic words like “formatting,” or “procedural.” My grandmother had to feel chosen, perhaps not much different than David and his star; she wanted to rest her head that night

knowing somebody in the world intentionally wants her to hold a passport for the first time, that she did something right to earn it.

This was the third time my grandmother had applied for citizenship. Last time, it came so close, when her interview and her sister's in Germany fell on the same day. We thought it had to be a sign. Her sister, who's only two years younger, had fled to Germany when Syrian refugees were welcomed and she was now eligible for German citizenship. What a time we live in: two sisters of a Russian Jewish mother are begging in their seventies to belong to lands that aren't theirs. Isn't God, too, a refugee? – this was all I could write in my journal that day, March 24th of 2017. My heart was too heavy then to carry the world and I worried it was my fault that I took notice of the mysterious ways life connected things, that it had to stop what it was doing until I wasn't looking anymore.

My grandmother is the radio station of our family. She knows too many things, she plans to hide them, then they slip out, often while multitasking, washing carrots for soup with her head tilted, clutching to the phone. "Sara, don't tell your cousin Judy, you know her dad applied before me, they'll get upset," she warned me. She told them herself an hour later. She dialed practically everyone she knew that day to spread the good news. A spontaneous woman she is, that if a random survey solicitor had knocked on our door that day, he would have been let in on the secret, too.

I never understood how an American passport would be any help to my grandmother. We have been in Columbus, Ohio, for almost five years now and she has yet to go through one pair of shoes. She has always hated going out, travelling, being somewhere unfamiliar. My grandmother spends her days in the kitchen, cooking, cleaning, or searching for something to cook or clean. I know her; it's not like this awaited palm-sized blue book was the only thing keeping her from becoming a world traveler. It's the medicines she has to take, tens and tens of them, their English labels too busy with the Arabic initials she scribbled; it's her cane, despite it laying in the corner of her bedroom for months, untouched; it's

our bathtub, that we lowered just so she can step into it, easily and without risk. But my grandmother overlooks it all:

“Where should we travel?” She asks me, as if it’d been as regular an inquiry as *Where did you see the charger last?*

I don’t say anything for a long while.

“Huh, where? Germany?” she reminds me again that she’s awaiting an answer.

“An Arabic country. I want to hear it spoken. I want real food, Grandma. Sick of English, of fries and burgers!” I say at last.

It’s been years since I heard Arabic spoken in streets. I miss it. Sometimes, when I am in class at the university, I doze off for a moment and think how odd it is that I am hearing English all over, yet no one can hear the Arabic voice in my head. My grandmother, on the other hand, has never heard any other language around her. She wishes she could learn English, she tells me that almost daily. On the days I am not too busy, I teach her a few English words, easy ones like *door* and *cat* and *book*. The next day, she forgets all about them, and we start again.

Grandmother wants to visit Germany, not because it is calling her name, but because her sister is. They’re both in their seventies, and we know what that means: *a reunion in diaspora*. Who knows when they might meet again, if ever.

That night when the letter arrived, I was trying to sleep when I heard my grandmother. Our rooms are on opposite ends of a hallway, and though my door was almost shut, I heard her ache in pain. It must have been her back, one part of many no amount of medicines can cure. She was turning, and her back failed her mid-turn, that my grandmother let out a cry before she could slump her weight on the other side of the bed. My grandmother muttered something, too. At first, I thought she was asleep.

Half-asleep, at least. She wasn't. I lowered the covers down and tilted my head in her direction. I heard it again now. Moments later, I got up and hid behind my door, trying to make something out of what she just whispered under her breath.

*I hope I live until the ceremony*, my grandmother had said. I recognized that, because it wasn't exactly the first time I had heard it at night. I knew that. She's been thinking about death just like we've all been thinking about death, her death, but none of us dare bring it up. It's a secret. That night, I couldn't sleep at all. I grabbed my cardigan and went downstairs. For a long time, it hadn't occurred to me to simply open the backyard door. There was always something to fear: bugs, rotten fruit, trash cans, untrimmed weeds. But that night, I did; I laid on the grass, staring at the luminous stars above. These stars, they're so far away, they might have already died. But that, too, is a secret I do not tell.

Background: my family is Palestinian – but we lived in Syria and recently moved to the US. The type of music I imagine to accompany this piece would reflect the Arabic influence and style. Fairouz is about the most famous singer in the Middle East and I'd love to see pieces inspired by her!

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_1zORamx9k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_1zORamx9k)

# TEXT 5

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## Realism - Amber Wardzala

The peeling leather of Alice's decrepit pickup truck stuck to the back of her spray-tanned thighs as she sped down the backroads of Minnesota. The car radio was supposed to be playing one of her old cassettes, but there was more static than there was Gloria Gaynor. Her stubby fingers clenched the wheel as she tried not to think about the news she had received on arriving at work.

Fired. She had been *fired* from the "Gentlemen's" Club she'd been working at for the last thirteen years or so. The official reason Cole—the errand boy of the owner of the joint—had muttered after she demanded to know why was she had been late too many times. But Alice wasn't an idiot. She had, in fact, been late three times that month, but that was four times less than the perky, twenty-seven year old, Becky.

Alice had watched this same thing happen since she started as an "exotic dancer" when she was twenty-five. The bosses always found a reason to let women go when their lines began to show too much for makeup to cover.

She wasn't sad to be rid of that place—she had always hated that job—but that left her unemployed with no skills desirable to potential employers—unless they had a need for some pole dancing.

The job always was supposed to be temporary. It was supposed to be something she did to pay the bills until her career as an artist took off. Though she tried not to, Alice still thought daily about her first—and only—show. How the champagne glass clenched in her left hand shook with her nerves and excitement as she stood near her water themed paintings—oils mostly with a couple watercolors and

one acrylic. Her eyes skimmed the crowds as she kept a friendly smile plastered on her face, trying to catch the attention or eye of someone. Someone to buy one of her paintings.

That show was supposed to be her break. Even though she sold only one painting during the entirety of it, she still held out hope—until the review came out.

Her dream of being an artist had collapsed in on itself like a star turning into a black hole. And also like a black hole, that crushed dream had kept any light or hope from escaping.

She hadn't touched a paintbrush in a decade.

Alice slowed the car as her eyes caught on a neon green sign announcing a yard sale down the road to her right, Iron Trail. Her car sidled to a stop as she stared at that sign. She wasn't in the habit of frequenting yard sales, but the idea of doing something different—even if it was as mundane as looking through other people's old crap—appealed to her. She needed a change like some of her former customers needed a trim of their nostril hairs. Besides, what else was she going to do? Just keep driving aimlessly? She was unemployed now—she didn't have gas money to spare on joyrides. Besides, garage sales could become her new mall.

She didn't bother to flip on her turn signal as she pulled her car onto Iron Trail. She drove a mile or two through the towering pine trees—trying not to think about or admire the breathtaking way the light spilled in through the cracks in the trees. A part of her brain whispered that it was a painting waiting to happen. She shoved that thought aside as she spied another neon sign pointing at a twisting, gravel driveway. She swung onto it without a second thought and drove until she saw a line of cars on the side of the drive. She parked there with the cars of the other people who had nothing to do with their Sunday afternoons—after attending their various churches and praying to their various gods for whatever people with no social life pray for, of course. The whole practice of god and church eluded Alice. It seemed like the easy way out—asking some big guy in the sky to solve all your problems for you. After all, if he really cared about any of them, would they really need to ask him for anything?

Alice parked behind a silver minivan and got out, swinging on her motorcycle jacket as the gravel crunched beneath her feet. The summer heat had given way overnight to the chill of the ephemeral Minnesota fall. As she walked, she tilted her head back and looked at the canopy of various hued leaves. She inhaled the scent of those decaying leaves. It smelled like the color brown to her. She loved that smell. It was so different than the scents of numerous perfumes and colognes that had filled her workplace—a vile pink scent.

She rounded a bend in the road and skidded to a halt, gravel flying from her wedge heels. An imposing brick house scowled down at her. She hedged a step backwards. The house was four stories with a wraparound porch and balconies dotting the windows. It remaindered her of a mansion from Scooby Doo that the gang would come across in the middle of a thunderstorm after their Mystery Van broke down.

For a moment, she considered turning back—she had no business even cleaning the toilets of that house, let alone browsing through their old junk. But the thought of returning to her little studio apartment above the questionable bakery and seeing the stack of bills on her kitchen table caused her to start walking again to one of the tables on the too-green front lawn.

She flipped through a box while her eyes wandered, looking around at all the junk that accumulated over twenty-some long years of marriage: mismatched china sets, old lamps, records, artwork, paperback novels that were read only once, VHS tapes, patio furniture. The place lacked no crap.

“Hi!” a cheery voice said from Alice’s left. “How are you on this fine fall day?”

She turned toward the voice and watched the smile fall from the makeup-free face standing across from her. The woman looked like one of those ladies at churches who pretend to be all high and holy and talk bad about everyone else behind their backs. Not a strand of her slightly unnatural shade of red hair out of place, a boxy jacket, high eyebrows plucked thin, and sensible, black shoes.

“Fine,” Alice replied and glanced at the box she was looking through without really seeing it.

“Um, lovely selection you have here.”

“Oh . . . thank you. Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

The woman skittered back to a lawn chair where a man with a potbelly was sitting and looking incredibly bored as he thumbed through a crinkled newspaper. The woman bent down and whispered something hurriedly to him. His head jerked up in interest, and he peered around the woman toward Alice.

“Henry!” the woman hissed. “I told you not to look.”

“But I ain’t never seen one before!”

Alice’s eyes burned as she tugged her jacket tighter around her. She should have changed out of the tube top and booty shorts. She should have washed off the coats of foundation and the winged eyeliner. Anyone who looked twice at her could tell what she was—what she had become.

She looked down at the bin she had been flipping through and froze.

An oil painting of a Boundary Waters sunset stared back at her. A mixture of abstract and realism, it featured a bow of a canoe pointing in the direction of the reds and oranges as the waves lapped gently at its side. That canoe seemed to be aimed towards more than just a sunset. To the artist, that sunset was her future happiness.

Alice and anyone else who looked at this painting would know it was self-expression, because the painting was from the viewpoint of the person seated in the bow of the canoe. All you could see of the paddler was the paddle resting across her cargo shorts and suntanned knees and her hands with their stubby fingers keeping the paddle from slipping into the water—from slipping away from her.

She should have held on harder.

Alice spun around and hurried back to her truck, straining to forget the alphabet of her past in the left hand corner of that painting. The name *A. Mealey* still taunted her as she walked away.

# TEXT 6

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Sarah Wilson

There was a composer at the window. He was hungry.

I sat on the countertop with my package of pop tarts and watched him tap at the window with his long earthworm fingers. It was the kind of day that felt like hours of dusk, the air crackling and heavy with rain. The spiny trees on the edge of the lot swallowed up the last remnants of the sun. The sun set early here. It set later in the town where I grew up, halfway across the country. Almost everything else was the same: the weather, the kinds of trees, but the sun always set an hour earlier. It made the whole world feel tipped off-kilter, like a fishbowl with nothing in it.

I waved at the composer through the window, the cat balanced in the crook of my arm. The cat hissed. The composer growled and tapped again. I wasn't sure how he'd gotten out here or how long it had been since someone fed him, but I didn't like the look in his eyes, narrow and wanting.

I had heard his violin concerto when I was seven. It was a vicious sort of music, the way it rumbled up through the opera house balcony and made my mouth dry, like the moment when you wake up from a nightmare and you aren't sure where you are. My mother had taken me to see it. She thought it would make me worldly, teach me what precarity tasted like on the tip of my tongue. I spent the whole performance leaning on the smooth rim of the balcony with my elbows, all of me taut and tremulous, attuned to the sound. Afterwards, I was too afraid to listen to the radio for a year. I thought the instruments would pop out of the CD tray and devour me up.

He didn't look vicious, the composer at the door. He was skinny and middling tall. His teeth were too small for his mouth like he had stolen them from someone else. He looked scarier in the black and white photograph from the program I kept pressed in a dictionary until I went to high school: his hair slick

with product and his face unsmiling, the harsh lighting that made his jawbone like a hunting knife beneath the skin. In color, he seemed realer, with his red mouth and fragile wrists and big dark eyes. His hair curled a little around his ears. It was dishwater blonde, lighter than I would have thought, if I had tried to construct him in my head from memory.

I broke off a corner of a poptart and offered it to the cat, who sniffed and rejected it. He was not a cuddly animal, but I was alone so I tucked him under my chin, cooped up by my arms so he couldn't slip away.

Before she left, my cousin said not to let anyone into the house. I was staying with her for the summer before I started college because everyone else in my family was too scattered and busy to look after me. I had a job at a tourist magazine in the city, but it was only three days a week, and we lived so far out of the city that the bus didn't visit. I hadn't made many friends, yet, with my corner desk too far away from all of the other interns, and even if I had, it would be too difficult to go and see them. Instead, I stayed inside with the ragdoll cat and watched true crime documentaries and did not listen to the radio.

It was a new-old house. She had only lived there for a few months before I arrived but before that it belonged to our grandmother, who helped her father build it when she was a teenager. For a long time, it was the only thing any of them owned. There was no furniture, only cardboard boxes and newspapers to burn. Now, we were scattered like seeds across the country: my mother in Massachusetts, my aunt and uncle in San Diego, my brother in New York. My grandmother, when she couldn't live alone, lived in a nursing home in Boston. I used to sit on the plastic chairs in her room and trace the bumpy road of her knuckles and wish I had the sort of hands that knew how to carve out a home.

The composer pressed both of his palms flat against the glass, leaning so close that his breath misted up. They didn't look like they would be good at building anything at all. But I supposed they were, because he needed them to string together notes and chord progressions, the sorts of sounds that rattle

around in the cavity of your chest. It was like building a house, in a way. You needed a foundation and a good roof and windows to peek into people's souls with.

I tucked the cat up under my chin, where he snuggled into my sweater and hissed contentedly. The composer opened his mouth, like he was going to say something, and I leaned in close to catch the shape of the words against the glass. But then he swallowed and watched, instead. I wondered if he could speak at all, or if the music had replaced any words he could ever say and turned them into something else.

He looked very lonely, standing by himself outside with his narrow shoulders and dark eyes, the sky pinkish grey behind him. I did not know how he had ended up out here, in the woods outside of the city, his hair still damp from the afternoon rain. Maybe all of his friends were in the city, or far away across the country, like mine. Maybe he had no friends at all. His hands trembled a little from the cold.

My cousin wouldn't be home for hours, and I was sure that the cat wouldn't tell on me, so I climbed off of the counter and I unlatched the window. The composer considered, for a moment, the space between us, his hand opening and closing like a fish mouth or a heart valve. He folded himself up like an origami frog and then unfolded himself just as easily once he was inside. He was taller than he'd looked, from outside. His head almost bumped the twisty blue light fixture my mother had bought, when my cousin first moved in, to add *personality* to the house.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen like a twitchy duckling, with the untucked back of his dress shirt and the way he held his arms stiff out from his sides like he didn't know quite what to do with them.

I offered him one of my strawberry pop tarts. I wasn't entirely sure what composers ate, or what to offer him if he didn't take it. No one delivered takeout all the way out here. He looked between the pop tart and my face, his pupils dark-big. The cat had fled.

I was coldly aware of the yawning gap of the open window, the three feet between me and the nearest phone, the two hours before my cousin came home. The composer wasn't big but the back of my

neck was sweat prickly and I couldn't quite remember how to correctly make a fist, where to put my thumb so that it didn't break. My brother had told me how to once, when I was twelve. I remembered the shape of his palm over top of my knuckles, the whispering lull of his voice, and nothing else.

He took the pop tart and broke off a piece. I breathed through my nose so he wouldn't hear me.

I uncurled my legs, rested my heels on the knobs of the countertop drawers. Like this, I was half a head taller than him. He tilted his back to look at me, his throat long and pale. He was dripping a little bit on the floor, raindrops gathering at the edges of his sleeves and in the hollow of his collarbone. He looked insubstantial in the grainy light from the ceiling lamp that never seemed to stop flickering.

He ate the whole pop tart, and then another, hunching in on himself in the dim light of the kitchen. I tapped my heels against the cabinets. His curls had begun to dry, salt-water stiff, on his forehead. Perhaps I should have offered him a sweater, something dry to change into, like a character in a fairytale. Get out of those wet clothes or you'll catch your death of cold.

But one of my brother's college sweatshirts with their cheerful maroon words would look out of place on him. The composer only wore black and white: a damp white dress-shirt and black pants with the pleats pressed out of them, ragged around the edges like someone had worried the fabric thin and pilly. He wore no shoes. I wondered where they had gone. Surely he began with shoes, somewhere, and lost them along the way.

I sat back up on the edge of the counter and divied up the remaining package of pop tarts: one for him, one for me. The chalky sweet taste of them reminded me of being seven and sitting so close to the television that my breath left a damp patch on the edge of the screen. I wondered what the composer thought of, when he tasted them. Maybe he had never been a child. Maybe one day he didn't exist and the next he did, with his dark eyes and the ladder of his spine like a line of Morse code that I did not know how to read.

Uncertainty crept over my skin like the centipedes I used to pull out from behind the mirrors in my dormitory bathroom, like something that you're not really sure if there until you're holding its many waving legs in your hands. I wanted to send him away and I wanted to fold him up tuck him away between the pages of my notebook.