

# The Labyrinth 2019

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Land of Marvels

I really believe in 1970, in costumes and wigs to ease the blues I got a dreamy American love, such is the buzz symmetrically-inclined souls swathed in tulle, a cultural thrill we believe in William Blake he helped us get off. And his fearful symmetry is Godly fire it is proof of the madness I only knew that my body was a juicy daydream scrolling flowers and smooth moves, the lust of my peers is proof, and my own lust is a provocative home it is a rolling globe with no severe punishment, only the playful experience

of being welcomed

back into the world

Ariana Landeira



Dylan Barrick

How I would love the man standing in daylight, Who looks past the glow of my skin, Following the shadow of my soul Walking like an old woman

How he would move his fingers through The worries knotted in my hair, Where nothing could run as Winter thin once more, With my heartbeat, soon following, Knowing that it contains his footsteps

Enough to bend and imprint,

But never enough to break -

And there I will be,

In his hands, melting like snow.

Christine J. Sawruk



Afua Anim

## A Water Song

His lips spoke of a tomorrow, To come another day, Where hopes are more than hopes And daylight does more than fade

Reserving an occupied space, Creating a heart's larger dent, It all means something, Until the moment appears, and it doesn't

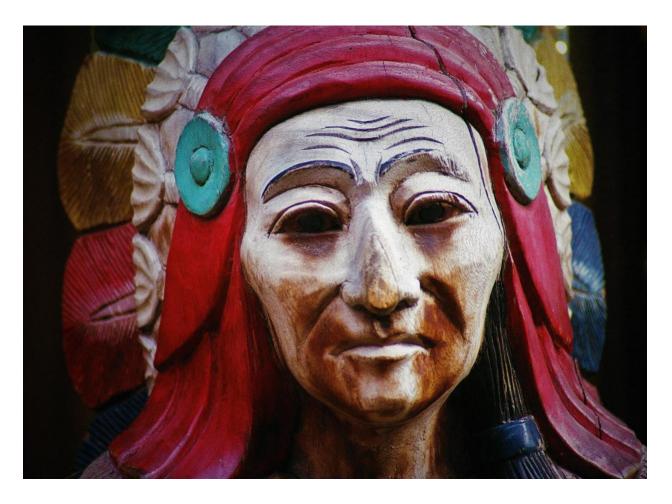
It must be a sign of the uninviting, I think I've seen the end of time, A world with no recollection of home, A place that's forever mine

I thought of it as *correct*, this round, He hears a knock on his front door, It's a girl from beyond the river, A girl he's known from before

The river turned into ocean, The ocean, touching sand, He ever so slightly drifts like the water, Only watching him let go of my hand

I will love the tide of waiting moments, To come of that same day, But what if we're dead by tomorrow? Does the thought go away?

Christine J. Sawruk



Dylan Barrick

"Have you any firearms, drugs, pornography or Bibles?" The officer shone his flashlight in Michael's heavily-lidded eyes. In the calmest voice he replied,

"Take a look." The officer nodded at him and began to search the perimeter of the car and the trailer that it was hauling. From the back seat, Stephan watched as Michael took a breath. His gray-eyed gaze looked out upon the road and the fog before him. He had this sleepy presence about him, and amidst the panic-inducing atmosphere, his lips formed into a gentle, natural smile that made it seem like he knew everything was going to be okay. Meanwhile, Thomas was sitting in the passenger seat, viciously biting his nails. Stephan could tell it was out of anger, not nervousness. To Stephan, Thomas was never afraid of anything.

"This is all because you thought it was a good idea to drive with high beams on, Michael. You're such a Dummkopf," Thomas scream-whispered to him. This whole operation had been Thomas's idea but during the entire trip, he had been the one to complain or doubt their potential success the most.

"It's going to be fine; we'll be in Sopot before you know it," Michael responded with such a placid demeanor that both Thomas and Stephan's sense of insecurity faded simply at the sound of their friend's voice. As the officer made his way around the trailer, Stephan thought about how he had gotten into this whole mess.

It had only been a week or so ago when Stephan was buried in his Bible studies, he and his notes spread out on the floor when Thomas had come rushing into their dorm room with exciting information. Thomas had an electrifying appearance with his lemon-yellow hair and intelligent blue eyes, awake, and ready for action. He was known for his social charm and

persuasive ways but tended to doubt others' achievements when juxtaposed against his own. But above all, he was the leader and initiator of many crazy antics.

"You wouldn't guess what I've found!" Thomas exclaimed as he plopped down on his bed. He had been sharing a dorm room with Stephan since the semester had started at the seminary. Stephan had grown up outside of Hamburg and lived a sheltered childhood. Going away from home to study in the city was a completely new adventure for him, but all of that was about to change.

That day, Thomas explained that he had been in touch with an organization that was seeking to transport religious materials into the Soviet Bloc. Stephan had heard stories about people trying to help persecuted Christians in places like Poland and Czechoslovakia, but the bravest of them ventured into the Soviet Union, and many of them ended up in prison for years if they were caught just carrying a Bible.

"Thomas, we can't do something like that," Stephan muttered. The semester and Stephan's journey to ministry had only just begun. As an incoming freshman, he was shy around Thomas who boasted the authoritarian presence of a proper sophomore. While Thomas might be able to get away with such a precarious act, Stephan's reputation was a clean slate and the risk one not worth taking. He was a good student. School had started only weeks ago and already he had been bombarded with homework and studying and was attempting to keep his record in good standing.

"Wake up!" Thomas suddenly cried, quoting from Revelation. "Strengthen what remains and is about to die...' Right?" Stephan's eyes widened at Thomas as he continued to say, "don't you think this is our duty as Christians? It isn't fair knowing we have the luxury of the Scriptures while our fellow believers can only preach by word of mouth." Stephan remained

sitting upon the old, creaky, wooden floorboards wide-eyed and looking at Thomas. Was this really what God could have wanted? Stephan's mind wandered as Thomas soliloquized. All his life, Stephan had known Germany divided by East and West. Growing up, he knew of the Berlin Wall and couldn't imagine life without it, but he knew of a history when it hadn't always been so. The oppression from within the Soviet Bloc regarding religion was such an everyday occurrence that Stephan didn't think about it often. But as Thomas kept speaking of underground churches where Christians had to worship in private, Stephan began to believe that this was his calling. By the time Thomas was done with the monologue, Stephan didn't care if the Soviets thought that Christianity was blasphemous, he knew it was his destiny to preach the Word of God.

Before long, Thomas was chatting up the plan with Michael, also known as "Thomas's designated pushover". It was Michael's last year at their seminary, and that 1984 September was the beginning of his final studies. Even though he was the oldest, he wasn't exactly the smartest. Michael was laid-back and would do anything Thomas asked of him. His eyes were a rainy gray and his fawn brown hair was permanently styled in the form of a disheveled bedhead. Everything about his appearance was pale and hazy which suited him since he had a reputation for falling asleep in class at a moment's notice. Although most tired people might seem a bit unapproachable, Michael came off as being friendly because he was always wearing a gentle smile as if he had just awoken from a pastel-colored dream and continued to see his woken life in that soft palette.

From the short time he knew them, Stephan saw Thomas and Michael as complementary opposites. Thomas was outgoing and excited, while Michael stayed in the background as the silent supporter. Thomas's emotions fluxed between rage and euphoria several times a day;

whereas, Michael's emotion was stagnant and monotone, the same drowsy smile paired with the same drowsy gaze. Stephan was unsure how he fit into the whole thing. He was new to this world, naïve and inexperienced. In the mirror, he thought he still looked like a kid. Perhaps, it was all of this: his sweet disposition, as well as the scruffy sable-colored hair, freckled nose, and wide-eyed stare that Thomas had become aware of. Thomas felt that Stephan was impressionable as the freshman entered the threshold of living within a city for the first time. However, he also saw Stephan as the perfect candidate to be his next designated pushover after Michael's departure and had decided to take him under his wing.

"The head of the organization said he'll be able to drop off the car and trailer in a few days," Thomas mentioned to the group. The three boys met in Stephan and Thomas's dormitory and began to hatch their plan. "Carpenters have built a double wall into the trailer; that's where the Bibles are hidden. They also decided to fill the main compartment of the trailer with camping supplies as a decoy. We have to take the Bibles to an underground Methodist Church outside of Gdańsk, Poland. The organization gave me the address, and they said we have a high chance of success. Nothing to worry about," Thomas explained without any fear. The organization had also provided Thomas with the itinerary mapping out the entire trip. It seemed simple: In, and out. They would drive through East Germany and into Poland, and then try to keep as far north of Berlin as possible.

"That's it? That's all we'll have to do?" Stephan had managed to get the words out.

"Well, there's one more thing," Thomas admitted. "We can't talk about it." Michael and Stephan both had a sense of confusion drawn upon their faces.

"What do you mean?" Michael asked. Thomas sighed and said,

"Rumor has it that once you enter the Soviet Bloc, there is a possibility that a listening device could be attached to the car." Hearing this sent a shiver up Stephan's spine. He began questioning if he was really going to do this. "Once we get into East Germany," Thomas mentioned, "we absolutely cannot say anything pertaining to Christianity." The room was quiet for a moment, and then Michael asked,

"So just run these Bibles into Poland and come home?" Stephan piped up to correct him and said,

"We're running..." his voice trailed off for a moment to think. "We're running Brot into Poland."

"Exactly," Thomas smiled. From then on, they referred to their mission simply as a bread delivery.

Within days, the people associated with the organization had dropped off the Mercedes and trailer in the middle of the night. Assuming the appearance of tourists, they had parked, gotten out of the car, and then walked away from it, leaving the key on the floor of the driver's side. After a few minutes, the trio of friends appeared and packed themselves into the formerly abandoned vehicle with their visas and passports and proceeded towards the border. There was no contact made between the two groups.

It began as a trepidatious adventure with the sharing of tall tales and jokes to ease the rushed mix of excitement and nervousness. The night was dark and with the limitless speed of the Autobahn, the rush of adrenalin in each of the boys was at its peak. The crisp night air danced its way through the window, tousling Stephan's hair and giving his arms goosebumps. This was the craziest thing he had ever done.

In just over an hour, the car rolled up to the border crossing into Zarrentin, East Germany. Stephan held his breath. It was pitch black that night. Few travelers were at the guard station. However, there were enough to keep the boys waiting for almost an entire hour before they were inspected. A young KGB officer came over to the car asking for identification and began looking at the vehicle. Michael, whom Thomas had appointed as the driver, handed over each of the passports and visas. He knew that with Michael driving there would be fewer outbursts of road rage, as well as little aggressive driving, and above all, the confident charm that would win over any officer were they to be pulled over. The guard came up the side of the car hiding a yawn, and Stephan could see the darkness under his eyes. How long has he been out here? It must be so tedious checking all these cars, Stephan wondered. Another officer, this one more assertive, started marching over to the trailer. He began opening the latch and flashing his light inside. The tired officer asked the equally tired Michael,

"What is the purpose of your journey into the East Bloc?" Michael wanted to say "bread delivery" just to be funny, but instead he kept his eyes locked on the officer and said,

"Camping trip." To Michael's luck, the assertive officer who was looking in the trailer found the decoy sleeping bags, tent, and other camping supplies, and as such, overlooked the double wall. Stephan noticed a third officer was with them, telling the assertive one,

"Let 'em through. They're just kids." The third officer looked the youngest of all and seemed almost afraid.

"Did you check the car?" The assertive one demanded of the tired one.

"Huh?" The tired one slowly lifted his head and then said, "oh yeah, everything's fine."

"Let them through," the youngest, timid one said. He had seemed as if he didn't want this job; it was like someone had forced him into it. He didn't know himself well enough yet. The timid officer only did border control because it felt like the right thing to do. It wasn't long before Michael revved up the engine and then the three colleagues drove away towards Poland, leaving their East German officer parallels behind.

The journey across East Germany took another hour, and dawn was fast approaching. They drove along a route to avoid Berlin at all costs. They knew their vehicle would be torn apart and searched if they were directed into West Berlin. The thought of how close they were to such catastrophe left Stephan silently praying in the back seat for God's protection. Meanwhile, Thomas began to doubt their success.

"We won't make it," Thomas muttered.

"Shut up," Michael said lazily.

"It's true, I doubt they'll like the bread when they see it," Thomas said sharply, trying to scare Stephan. Although Thomas did not appear scared on the surface, he was quite nervous deep down and was questioning whether or not they would complete the mission. He never showed his fear, however, and Stephan was gullible enough to start doubting their quest along with Thomas. The difference was that Stephan who prayed and prayed quietly in his mind did so out of fear, and with that, a glimmer of hope remained within him.

It wasn't much longer until the car touched the border of Poland; the clock struck the blue hour. A dense fog coated the woods and road. Twilight was barely visible. Michael turned on the high beams of the car to pierce the darkness of the shaded pine forest. With the density of the fog, it was inevitable that his tactic would fail. Before he could revert to using the low beams, a flashing blue light came after them, and Michael began the steady deceleration. No one had seen the cop car that had been parked on the shoulder of the road as they had zoomed past it.

"Have you any firearms, drugs, pornography or Bibles?" the officer asked.

"Take a look," Michael responded with his peaceful aura. The officer nodded and circled the car.

The foreboding mist clung to the air. With it, a sense of dread stood stagnant. Together, the fog with the fear of being found guilty of smuggling made the dark vast forest of black pine appear to be as much of a barrier as the officer's presence. The difference was that the trees knew. The trees had a looming presence, craning over the trio of scholars as if reprimanding them of their foolhardiness. Thomas began to complain and blame Michael for having his high beams on while driving through the fog. Michael sat quietly, taking the jabs, and Stephan was left to timidly whip around back and forth in the passenger seat, his eyes following the officer as he circled around the trailer. The officer came back to them and simply said,

#### "Move along."

Within a half hour, the boys reached Sopot, each of them sighing with a sense of relief. It was a small beach town outside the city of Gdańsk, and the fog began to lift as the sun rose from its grave. It revealed the glistening water of the bay, its calming presence as a declaration of peace. They reached their meeting point with the Methodist pastor. It was in the back parking lot of an abandoned warehouse. The pastor invited them inside, where he led them to a nearly empty room within which a glazed light peeked through the paper-covered windows.

"I've been preaching sermons here for the past three years based on this." The pastor carefully pulled a mangled sheet of folded paper from his pocket. Stephan's jaw dropped at the sight of it. It was a solitary page from the Bible. The words had been worn, almost illegible. At the creases of the folds, one couldn't make out what it said at all. It was the second half of the seventh chapter of Acts. The story of the first Christian martyr. The back had the beginning of chapter eight. Stories of the first persecuted believers of Jesus the Christ, deprived of religious

freedom. "Everything I have to teach," the pastor wept, "is easier now. Have this." He handed the singular, thin sheet to Stephan, who was overwhelmed with happiness at the sight of the pastor's grateful grin, and slipped the sheet into his own pocket. They began unloading the twohundred Bibles out of the trailer. As they unpacked, the never-opened Bibles smelled new; the covers were without any flaws. The pastor couldn't stop mentioning how happy he was that the children of the church would finally have learning materials for Sunday School. All of them had grown up without ever having seen a Bible. The idea of children having access to knowledge right at their fingertips warmed Stephan's heart and pleased him to no end. He couldn't imagine what it was like for the pastor to preach from only two chapters of the Bible for over three years. He couldn't imagine what it was to grow up as a child not knowing the Bible at all. As the three friends left to take their time driving back to Hamburg via East Germany. Stephan knew that he had done the right thing, fulfilling the act of a true Christian.

As they entered East Germany, rain clouds receded from the sky. The sun shone through the cracks of the clouds and lit up the luscious green of the pine trees. Michael took to the roads more slowly this time. Without the bread in the trailer, they knew they would be fine. Once again, they were able to enjoy the road and sense of adventure that it offered until Thomas interrupted by saying,

"I think we need to make a pit stop."

"What for?" Michael asked.

"A piss break, genius," Thomas snapped. He looked out into the woods and said, "besides, the clouds are clearing up. Let's stretch our legs." The road was desolate and the allknowing trees welcomed back the boys by leading them into their shaded darkness with open arms. After being done with their relief stop, the friends trailed deeper into the foreboding

woods, down a long slope. The giant trees became dense, suddenly acting as a harbinger to go no further. Nonetheless, there was a sense of ethereal magic within the woods as the dappled light filtered through the trees.

"Hey look," Stephan said. The ground at his feet was damp from the foggy mist that had settled earlier that morning, followed by the brief rainfall. He pointed at some small, yellowish fungi. "Chanterelles!" He cried. "We should bring some home." Thomas began to wander off and suddenly called out,

"Hey, there are porcini mushrooms over here." He began plucking through the ground and waved Michael to come over to him. Meanwhile, Stephan was fascinated by the number of chanterelles he had found and began foraging for other species of mushrooms. Michael sauntered over to Thomas and crouched next to him. "Wanna pull a prank?" Thomas murmured to his designated pushover.

"On Stephan?" Michael asked, a bit confused as usual. "Not really," he admitted.

"Oh c'mon," said Thomas. "Let's tell him to keep looking for mushrooms and we'll go back up to the car, turn it on, and then pretend that we're driving off without him."

"That's messed up," Michael replied.

"It'll be funny," Thomas insisted. "Imagine how scared he'll be when he thinks we're leaving without him."

"I was kind of looking forward to mushroom foraging," Michael said slowly as his gloomy gray eyes swept across the forest floor.

"I doubt you have the guts to do it," Thomas teased a little.

"You doubt a lot of things, Thomas."

"C'mon," He persisted. With a heavy sigh, Michael got up from his crouching position and turned around to see the small, impressionable Stephan with a handful of mushrooms.

Michael called out, "Stephan, you should check down there for more. Mushrooms grow in wet, dark places, and all the water runs off to lower ground. We're going to look up here to see what other plants we can find." Stephan nodded and followed orders. He began to go further down the slope as Michael and Thomas trekked back up toward the road. Stephan was happy to help his friends, and his mind wandered about the possible mushroom dishes they could make that night. After their adventure, they deserved a well-earned feast that had been freshly harvested from the earth.

"This is so messed up," Michael kept saying, but kept going along with Thomas's plan. They hiked up the slope and came in sight of the car. They had only been in the woods for a short time when they unknowingly found themselves in the eye of the storm. Above them, the rain clouds had started coming in again, making the world dimmer. "We should go back," Michael said with worry. "It's going to rain again soon, we can't leave Stephan down there."

"Just turn on the car quickly," Thomas pushed. As Michael came around the driver's side, he noticed a police car parked down the road. On that same side of the car, he saw the two officers who had gotten there before them. One had dismantled a part of the trailer, revealing the double wall. The other stood by the driver side door, the window having been shattered with the shards lying on the ground. He held two passports in his hand; in the trio's insouciance, they had been left on the console in between the driver and passenger seats. Michael stood frozen in shock, and Thomas came running around the other side, ready to fight. The officer with the passports announced,

"Michael Schröder and Thomas Wolff, you are under arrest for the distribution of illegal propaganda."

With those few words, Michael's eyes, for the first time, widened with shock and sheer panic. His pastel daydream suddenly became saturated with pigment. Seeing the world in true form--in its bright, bold color as the last ray of light snuck through the stormy clouds-- blinded him. Before he realized it, Thomas had attempted to clock the officer across the jaw with a speedy hook of the fist. He had followed through the punch leading his swing to be countered by naught but the pavement. In a few quick motions, while yet on the ground, a full-blown fight broke out between Thomas and both East German policemen.

Eventually, Michael overcame his drowsy, slow reaction time and realized that this was all happening in full color right before him. Before he knew it, he was yelling after Thomas and getting involved with the fight. A punch thrown across the face again. A jab to the abdomen. Someone grabbed onto someone's hair. Another clawed at another one's leg. Someone else even bit someone's arm. And someone out in the woods from afar was watching it all go down.

Stephan didn't know what to do. The people he thought were his friends had tried to abandon him in the forest. Still hidden by low shrubs and trees, he looked at the mob from atop the slope that he had climbed. He saw the red, swollen marks on Thomas's face. He saw the blood dripping from Michael's lip. He looked down and saw the mushrooms in his hands and thought, how naïve am I? Stephan wanted to prove to himself and to everyone else that he wasn't just some kid that could be pushed around. During the entire trip, he had been so nervous, so unsure. But at the sight of the pastor's expression when his eyes had lit up when they gazed upon the Brot delivery, Stephan knew that for once he had been a hero. He felt so graced in that short moment; he had risked his life to save the Word of God. He would do it all

over again. So, he would risk it on behalf of his friends in order for them to continue on as successful ministers. With that, Stephan took a deep breath, and from the dense, dark woods, he screamed.

He continued to shrill for quite some time which paused the fight between the officers and students. Then, all was quiet for a moment.

"Stephan?!" Michael called out in a panicked worry. The two officers bolted off into the woods concerned about what had happened. Thomas and Michael remained stationary as their state of shock kept them from moving. Stephan began to run. He ran down the slope and continued on into the thickness of the forest. He ran at full speed and heard the officers behind him not knowing their intention was only to see what was wrong. From his pocket slipped the page from the Bible the pastor had given him. All it took was a single slice of bread to lay on the damp forest floor.

"Look!" One of the officers called out, picking up the page and immediately recognizing it for what it was-- forbidden propaganda. Stephan was now their enemy having gone from possible victim to villain, and with a shared glance at the words before their eyes, the officers shifted their look to one another and began chasing after the young, innocent foe.

"Halt!" They called out. Stephan kept running. As the forest became denser, tree roots had grown beyond the surface of the forest floor, making it the ultimate obstacle course. "Stop, stop!" They continued to call out. He heaved with panic and terror, unable to catch his breath. He snaked between trees, and hurdled over rocks. The sound of twigs snapping beneath his feet. The calamity in his breath and the cacophony of blood rushing through his ears instilled a sense of alarm, but it was too late. He heard gunshots being fired at him. He ran faster. He could feel and hear his own heart pumping. The forest became so dark; the clouds had rolled in again. He was not sure where he was going, but he knew that he could not stop. While they were shooting at him, Stephan prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Out of nowhere, he tripped on a tree root and fell to his knees crying out,

"Lord do not hold this sin against them!" There was a final shot that Michael and Thomas heard echoing in the woods somewhere. A murder of crows cawed and flew from the looming pines, and then there was silence.

Jess Titterington



Jess Titterington

The Happy Place

When the ground is shaking

beneath your feet

And there's nowhere left for you to flee...

If the walls around you start closing in And the roar of the crowd is deafening

Allow yourself the space to find, The peace you seek hides

- -

In your mind.

Valentin Villaluz

### Intimate Moment

You lie on your back And look up at your ceiling, Your bedroom appears to get smaller As you start squinting, seeing stars, Next thing you know, It is no longer a ceiling, but the night sky, You find yourself getting lost in it, Wondering how the plaster is moving Like putty you would run your hands through As a small child, happy, Not only having no cares in the world, But never able to have any cares at all, The cracks in the sky start to shine a bright light And your eyes tell you it's just the universe's way Of putting a spotlight on the presence Lying next to you in your bed, You are reminded of light, again, As she rolls over, still asleep, Humming sighs with a slight smile on her face Like she knows you are watching, You are aware of your actions

And you can't take your eyes away, Maybe she is dreaming, Maybe it is of you, The mere thought makes you feel so safe That you forget black holes exist, That the sun could burn if you stand too close,

But you aren't in love -

You said so yourself

Christine J. Sawruk



Lil Sloginski

Most of the walls have been torn down but mold still attacks the faded floral patterns of the ones that remain. The filth-engrossed, shattered remnants of a once luxurious chandelier now dangle an inch above the decaying hardwood floors. Light is hardly able to shine through the residue covering the windows and only forgotten photographs dance carelessly through the empty hallways. Even the staircase's heart has grown too heavy, for it too has collapsed over time. And despite the efforts I have made to fix him, he would rather be condemned than have another live in her home.

Victoria Rediger



Dylan Barrick

There are two things you can hear from the Sadner household: the blaring sound of music coming from Mr. Sadner's radio and the incessant tapping of his son, Jon's typewriter. Inside of their home lies some outdated and dank furniture that creaks whenever you put weight on it. Their floor boards are damaged and their windows are cracked. The only thing that is maintained to any degree is Mr. Sadner's personal shelf where he keeps a pristine and shiny trophy from his golden days as a high school quarterback along with a faded photo of him and a woman that slightly resembles Jon.

"Hey, can you turn that down?" Jon politely requested from the kitchen. The music lowered for a moment, just to hear the request, but was only turned louder after acknowledging it. Jon rolled his eyes, sighed, and simply continued working.

After some time, Mr. Sadner lumbered into the kitchen for a beer, while also making sure his presence is heard with the loud stomp from his cane. Jon cringed whenever he heard that cane come into close proximity of him, and Mr. Sadner knew it. "So…" Mr. Sadner began, "Why aren't ya at work?"

"It's Sunday," Jon answered while not taking his eyes off of his work.

While gripping his beer tighter, "Hey!" Mr. Sadner screamed, making Jon jump. "Look, at me while I'm talking to you, boy." Jon looked at him pensively. "I'll ask again. Why aren't ya at work?"

"It's Sunday."

"Did I ask you what goddamn day it was?"

"No, but..."

"Do you see what this house looks like?" he yelled while gesturing his free hand to encompass the whole room.

"Yes."

"Ever consider that maybe you should be working to get me the hell out of here instead of writing poetry like a goddamn fruit?!" Jon simply looked at him for a moment but soon carried on with his work. "Uh hello!" Mr. Sadner said while aggressively snapping his fingers.

"Did you hear me?"

Jon stopped his typing once again and coldly answered, "Yes."

"So, what the hell are you doing? Get out and do something useful for once!"

"I work from eight to seven at Dave's five days out of the week. Leave me alone," he rebutted sharply.

It then got eerily quiet. The two men stared at each other with hatred in their eyes. Their gaze was finally broken by a sudden jerk movement by Mr. Sadner. He threw his finished beer bottle at Jon, but missed, making it shatter against the already rustic-looking wall. "What the hell is wrong with you?!" Jon shrieked in fear.

"Oh I'm sorry, did I scare ya?" Mr. Sadner snarked while reaching for another beer from the fridge and popping the cap. "Serves ya right for talking back to me like that." Jon briefly clenches his fists in rage but soon takes a deep breath and continues working, ignoring his father. This angers Mr. Sadner. So much in fact that he grabs his cane and attempts to charge at him with the full force that such a man of his age can perform but instead he trips over his own feet and falls on the hard tile floor. "God dammit!" he screams. Jon looks at him briefly stone-faced but

just turns his attention back to his work again. Mr. Sadner tries to get up on his own but has fails

at every attempt for the next couple of minutes. The sound of Jon's typing and his father's grunting reverberate in the kitchen's walls, leaving an uncomfortable echo. Finally, exhausted and frustrated, he starts again, but with tears forming. "Why are you just sitting there? Please just end it."

Tempted by cruel curiosity, Jon looks at his father, "End what?"

"Me! God dammit!"

"And why would I do that?" he asked smarmily whole folding arms around the back of his chair.

"Boy, we both know ya hate me, just do it!"

"No, thank you."

"What?"

"No thanks."

"But..." he began while looking puzzled.

"I mean, I really don't see why I would."

Now returning back to his screaming-self, "You're a coward! That's why! A goddamn Coward!"

After hearing that, Jon stood up, decided to let go, and began to retaliate against his father in the only way he knew how. "You really want to know why I don't end it?"

"Yes!"

"Because..." he started while looking at his father with eyes of a mad man pushed to his limits, "What else is there to do?"

Looking mercifully at his son, he stuttered, "Wh-what?"

"What else is there to do? I mean look at you..." John mocked as he gestured his hand

downwards. "For scum like you, there's only one thing that can be done and let me tell you, it's not death. No, in fact, the worst thing I could ever do to you is ensure that you live as long as possible in that useless, lonely shell of a body you made for yourself." The tears that were just forming in eyes soon began to drip down Mr. Sadner's cheeks. "Just think, whoever comes here anymore? Nobody. And you think it's because of me? HA! No, it's because nobody wants to be around with such scum like yourself.... not even Mom." Mr. Sadner soaked in every word his son said and he just wanted to explode in a wave of emotions he didn't even know he had. But alas, he could not since he was still a cripple rolling around on a dirty tile floor looking up at the only thing that he has, which happens to feel only hatred towards him. "I hope you live forever. I really hope you do. I want you to live an eternity just stuck in this hell that you've created."

"Please...please...just please..." Mr. Sadner desperately pleaded.

"Well, it's a beautiful day," Jon cheerfully interrupted. "I'm going to go for a walk."

"No! Come back! No!" his poor father screamed, but nothing was heard. Jon went to the living room where the radio was blasting music and simply turned the knob all the way to maximum volume. It was so loud, no man could be heard doing a thing in that rickety house, but Mr. Sadner kept yelling and Jon kept ignoring. "Please...please..."

He then stepped over his father's exhausted body, grabbed his coat, and casually said, "See ya later, Pops!" The man walked out of that house with a head held high from redemption without knowing that he introduced a new Mr. Sadner into this world.

Patrick Cao



Jess Titterington

Role Model

"Teach me" says the child "I am young and know nothing of the world. Teach me about the trials of life, And the pains of love. Tell me of the mistakes you've made, And the lessons they've taught you.

I want to be like you so bad, But you tell me that I am too young So teach me what I need To grow"

Valentin Villaluz



Dylan Barrick

Within the past 100 years no one has left Ivanor, nor encountered anyone outside. Jakob's eyes gleam along the vast prairie of the training grounds full of paladins teaching the power of the light to their squires. He stares at the golden barrier that covered Ivanor, trying to look beyond the brigade, but failing as he was unable to see past the murky barrier. The head priest made the barrier so rich in bright gold for no citizen of Ivanor to see beyond. Jakob is ambitious, yearning to have songs and tales of his vast journey. A dream Jakob has across this wonderland of holy energy, so gold and strong, he could not take his eyes off. "What is that?" he thought as a black indent appears on the barrier. His eyes peer close, but the golden barrier begins to fade. A creature the size and stature of an average human covered in black robes with a hood that oozed black smoke stares into Ivanor right in front of the barrier. Shock fills Jakob and it is getting hard for him to breathe with his blood turning cold as ice. The clouds fade to black and the light disappears. The creature holds its hands together creating a large black ball of energy and then letting it go into a mysterious black wave. The crops fell, the grass turned to dirt, the trees are quenched, and all of the paladins disappeared leaving their armor to fall to the ground. All living things begin to decay. Jakob's skin started decaying down to the bone. The dark creature notices Jakob and whispers loudly an unknown language, then stretches out its arm reaching towards him.

"Jakob stop daydreaming and parry my attack!" Jorn screams. Jakob shakes his head left to right and snaps back into reality, his mind escaped the mysterious hell. He positions back into defensive stance to parry with Jorn's incoming attack. Both of the swords clash together, but Jorn's blade got awfully close enough to trim a piece of Jakob's hair off. Jorn has mentored

Jakob in the arts of the light and the ways of a paladin ever since the age of eight, now he is nearly eighteen getting ready to become a Paladin. Paladins and Priests are the true protectors of the realm from devilish foes. The Paladin uses holy techniques that power up their weapon of choice creating a devastating blow to their enemy. Priests use their holy magic to cast spells from afar, these spells are very powerful and there is only a handful of paladins that are able to maintain and possess that magnitude of holy power. "Tomorrow is an important day, the head priest will decide if you are ready to become a paladin! Now again!" Jorn Swings his two-handed blade bursting with holy energy.

Jakob left with burns and scars, exhausted from training, but Jorn thought it was successful and ended the lesson. Jakob mounts his white steed and leaves the training grounds galloping against the outskirts of Ivanor along the bright glow of the gold barrier. Jakob halts his horse to enjoy some hay and he begins to search, questioned from the mysterious creature, but the barrier stretches for miles across the field of grass deep into the vast blue sea with the sun floating right above. There is no sign of it, within the search Jakobs eyes follow the continuous rays of holy energy that fly high above the clouds, surrounding the farms and villages that spread out from the castle like a blanket of huts and hills, right up to the barrier that they never thought to doubt.

"Hey, stop eating my roof!" bellows from a distance. Jakob looks over his left shoulder and sees very small dwarf tumbling down from the nearby cliff. "Stop your wretched horse from eating my roof!" the dwarf screams as he is charging toward Jakob. Jakob realizes that his horse was munching on this man's roof full of hay. "Sorry!" he exclaims in a raspy voice, but the tiny man does not relent and wields his pitch-fork ready to stab the steed in the chest. Before he is able to connect Jakob quickly flicks the reins of his horse and gallops toward the entrance of the

inner city.

Jakobs horse trots along the drawbridge that is placed next to the stone wall that stacks a hundred feet high with circular pillars every few hundred feet and larger pillars grounding the corners. Along the wall a beautiful she-elf archer attracts Jakobs eye. Above her was a waving flag of Ivanor that expressed Ivanor's sigil; a gryphon spreading its wings. Her steel sallet shined with the golden barrier as she was sitting in between the battlement with one of her legs hanging off the edge. She pulled out her dagger and began to sharpen it. Her gambeson was dark black with a golden gryphon in the center. As she began to take her helmet off the great gate with broad metal doors blocked Jakobs view of her. She was beautiful he thought. He passes the gate and enters the village.

The inner village is teeming with some quite ordinary, some spectacular, and some look quite elvish. Omniscient sounds appear from blacksmiths smelting, with hammering weapons, or gear, with many flicking their lyres, and an elf and a human arguing drunk outside of a pub. Every

word was gibberish until the man sets his fists getting ready to brawl. "What are ye goin to do eh? Poke me with dem ears!" The man states as his body wobbles left and right. The elf raises his right arm and hooks the man in the face. The man falls to the ground with a bruised eye, then local paladins rush over to break up the fight with their blades holding a bright glow of holy Energy.

Jakob finally makes it home. Before entering he looked at the great view of the heart of Ivanor. Especially the temple, it stood tall and splendid, with pillars as thick as three dwarfs. Within the pillars was a gatehouse that held the Paladin leaders. Inside the temple lived the head priest with paladins who are on their journey to priesthood. Jakob dreamed of one day to live in

the temple. He would think about wandering along the great hall full of strong and powerful leaders. With a giant hearth that would be burning in the middle for warmth, with a rotisserie pig.

Jakob stables his horse on a wooden pole outside and enters his house. He finds his father staring at a letter that held the king's sigil. Half a bottle of wine is sitting on his oak table and a empty one is rolling across the floor. His eyes are opened wide with his left-hand ruffling through his messy hair. Did he have the same vision as me from earlier? Jakob wondered.

"Father did you..." he clears up his throat as his father's veiny red eyes begin to stare at him.

"Son..."

"The others and I are summoned to fight the ones that are across the barrier." Jakobs father said in a disgusted tone which led to a tear that shed along his right cheek. About every hundred years or so, Archers, paladins, and priests are ordered across the barrier to battle invaders to protect Ivanor. Yet, there are never survivors. Beyond could be anything from humans, elves, orcs, goblins, or even trolls, but they all knew it must be much worse. Before the fight the soldiers spend the night in the king's palace fine-dining to rejoice to the gods on them most grateful sacrifice.

Jakob wanted to help, but knew he couldn't. His heart began to shatter and he felt an upcoming spurt of energy he could not control. His hands begin to glow and it quickly turns into a powerful light, then begins to form into a mix of a blackish purple. He rises from the edge of his

bed and is speechless. His father turns, but the energy fades before he noticed. Standing still silent, Jakob is frozen, but thinking of his father he was able to wander his eyes along his father's beautifully crafted plate of armor made out of steel with his two-handed sword with trimmed

gold around the handle with a leather grip. Jakob begins to get feeling back in his legs takes a step closer to his father, and a tear seeps through his father's eye. "Jakob. I love you and I will miss you, but I have an important thing to tell you that your mother..." the general of the kings guard kicks open the door and screams "Soldier! The king has ordered you to go to his palace". "Wai--" His father tries to get the last of his words out to me, but the general has no patience and cuts him off "No, now soldier!". The general grabs his father by the arm and drags him out. Before the door shut Jakobs father says, "Search beyond son" and then that was the last time Jakob will ever see his father. He can hear the screams along the town of soldiers getting dragged out of their homes.

Within minutes a knock pounds on the door. Jakob opens it while clearing all of the tears from his innocent eyes. "Father?" he asks. It was not him, but an elf with clean white robes, pointy ears, and long thick gray hair. "Hello Jakob, I am the prophet and you will live with me now in the temple, we will master your arts of the light and you will cure the wound of this world". I nod to the prophet and sniffle my nose. As I stumble out of the door with all of my belongings and head to the horse, then I stop and turn back staring at my house to reminisce all of the good times my father and I had.

Jakobs father left him ten years ago and ever since he has been training every day with the prophet and after he would stare deep into the fluffy, white clouds that floated above, searching. By now he has learned to cast a projection of powerful light energy that radiates from his hand, shooting far beyond my reach blowing away the useless training dummies made of sticks and hay into infinity. Also, his swordsmanship has advanced as he has been dueling against soldiers of the king's guard using the arts of a two-handed sword. As the hay flies off into the wind, the prophet steps behind Jakob and claims "You are ready". "Ready for what?" Jakob responds confused, but as Jakob looks around all of the king's guard were kneeling around him. "You will join the second draft, they depart the end of this week, and this time all will survive".

All of the soldiers gather in the dining room and prepare for the next day to come. Before the feast, the king has presented to the soldiers what they will be facing. "Greetings everyone! A herd of undead are heading north toward our castle. The undead reign north, which is summoned by elvish warlocks that are spreading the darkness deeper and deeper into the land. I must tell you this so you can prepare yourselves, the undead will open your chest, eat your heart, and then consume your soul." The king states, but the soldiers did not take that well. Some murmured amongst themselves "Undead! How we supposed to go up against that?", "This is a joke isn't it?", and others just stare blatantly at the ground because they knew there was no hope. "Quiet now!" the general yells. The king continues and clears up his throat "Thank you general, This time we have Jakob; the chosen one. He will lead us to victory, this will be the last time we will ever fight this gruesome battle." The soldiers look around confused trying to find out who he is talking about. Jakob stands up, and makes it loud and clear "I am the chosen one". All of the soldiers stare and begin to laugh. An elf sitting down enjoying his pipe begins to remark "This is the one to save us, I'm baffled, you expect a kid to save us all" and the laughter continues. Jakob replies to their comments "I wi--", the prophet puts his hand on my shoulder with pressure insisting for Jakob to sit and whispers in his ear "Do not let the soldiers' pressure you, they are only scared of death. I have also noticed that no fear has succumbed you, I am surprised, is everything okay?". "Everything is perfectly fine prophet, I have been training every day for this moment for the last ten years. Just as you said I am ready" determination and strength fill Jakobs

soul as those words slip smoothly off my tongue. The prophet nods with a smile and walks away with his robes dangling along with him.

The soldiers keep on babbling over the king, but Jakobs stomach growls from massive hunger. The servants come rushing out of the kitchen with large plates with golden brown chicken, broiled lobster tails, and a delicious side of rice. I fill my plate until it is overflowing and then he sits down at the one of the many long narrow dining tables and begin to savor my food. As he is eating, a middle-aged elf comes and sits across from Jakob. "How can you possibly save us all, you are just a small boy?" An older man then joins the conversation and sits right next to Jakob "I believe in him, as I believe in this kingdom". "Ah, you're not sad at all, old man, you lived your life already." the man replies and then chugs his glass of wine. "And I will continue to live my life." Anger fills the man's face as he then spits in my food, I stare at the man walk away and then "Aw, my food! eh, it's just spit." Jakob says out loud as he begins to pick around the spit. "Here eat mine boy" the old man replied to Jakobs stupidity with an old, wise laugh. "I do not need to eat tonight, I just need some sleep, you need all the energy for tomorrow's fight." He slides over his tray of food, pats me on the back, and begins to disappear into the room with the beds. I devour the food and quench my thirst with water. As I look around, I notice that not everyone is eating. Some are just staring at their food, as tears drip down onto their plates, others are picking around the food, with more choking on the bones of the chicken. Jakobs stomach seems to be satisfied, so he heads onto his chambers to rest for tomorrow's battle.

The time has come to enter the unknown land that lies north. As they depart to the front of the castle all the villagers stare at the sad march. A man begins singing "We are all going to die, we are all going to die, HAhaha haha HA" until the elf next to him punches him on the

shoulder. He was probably still drunk from last night. After an exhausting walk, they make it to the edge of the barrier.

The high priest orders the men and women walk past the barrier. As they go through everything turns to midnight. There is no grass only soil with trees that have no leaves and broken branches. Ashes floated around the air with nothing but dark clouds. Jakobs heart begins to beat fast. The clouds were his confidence for his belief that his mother was always watching over him, but now she is unable to see me from the darkness of the clouds. The old elf stands behind him with a nice smile as if he is accepted of whatever is about to come. Some soldiers try to run away and escape from this hell by running back through the barrier, but there was nothing that will not let them back in. A sound of a horn rings in all of our ears and everyone grows quiet and stops scrambling. "Prepare yourselves!" The general and prophet yell. The ground begins to move and skeletons begin to crawl up from the ground. Dark elves appear out of black, misty portals and begin summoning undead creatures from the dirt. A man then runs out to attack screaming for his life with his sword tightly gripped and ready to swing at an undead. The undead raises its arm slashing his face knocking him onto the ground. It then hovers over the man and opens his chest, eats his heart, and then opens its mouth consuming the man's soul. Everyone stood speechless as they are watching this man's soul being consumed as Jakobs is filling with anger. "It is my turn" Jakob thought to himself, "Stand back," he says to all the soldiers. "What are you going to do boy?" the drunk one replies as he is trying to maintain balance. Jakob grips his sword in my left hand after planting the edge of the blade into the earth. His right arm raises consuming the light and he pushes the magical energy forward summoning the powerful beam that consumes the undead and the dark magicians. "That was easy..." He thought, until.

A large dark portal appears and out enters a twenty-foot red-skinned giant wielding a hammer that is twice the size of him. The giant then screams "Prophet, you have an apprentice I see, ah yes very powerful indeed, but is he the match for his" the giant raises his arm and dark magic seeps out and Jakob counters as quickly as he can by summoning the power of the light and their beams connect with each other creating a deep hole in between the collision. The beams quickly begin to fade and smoke clouds everywhere. Overlapping the sounds of the dirt fluttering the giant begins to clap and say. "Impressive... Impressive". "Your reign ends here demon!" The prophet replies. "Oh, we are not over yet prophet!" The giant raises his fist and summons the undead once again from the ground and charges stomping across the battlefield with the undead at his side. The general eager to fight once more yells "Charge!" and the soldiers begin to rally and rush onto the battlefield as Jakob heads directly towards giant himself. The soldiers clash against the bones of the undead as my sword parries against the hammer of the giant. As he struggles to hold against the demons might his sword begins to glow with holy energy knocking his hammer back. Jakob goes in for the strike and the demon blocks it with the handle of his hammer and pushes forward knocking Jakobs body far back. He wipes off the dirt covering his face from the fall and began to call upon the light again it was too late. The giant winds up his hammer and smashes Jakobs hand from casting destroying every bone in it. The demon grabs Jakob by the neck and lifts him up yelling "Is this what you thought could defeat me, a little boy!" Jakob begins to lose breath and everything begins to fade, but his eyes are focused on the clouds to search one last time. The clouds begin to move rapidly and a beam of blackish-purple energy strikes from the sky into the demon's chest. The demons grip begins to unfold and Jakob lands on his knees catching his breath. Then Jakob picks up his sword and begins to float using all of his strength casting a beam of holy energy with a golden blackish-

purple aura. The demon gets knocked back and fades away in tiny particles. All of the undead creatures crumble, the grayness fades, and a golden light brings life back from the dead. As the soldiers cheer for victory, Jakob stares at his hands and notices that they are still glowing golden blackish-purple.

John Pacifico

Step 0

Watch the news. Remember the stories, or don't. It's optional.

Talk about them.

Want to make money by talking about things you don't remember?

You might as well become the news. Fiction is the new fact.

Start writing stories full of conjecture, neglectful of fact.

Start writing stories of what other people are talking about to stay relevant.

Make sure you check primary sources,

and ask questions that may conflict with your world view.

If you cannot ask questions, you can just talk out your wrecked rectus. Speaking without thinking, without verified information.

It's not like anyone will call you out on your nonsense, right?

## Step 1

When someone calls you out on your misleading bullshit, you can just make up some more nonsense and your audience will eat it like a fat person eats chocolate.

Make sure you always claim that you only post "the truth" and its information you "can't get anywhere else" to give off the air of exclusivity.

People generally like feeling like they're superior to others.

Step 2

When groups of people continue to call you out on your nonsense, your reputation remains positive! Even when you claim that school shootings don't happen, or that the government has the power to control tornados. That doesn't matter because your fans support like zombies eat brains.

Now is the time to exploit your crazed fans for near-tax-free dollars.

First, register as a non-profit organization.

Incorporate a church.

You still can't sell ad-space on your newsletter because major companies aren't as demonstrably stupid as your audience, so you need to think about how to squeeze every dollar out of your fans.

To sell your audience an overpriced product E.g. (costs \$4 to make, sell it for \$79) that also doesn't work of treat any ailments.

Next, feed your viewers a "news story" and frame it as a potential problem that doesn't exist for anyone in the first world. E.g. There are chemicals in the tap water that turn frogs gay.

After that, take a break from letting stupid wind escape and beg for money. At the same time present a product that is relevant to the "news story" you mentioned earlier. E.g. Water filtration systems, it removes all the chemicals, fluoride, germs, bacterium.

Make sure you put pressure onto people's pain points and you will make enough money to support yourself and your operation.

Eventually you will make enough profit and have so much discretionary income to buy some Rolex watches.

Step 3

Survive, it's easy when you encourage your zealous fans to fight your critics for you.

Make sure your fans bully your opposition into exiting their careers through a 12-story window.

Miraculously, your reputation is still solid gold. Simply because your fans adore you for your truth. They love you because you tell them what they want to hear.

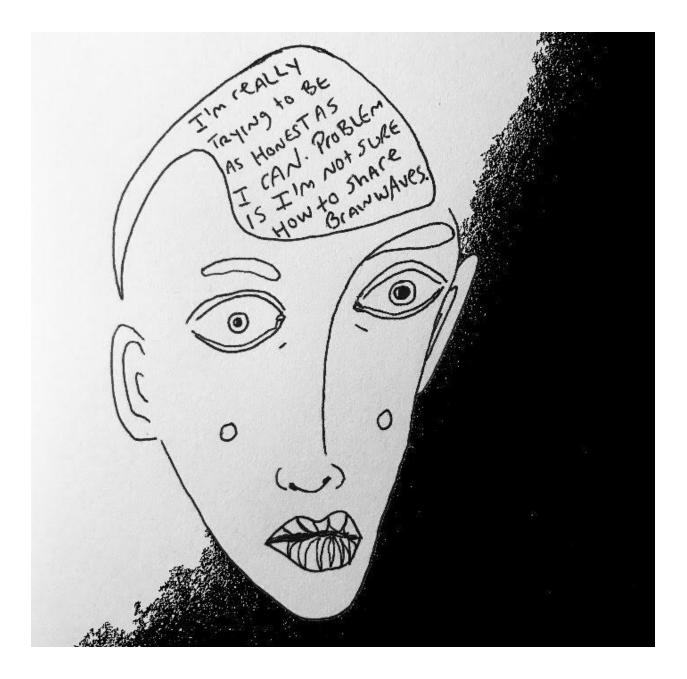
Isn't that wonderful? That you can make near-tax-free dollars by lying to people that can't tell the difference between facts and conjecture?

No. This is terrifying.

•••

I need to start my own website.

Felicce Sacco



China Rain Chung

A Love Poem

With your hair and I see a deep forest Every single strand Every single knot It even has a slight earthy smell With your skin and I see tenderness So delicate and sweet The perfect area to lay my kiss Or lay my love I listen to your voice just to hear silk The depth and valleys of your vocal chords Listening to you speak is like music to my ears When you actually sing It's like hearing the Gods of Jazz Blessing my ears The same way Catholics bless their wine and bread To me, you are grounding To me, you are real To me, you are you That's all I need

Tiffany Rivera

Sound

- the room in silent my ears are ringing
- i lay my head on the pillow
- and the silence
- becomes deafening

the silence

- turns into static
- turns into nothing
- i close my eyes

roll over

- lay my head on your chest
- the silence
- turns into a shallow
- steady
- heartbeat
- it's like a bass drum
- i open my eyes
- but you're gone
- and everything

goes back to normal

it goes back to silence

back to static

back to nothing

Kaiden Cilento



Dylan Barrick

Lord, you knew me before I was even knitted in my mother's womb

A perfectly designed plan to glorify your holy name, but I am trapped.

Trapped in the bondages of shame, hardened, engulfed by an abundance of pain!

My God, how could I have strayed so far away?

A beautiful butterfly in reversed progression,

A cocoon made up of past regrets, stuck in what was, now dealing with the wages of my sin DEATH....

My cocoon is deeply saturated in hues of what should have been

Ensnared by the anger and bitterness, tightly enclosed with memories of where I went wrong

MY GOD!!! I scream out loud....

How I wish I could break free from all of these lies

A predestined life with such a sorrowful ending, for who could ever love such a sad story? My heart is in anguish and my tears! They flow from within me, like the wild rapids from the depths of my soul....

How is it that we have come so far from the days of Queen, Eazy-E and Liberace and yet this disease is still on the rise...

A silent epidemic, taking hold of the lives in the minority community, LGBTQ and everything else in between.

But whose fault is it? Who are we to blame?

Maybe it's this misperceived notion that one pill is all it takes...

Or am I to blame?

For not telling my truth I fall in line with those who are too scared to scream that this is not fair,

and why me!

A totally avoidable disaster that I chose to ignore

And for that I must walk the path that too many unfortunately may know.

So I ask everyone and I urge you to please ....

Get tested, be protected and follow in HIS name

Jason Rodriguez

Last night I was doing the dishes again, for what seemed like the hundred millionth time, when I noticed a pile of the black-handled cutlery in the sink. That set was a gift from when I graduated from a halfway house for throwaway teens, about two months after I'd turned seventeen. About half the set has disappeared, but I still keep the remaining pieces in the drawer along with our everyday set. I picked one up and really studied it: the handles were no longer shiny black; they had greyed and taken on more of a beaten, matte finish. Kind of like me. But they were still perfectly useful things, and had held up admirably over the 33 years I'd had them. Kind of like me, too.

With my hands in the hot, sudsy water, my mind wandered off, back to when I'd gotten those black handled utensils. And since it's nearly Christmas now, I was also reminded of my first Christmas in my first apartment.

I got that apartment right after I turned 17, and left the halfway house. They had a party for me right before I moved out, when I was gifted the black-handled set, a hideously ugly set of cream and babyshit brown heavy ceramic dishes, and a quilted red potholder that read, "Best Cook Ever." The potholder was because I was famous at that house for my pepper steak, but that's another story.

My apartment wasn't much; the top of a Cape Cod house with a dormered kitchen and bathroom, sloping attic ceilings in my bedroom and living room, and not a whole lot else. It was also damn cold that first winter- no storm windows. It was all mine, though. I could come and go as I liked, and I made sure that none of my friends ever spent a night on the street like I had.

One of these friends was Carolyn. I'd met her at that halfway house for homeless teenagerssort of a practice independent living space for kids up to eighteen. You could live there for six months; by then you'd hopefully have saved enough money to cover rent and security on your own place. I'd heard about her before we met, though. Our paths had nearly crossed in a detention home in a sketchy part of Long Island, where her previous shenanigans were the stuff of legend. She'd

bashed in a counselor's face with a heavy Bakelite telephone and spent time in prison for assault. They still had the same phone when I was there, though both the counselor and Carolyn were gone.

Carolyn and I had a terrible relationship, but at the time I didn't understand that. We loved each other, of that I'm sure. They call it codependent now, but this must have been in 1986, so, as a newly minted high school dropout, I wishfully thought she just needed me. She would live with me for a while, then she would do something shockingly stupid, like piss off my neighbors, and I would kick her out... She would be gone a couple months, then she'd call me up crying, or I'd get that crackly collect call from jail, or she'd be sitting on the steps when I got home from work- shit like that. And once again, I'd take her in. I knew her story. Abusive and neglectful parents kicked her out. She got pregnant by her foster brother. She was an alcoholic. I thought I could help her, save her somehow. As if, miraculously, our friendship could ever be enough to undo all that damage. Like I said, I was only seventeen when we met. We continued our dance for years, until the time she asked me to watch one of her kids for a few weeks, and I finally got off the roller coaster. I'd had her pair of unreturned kindergarten parakeets for years by then. Anyway.

So we were together the first Christmas Eve I had that apartment. I'd just turned eighteen, and, counting up our money, we found we had seventeen dollars between us. We'd both just gotten home from work, and though my hips were aching from the cold, damp weather, we decided to get a tree and go to the movies. We headed up to the movie theater in Hicksville, I think, or maybe it was Levittown, to see the midnight show of Rocky Horror. On the way there, peering at the road through the mix of thin snow and dreary rain, we passed a miraculously open tree lot with a few sickly, spindly trees remaining. I swung my gigantic baby blue 1971 Ford Galaxie 500 into the lot, bouncing over the uneven gravel. Standing in the rain, I asked the guy how much for a scraggly, tiny little tree, and he said two bucks. Maybe it stood two feet tall and had less than a dozen branches. Carolyn and I stared at him, then at each other, grinning. We had no idea what a Christmas tree, even shitty one, was supposed to cost, but \$2 worked for us. After he nailed a splintery cross-shaped stand to its base, we gently placed our first Christmas tree in the trunk, slammed the slippery wet lid shut, and split for the movies. We had \$15 left, and the tickets were \$4 each. We shared a bucket of hot, salty popcorn for \$2, got free cups of water, and carefully placed a dollar into the countertop collection tin that featured a heartbreaking photo of a skeletal, big-eyed puppy. We still had \$4.

After the movie, we sat quietly in the parking lot for a few minutes before we headed home. It was Christmas, and it was raining; the snow had lost its argument with the rain. It was bleak and gloomy, a cheerless night for Christmas. I wondered briefly what I could make us for dinner when we got home; the cupboards were pretty bare. When I turned around to back out, I noticed an open pergament across the street. I said, "We need ornaments!" and with, broad, silly grins, (this was the best thing about Carolyn, she was usually great fun and always up for anything) we started across the drizzly, surprisingly crowded lot. Over bright Christmas lights from the store windows reflected wildly on the shining pavement outside.

Inside the store was utter mayhem. Pergament had gone completely insane by 2:30 on Christmas morning. There must have been a hundred people in that store, crowded into the front by the Christmas aisles, and the place was wrecked. Christmas music was blaring, there was stuff all over the floors, spilling out of split open boxes. Broken ornaments crunched under my big black boots. Carolyn gave me the side-eye and a sly smile; I knew exactly what she meant. There was no way anybody would notice a couple of kids stealing a few ornaments. We didn't have just \$4 to spend, because the famous five-finger discount was now in full effect. It was a bona-fide Christmas Miracle.

We split up and I started down one aisle. I found a few little ornaments for fifty cents each, and held onto those to pay for later. I spotted a long, aqua and white box of bright red taper candles with a three-dollar price tag. The previous summer I had found a pair of heavy, clear, cut-glass candlesticks at a yard sale for a quarter; they would look so pretty together, so festive. Homey, you know? I grabbed those too. I still have that box in a closet, and it still holds a few of its original red

candles. Glancing around me, careful to remain invisible, I shoved a package of red tinsel under my too-big, second hand men's overcoat. I made it to the end of the aisle when I bumped into Carolyn. "Ready?" I asked. She nodded and we headed forward to the exhausted cashiers. I handed over the candles and the little ornaments, and we paid: \$2.50- Christmas items were half price! Wishing them a 'Merry Christmas,' we boogied out of the store, through the rain, and back to the car.

We curled up on the wide front seat, upholstered in teal damask. The heater and defroster were blasting, the windshield fogged over. As we waited for it to clear, we pulled out bits of Christmas festivity from our clothes. Carolyn squealed when I showed her the tinsel. Oh no, I thought, we don't have any lights... but before I could even complete the thought, Carolyn pushed up her grubby khaki coat sleeve to show me her arm wrapped around and around with the familiar green wire of multi-colored Christmas lights. I reached out to hug her and we held on for a minute. Then she made sort of an 'ooof' sound, laughed, leaned back, and yanked a long flat box of silver icicles out of her pants.

We headed back to the apartment, tired and happy. It was Christmas, and we had a cozy, safe home waiting for us. I parked, grabbed the tree out of the trunk, and tiptoed silently up the stairs (hell had no fury like my downstairs neighbors when disturbed). My pets greeted us at the door: a rescued ferret and slinky little white kitten, also a rescue from a local radiator repair shop. Carolyn got to setting up the tree while I ransacked the kitchen for dinner fixin's- egg noodles and frozen Italian vegetables with pepper, Parmesan cheese, and butter. Soon I had the pots bubbling on the stove, the pleasing smells of butter and fresh pine filling the tiny apartment. Carolyn had already put the lights on and was winding the tinsel- there was almost too much for our tiny tree. The kitten, Kato, stood frozen in front of the tree, entranced by the shimmering tinsel. We hung the ornaments and icicles, and leaned back to admire our beautiful tree. It was simply perfect. I wish I had a photo, but neither of us owned a camera. I can still see it clearly in my head.

Dinner was ready, so I set the table, served us generous, steaming bowls of vegetables and noodles, dusted with parmesan and pepper, and fitted the red candles into the glass candlesticks on the table.

Carolyn turned off the overhead light and lit both candles. We flipped on the radio, low, to the classical station, and enjoyed the Christmas music floating softly through our sparkly lights.

We sat and ate together peacefully, delighted, watching our tree twinkle. That night, the handles on this cutlery were still shiny black and new, barely used. Like we were, then.

I've made and served thousands of meals with this cutlery to hundreds of friends. I'm 50 now, and that first Christmas is still my brightest and most favorite Christmas memory. It beats out my childhood Christmases, most notably the one when I was fifteen, just returned from reform school; my father had vanished and my mother was so drunk that she forgot it was Christmas.

And don't worry; that Christmas was also the last time I stole anything. Carolyn and I lost track of each other after I refused to take her daughter, Amiee Kristine, for a few weeks, which I knew would turn into forever. I have no idea what's become of her. But I think of her sometimes, especially around Christmas, and whenever I hear Janis Joplin, Carolyn's favorite singer.

I finished the dishes and washed and dried my hands. I had a lot to do to get ready for this Christmas- a house to clean, plans to make, food to prepare, gifts to wrap. A real, grown-up woman's Christmas. But I'll never forget that first Christmas

of my adulthood. Carolyn and I had no gifts, no cards, not even a real, balanced dinner. All we had was ourselves and each other. And that was all we needed.

Kristine Amels



China Rain Chung

There's fish hooks and messages on strings All slung throughout my brain, Winter's calm cold tongue Licks the sky of color, Till we are left with those pale cold mornings, Porcelain and easily broken By the rising winter sun.

I woke still in a dream,

A yellow bird was flying around my room, I opened the window and gave back into sleep, I woke up cold.

At the grocery store when you see me, I am doing pretty well, How are you? I don't care much for politics anymore, I'm not convinced any of this is real anyway.

Back home my Kitchen is a quiet color,

That dim blue, late winter, color,

Tonight looks just like last night,

And tomorrow will look like today.

I'm not cynical,

I hate trendy nihilism,

But my cat did die a few months ago,

So now with nothing to do,

I am prone to laying on my back

in the kitchen,

And waiting for when these days don't all feel the same.

China Rain Chung

## Interested in submitting to next year's *Labyrinth*?

Submissions format: Email to thelabyrinth@bergen.edu Subject line: [Author's last name] [Title of Work]

## Subject Guidelines:

Contest and publication of *The Labyrinth* is limited to students of BCC enrolled in academic years 2019 and 2020, including part-time and Learning-in-Retirement students.

All work submitted must be original and previously unpublished. By submitting to *The Labyrinth,* the contributor verifies that the work is definitely their own work and has never been publicly presented in any format, including print, personal blog, internet sharing site or social media website.

Only electronic submissions will be accepted. Please format text documents to be readable by Microsoft Word. Artwork and photography should be submitted electronically in JPEG or PDF format, minutes 300 DPI.

Length restrictions: Fiction and essay, 5,000 word maximum; poetry, 35 lines maximum; play, approximately 10 minutes performance time.

Artwork in any 2-dimensional medium will be considered.

Each work should be submitted separately. Maximum number of submissions in fiction, poetry, drama, and essay are permitted. Artwork submissions are limited to a maximum of 5 in each category.

All text submissions must be typed. Prose must be double spaced. Plays must be in standard dramatic manuscript form.

All work must include the contributors name, student ID number, full address, telephone number, and e-mail on each page. Contributors are advised to thoroughly edit and proofread their work before each submission. Artists and photographers, please title each submission.

Questions may be directed to Professor Mary Crosby (201) - 879 - 8931

