TEMPO IS A STUDENT PRODUCED PUBLICATION THAT EMBODIES THE CULTURE THAT IS COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY THROUGH EACH PAGE.
A note to our readers,

The production of this magazine was not a simple task once the carnage of Hurricane Florence swept through. However, we persisted. It is curious how we strategize for a future that is forever unfamiliar to us, and how our ideas somehow come to align with what happens. Looking back upon our collective struggle, I don’t believe we could’ve better highlighted the students of our campus than with our theme of rebirth.

This magazine was a rebirth in of itself. First printed in 1999 Tempo has its own history behind it, and with history comes revisions. With the highs and lows that come with time, everything can change in 19 years, and it has. The Tempo of two decades ago would be unrecognizable today, and with our new staff, we have made it our mission to further express that Tempo is not only a literary magazine, but an alternative culture magazine. We give a platform to those who may feel isolated but, who—in reality—have some of the most relatable stories. Rebirth highlights how we are stronger than our pasts, working through hardships, and using our past selves to cultivate our futures.

We are in a constant state of growth, relentlessly being tested and propelled into new adversities. Sometimes we are tested as a community, and in our case, a community that has been battered by natural disaster. Some of us called it a “hurrication,” using our twenty days out of school and work to travel to safer locations and relax. Others fought for their lives, lost their homes, and now battle the mental strife that comes with these misfortunes.

Nevertheless, we overcome.

We learn, mature, and rebuild, not only our surroundings, but our internal selves. We power through the struggle because we must, because we are stronger than what happens to us and we always will be. This theme is a tribute to us all: the fighters, the growers, the hopeful. And to everyone who thinks they’ve lost the power within themselves to change and endure, don’t choose defeat.

Choose to be reborn.

Anne M. Kelley
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By BRITTANY ALOEO
When I look in the mirror, I can’t classify what I see. The reflection changes from day to day. Hell, sometimes it changes multiple times a day. Every given morning it’s a different look: red plaid pants topped with a cropped navy sweater, sequined with a raincloud. Anywhere I go, I represent myself by the way I dress: hand-painted butterfly clips holding my long strands of silver-tipped hair in place, bright red lips, chunky yellow plaid blazer laid over my shoulders, and platform slingbacks with silver-backed heels. That’s one example of my everyday look for an eleven-hour day of classes and work, or even a late-night Publix run.

You know those “fashion rules” that scream at you during an episode of your mother’s guilty pleasure show, “What Not to Wear?” You know, from the kind of people who religiously swear by not wearing white after Labor Day, or that patterns should be worn sparingly inbursts? Well, dear reader, I am here to tell you that none of that matters! Throw all of what you thought you knew about fashion out the window and try shaking things up Britta Style. You might be surprised at how much of yourself you can uncover.

As a child, I was always drenched in SpongeBob SquarePants t-shirts, plain blue overalls, athletic pants made of nylon, and that one umbrella hat I found in my grandparents’ shed. Everyone who looked at me described me with the word “tomboy.” Even today, I’m still not sure what that word means or what exactly they were trying to categorize. What does it mean to be a “tomboy?” Maybe they meant that the comfortable way I was portraying myself through the clothes on my post-toddler body was more masculine than what a society-identified female would wear. Perhaps they weren’t trying to identify my style choices at all, but rather something deeper than what they could see on the outside.

The way a person chooses to identify themselves comes through in a variety of different ways. These ways would be gender expression, personality expression, or any type of performance that comes from the way a person dresses. This is especially true if there has been this predetermined mode of identification in a fashion community, like the ones societally constructed in queer theory.

Let me unpack that a bit. There has always been this notion that someone can look gay. It’s usually the main way people try to gauge another person’s sexuality, the initial step of the gaydar. However, there are so many ways in which this process of trying to categorize a person is completely irrelevant and, let’s just go ahead and say it, outright wrong. Sure, there are clothing stereotypes, but it was a heteronormative and probably misogynistic culture that taught you that to begin with (oh, and let’s not forget to add sexually-insecure to the list). Who is to say that wearing a piece of fabric that flows around the knees without connecting between the legs is more feminine than fabric covering the entirety of the legs? Why does a loose tie-dye shirt with jeans make you think I’m suddenly a tomboy? The answers lie in the way you were taught how people should perform their gender, sexual preference, and basic identity through stereotypically gendered clothing.

Along with societal pressures, there are body standards that run deep in the fashion industry. These standards are seen through the ways women’s and men’s clothing are
sized differently; women having smaller sizes in every category, along with sizing that ranges from a meaningless number scale, to the typical small, medium, large, and so on. Labels on clothing are problematic in a few different ways besides the obvious double standards of size relating to gender. Having clothes that society determines “for girls” or “for boys” completely marginalizes those who don’t conform to the gender binary. This ridiculous sizing and categorization can also lead to a variety of adopted body issues that may develop very early in life, like mine did.

Whether they were dresses that hugged my midsection just a bit too tight, exposing the outline of my rigid un-flat belly or the shorts that snuck up my thighs, exposing the way my knees touched together and sent my shins curving away from each other, I never felt comfortable exposing my body. There was even a time when I was twelve where the only thing I wore was a zip-up hoodie and jeans. It’s hard to imagine now, but that’s what I was taught and that is what I felt comfortable in. Hiding was comforting.

This was also the same point in my life where I would admire my grandmother’s bright red toenails, and aspire to paint mine the same color, only to have my grandfather pluck the bottle out of my hands and demand me to beg for my originality. “No. No painting your nails. Do you want to be called a slut?” The fashion magazines hadn’t ever said anything about that. They never said anything about how older men would look at me if my nails were the color of a bleeding rose, or the way they would imagine those nails wrapping around their phallic-shaped egos whilst thinking that the way I dress is all for them. The magazines never taught me of the way I would be sexualized at age six when the freckles on my shoulders would soon turn into targets for unwanted kisses. They never taught me that covering every inch of my skin would feel more comfortable in 102-degree weather than the constant gnawing I felt in my flesh.

To be honest, I don’t remember when I changed. Like all births, I wasn’t conscious for the transformation, but one thing is for certain. The days of hiding myself are done.

A couple years ago, I started to focus my efforts on being who I want to be, instead of having to cater to those sexist ideals my grandfather tried to bestow upon me. Unlike my hair, I had to cut off all the dead weight that was keeping me from being happy in the only body I will have. Unfortunately, most of that toxicity came from the only father figure I had known.

Once I was free falling through the crevices of my fashion identity, I was now able to experiment with clothes, makeup, and fashion in the way I wanted to. It also opened up a few other thoughts on identity that I had previously oppressed every year before.

What kind of clothes do I wear if I like boys, but also like girls and people non-conforming to any gender just the same? Do I represent my open sexuality with monotoned clothes just to make sure nobody considers me more masculine or feminine? What if I keep wearing hoodies and loose-fitting jeans, keep a bare face, and lay low? Will that make sure my body won’t change shape in the mirror every day? Will my skin stop feeling like the exposed underbelly of a rabbit in an open field in midday? These were the questions plaguing me. In fact, these are the questions that led me to discover the real problems with the way I viewed clothing before my revelation.
The soft

Something

beautiful

happened in

the dressroom.

Goodwill.
Because of how my grandfather taught me that I would be sexualized, that my body wasn’t for myself, and the way fashion magazines stood behind his teachings through diet plans and columns about What Your Man Wants to See When He Comes Home, I saw how I would be viewed in society as long as I was a feminine woman. So, I dismantled that category and made something of myself that I was more comfortable being—non-binary.

Walking into thrift stores went from being an unruly search for something “right” for my body, to looking for any piece of clothing that was weird, fun, and unusual, no matter the originally assigned gender of the fabric stitches. The rebirth was underway.

Once I started to acknowledge the identities truer and more freeing to me, I didn’t have to hide myself anymore. I started to realize other things with my appearance that I wasn’t aware of, or, I guess I should say I started to realize other things about my perception of my appearance.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is a body-image disorder categorized by the persistent and intrusive thoughts that cycle through the affected person’s head continuously, focusing on an imagined flaw or slight defect in appearance. They think about their real or perceived flaws for hours each day. They can’t control their negative thoughts, and don’t believe people who tell them that they look fine. These thoughts cause severe emotional distress and can even interfere with daily functioning in life. People with BDD may miss class, work, avoid social situations, along with mirrors, and will even isolate themselves from friends and family because of the extreme fear that others will see these flaws the way the affected person sees themselves. Through my journey to finding who I was, and what I wanted to look like, I started to realize that I am a part of the two percent of the population with these debilitating thoughts about my body. Then, something beautiful happened in the dressing room of Goodwill.

I realized that when I have clothes on my body of no distinct size or contour, clothes of all different colors and lengths both form-fitting in good areas, and loose in others, I was distracted from the crippling hyper focus on my imperfections, and could look at my reflection in any surface to first see the beautifully woven fabrics, and not myself. The rising of the new me, dawned in bright colors, patterns, and types of fashion that I love, helped better myself in more ways than I ever thought possible.

To think, my complete mental makeover was put into motion by choosing to wear white on picture day while my shirt was covered in a repeating cherry pattern and finding solace once again in the swirl of the tie-dye. For me, fashion isn’t just as the dictionary describes it. It’s how I choose to not identify myself. It’s how I can look at my flaws in the mirror and laugh because the pores in my nose look just like the polka dots on my pants, and that is okay. Fashion is how I have defied every notion of what society has told me I needed to be. All the power lies in self-expression, and finally choosing not to be what others expect. I choose bold.
One of the superstitions that I have adopted over the years in my family is eating twelve grapes at midnight every year on New Year’s Eve to bring luck to each month of the New Year. This tradition comes from Puerto Rico for me specifically, but I know that it is a common belief among Latin America. One year we were all set up in front of the TV and my Papi rushed in with the freshly washed grapes separated into 5 cups, twelve apiece. The ball was going to drop any second, and as we counted down to midnight and cheered we began to eat the grapes. We popped them in one after another to get them all down in the first minute, as is the tradition, when suddenly we all started to look at each other in alarm. The grapes we had bought looked smaller than usual, but we had payed no mind, I wish we had.

As I looked around the room I saw my own horror-stricken face reflected at me, the grapes were extremely sour, and we had each just shoved as many as we could into our mouths. As we keep chewing all our eyes squinted with tears, but we were determined to keep going. Laughter started bubbling up and once we saw each other, we lost it because the hilarity of our situation was too much. It was quite the sign to start off the New Year with, but luckily, we got all the grapes down and no bad luck followed us from the sour grapes.

There is a superstition that is used to try to predict the gender of your child when you are pregnant. It goes, if you hold a necklace or a thread with a needle hanging from it over your pregnant belly, and you are very still, the way that it moves can predict the gender of your child. If the needle or necklace moves in a circular motion the baby will be a girl but if it moves in a side to side motion the baby will be a boy. My Mami said that she did this for each of her three pregnancies and that it worked for them all!

One superstition that I have never gotten to be a part of but I love hearing about is performed for good luck on San Juan Day. My Mami says that she remembers doing this growing up and the beaches would be packed full of people and she and her sisters would go together. On June 24th, San Juan Day is celebrated. The night of the 23rd people go to the beach and at 12:00 o’clock precisely, they throw themselves into the water on their backs seven times to bring themselves good luck.

Who’s to say if superstitions are true or not, but getting to learn more about your heritage and culture through them, and gaining some funny memories, are definitely worth practicing them.
COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET

AND I'M DOING JUST FINE

BY MICHAEL CORMIER

Over a year ago, I was drowning in depression. I was in a dead-end job, obese, and in an emotionally abusive relationship with a girl I had met when we were in high-school. I was an individual and I had personality, but she took that from me and threw it away. My life had become a routine of waking up and feeling upset that my dreams were not a reality. I was 32 years old and for 14 years struggled in a relationship that had never felt right. A life once filled with laughter was now full of bitterness and regret. I felt stuck in the life I had and trapped with no escape.

I was physically, emotionally, and mentally in the worst shape of my life.

There was something between us that could never be satisfied, something that felt off. When our relationship was good, which was rare, it was tolerable. We both tried so hard to convince each other we were in it for good, that there was a purpose. We had virtually nothing in common, and as the years went by we became more like roommates than anything else. It became clear that whatever path our future took, was not going to be with each other.

I had always known that my life wasn’t being lived to its potential. I was keeping a secret; I was lying to everyone I knew, and most importantly, to myself. When our relationship ended, as it was destined to, I was faced with a new prospect: I was now entirely in control of my life, and my destiny was finally in my hands again. It was going to be a long process to rebuild, but I needed to find out who I really was.
My journey began in my mind, where the most damage had been done. I knew I was a broken person. She had spent years telling me that I wasn’t good enough and that I would never accomplish anything. I believed her. I had convinced myself I would never be happy. I had forgotten what it was like to laugh and to have fun, but that was about to change.

I made up my mind that the key to happiness was going to involve loving myself. I looked in the mirror and saw a stranger, a shell of a man who had let so many years of his life slip by and lost every semblance of who he was. Someone who wasn’t living his best life. I didn’t even know who I had become. I told myself I was worth fighting for. My face started to change before my eyes. My reflection showed an expression that I hadn’t seen in years, unrecognizable to me after the end of a bitter and loveless relationship.

It was a smile. This smile was a breakthrough for me. The first of many steps towards regaining what I had lost in myself.

It was no small feat. I had no clue where to start. I had been following the same dull routine day after day for years. The first measures I chose to take were to regain control of my body. I was edging close to 360 pounds, I would break a sweat tying my shoes and had a familial history of heart disease. To put it bluntly, I was unhealthy, and if I continued the same path, I would be a dead man. To go on this much-needed journey of self-care, I would need to focus.

I paid for a membership at the gym and started strong and hard. I was going five days a week. In the beginning I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I felt like a fool on the treadmill. I didn’t know which machines to use or to stay away from, but I knew that doing something was better than doing nothing at all. Little by little, I was able to run faster and farther.

My eating habits changed immensely. After years of ingesting junk food and soda, I had to quit eating for fun, and instead, eat for function. Instead of going out to eat routinely I prepped my own meals at home. This both saved me money and allowed me to control what I put in my body and the portion size as well. I replaced burgers with grilled chicken, and Diet Coke for water.
Bit by bit the pounds came off. It started slowly but built momentum, and soon my pants were falling off. My journey was starting to reveal results, something that had been so foreign to me. I had been skating by in life with little to no “payoff.” The man in the mirror was still a stranger to me; he looked different than when my journey began. Something else was building in me as the pounds were shed, something I hadn’t felt in years: confidence.

Yet there was still something that needed addressing, big time.

At this point I had re-entered the dating world. It had morphed into something far different from 2003— the last I was a single man. 14 years seemed like an eternity, I forgot my desires and what I had suppressed. I had changed so much over the past decade. I knew what I wanted, and I was finally able to come to terms and accept myself for who I knew I always was. I had to confess and make the statement to myself before I could reveal it to anyone else. I was gay.

There were going to be no more barriers placed on myself and who I truly was. It was terrifying knowing that I was this person. I had kept him away from my family and friends and had yet to reveal myself fully to the people who matter most. It was
an introduction I wasn’t sure I was ready to make. I had no idea how the people closest to me would react. For years I felt like there was a fire inside of me that had to be released, something begging to come out. I’ll admit I was a coward, fearful of what questions I might have to answer. Did I know I was gay when I was with my ex? Yes. Had I always known I was gay? Yes. Am I sure? Um, duh, yes, I’m sure. Something I wasn’t prepared or willing to do was rationalize or defend my decision to come out. Once I made up my mind I realized this is who I am and who I have always been.

I found Jordan when I least expected. I had talked with a few guys, but nothing really panned out. Nothing seemed like it had the potential for something more, but here was somebody who I connected with on so many levels. We liked the same movies and music, we both liked to take long drives and talk for hours, and most importantly he made me laugh. I had almost forgotten what it felt like to laugh. If things were to continue with Jordan, which I very much wanted them to, I was going to have to start telling the people in my life about him, and about me.

The first person I came out to was my best friend Steve. We’ve been friends for almost 20 years. We came up through school together, supported each other with the loss of his mother and my father, and spent countless hours of our lives together. Yet, he never knew who I truly was. I suppose I felt like I had betrayed him. I told Steve everything, and there was a huge part of my life he didn’t know about. The guilt of keeping something like this from him for so many years felt unforgivable. We were sitting around my place one day, getting caught up on each other’s lives and when he asked me how the dating scene had been and if I had met someone, I told him I had. He of course asked me what her name was, and I said, “his name is Jordan.” There was a silence in the room that drowned out every other noise in the world. I stared at Steve waiting for some reaction. I waited for him to wrinkle his nose in disgust or laugh and mock me or punch me in the nose. He didn’t do anything of the sort. He smiled and said “Cool. I’m really happy for you.”

After Steve, I told my mom, my sister Olivia, and Alice, who is as close to a sister as I could have without the blood connection. My mother and sister were proud of me and happy that I was finally happy. Alice hugged me and asked immediately to see pictures of Jordan (who she was convinced was catfishing me, but I had to convince her that he and I had already met, and he was 100% real). The response was the same from everyone, as I should have known it would be. They were happy for me. They were proud I had the courage to come out and announce myself and they supported me. They told me that nothing I told them would ever change their opinion of me because they loved me for who I was. They all agreed I was the absolute happiest they had ever seen me.
I am constantly amazed by comparing my life now to my life before I went on this journey. Those were dark, dark days. I have since lost over 110 pounds and counting. Every day offers new challenges, but I am spending my free time doing things that I enjoy, with people who I love. And in doing so, the circle of important people in my life is growing.

When all of this began, I had no idea what would come from it. So many new friends have come into my life when I least expected it. Most importantly I have found Jordan. He is someone that I share my life with who loves me unconditionally—a feeling I’ve never known before. He inspires me to do more, be more, and constantly affirms that I am good enough, that I am worth it. To feel all the love I have in my heart returned to me in his eyes is more than enough for me to keep climbing and striving to be the very best version of myself. I laugh with him more than I ever thought possible. My life is filled with laughter and it reminds this new me that I am truly living my best life.

All it took was one day to decide it was time for a change.
Brazilians have many superstitions that are taken very seriously even if to some they appear foolish. One of the largest superstitions in Brazil is Friday the 13th. This is the day that your chances of being physically harmed are the highest, so many avoid traveling, doing surgeries, or anything that could cause injury. Brazilians really believe Friday the 13th is a cursed day and it is dreaded throughout the country.

We also have some hard-to-understand superstitions such as: one cannot put a bag on the ground, or the bag owner will lose all their money. Breaking a mirror not only gives you 7 years of bad luck but it will also ruin your love life forever. Finally, the best-known superstition among Brazilians is that leaving a broom behind the door can keep annoying and unwanted visits away.

We have regional superstitions as well that are central to different states of Brazil. I’m from the state of Minas Gerais, which is located in southeast of Brazil. The week before Easter is called the “Holy Week”, and people from my state that have dairy farms, donate all the milk taken from the cows on a specific day. I have a dairy farm back home and we donate milk on Good Friday. Every year there is always a long line of people in front of my farm’s gate waiting to get fresh and free milk. The superstition is that if you sell milk on Good Friday the cow’s milk will dry up. On the same day, we cannot ride horses, or sweep house because it is considered a sin.

If you think of Brazil, soccer might come to mind. Superstitions are also imbedded into the sports in my country. Several goalkeepers in Brazil will go to the goal post and hit it with their hand in each corner when they first enter the field. Many players before entering the field make a sign of the cross on their chest and kiss the grass soon after. These superstitions lead players to think that they are blessing the field and their own game.

Personally, I do not believe in most of these superstitions but they are important because of their presence in my country’s culture and the day to day lives of millions of Brazilians.
At some point in 2010 I became suicidal. It wasn’t something that I did consciously and certainly not something I even recognized until seven years later. Looking back though, I can see the red flags standing out as clear as distance markers on a ski slope. For me, suicide wasn’t an immediate option; I am terrified of death, and I wasn’t going to do anything drastic. I like to refer to this mental state as being ‘long-term suicidal’; following a pattern of behavior that carried life-threatening risks that wouldn’t really reach their natural conclusion until much later.

I didn’t care about myself. I was so tired. My life from the ages of eleven to seventeen had been one exhausting train wreck. My father died, and my mother lost her damn mind shortly afterward. She brought a genuine parade of abusive men into my home and stood behind them no matter what, even when one of them decided to throw me out of the house at fifteen. I was told every day for five years that I was worth nothing—less than nothing, that I was unlovable and destined for a life of genuine loneliness and dissatisfaction. For two years, I latched myself to a boy named Storm who only reinforced these ideas. I was nothing without my boyfriend, and when he left for college, he left me, and I was nothing at all.

I wasn’t a good friend. I was angry, sharp, and prickly like a cactus. I was a leech, an emotional vampire trying to find anybody or anything to hold onto, or at the very least something that would numb the constant feeling of being metaphorically dragged through an ocean of broken glass. It was around this time that I reconnected with an old friend that I had not seen in four years. His name was Matt, and he was serving in Afghanistan. He told me he thought I was pretty, and I married him for that. He was certain he was going to get blown up, so he insisted on an open relationship, and I took full advantage of it.

The basic housing allowance given to military spouses fluctuates based on the area in which you live. If you live in Key West, Florida, you are given $1,900 a month for living expenses. On a bad month, I was paying $1,300. I quit my job, because why should I work? As a result, I had $600 of disposable income every month and unlimited free time. I should have saved the money, I should have worked on giving myself a financial cushion, or worked to get a car, or saved up for college expenses, or literally anything that could be classed as ‘responsible.’
Instead, I developed a cocaine habit that my new boyfriend turned me on to.

Red flag number one.

When my husband would visit, I would purposefully antagonize him. He hit me once, and I stayed with him, despite vowing to myself that I would never be that girl. I rationalized.

Red flag number two.

I engaged in casual sex with people I met four hours before, inviting them back to my home and showing them where I slept. I never locked my door.

Red flag number three.

I walked around the streets alone at night and spent way too much time talking to strangers at four in the morning.

Red flag number four.

I stopped eating. I subsisted on a diet of cocaine, Coca-Cola, and Marlboro Smooth 100’s.

Red flag number five.

I had parties at my house every weekend that grew in size until I didn’t recognize 90% of the people in my home. I still took drugs from them when they offered.

Red flag number six.
So you see, I wasn’t suicidal in the traditional sense. I was just... empty. I wasn’t choosing to die, I was just choosing not to live. Many people in my situation stay on this path. They become addicts. They lose their homes and live on the streets. Sometimes it becomes too much and they take their own lives.

Notably, during this time, I was using my birth name. Casey was a sad girl, full of the void, looking for anything that could fight the tide of ennui that threatened to drag her down into its depths. Casey was a vicious animal, using her massive vocabulary and intellect to hurt people before they could hurt her first. Casey is the girl who got married and divorced in the span of seven months. Casey was a joke, a laughing stock, that girl at the party: the one who drinks too much and takes too many drugs and gets caught having sex with a stranger in a hot-tub. Casey is the girl who is drugged at that party. She is the girl who is taken off alone by someone she doesn’t know and wouldn’t normally want to know and taken advantage of. Casey is the girl who nobody believes when she says she was sexually assaulted because she’s “such a whore anyway.”

Casey wanted to die, so she did.

At the tail end of 2011, Casey decided to leave. Casey met some people on the internet, one of whom lived in South Carolina and needed a roommate. Casey decided to move there, because what use would it be to stay? Casey bought a Greyhound ticket that departed on her nineteenth birthday, two days before Christmas. She would arrive at her new home in her new life on Christmas day.

Shortly before she left, a friend of hers posted on her Facebook that called her out for being a shitty person. He called her a leech and claimed she only stayed until her birthday so she could have her friends to give her free stuff before leaving them all for good. She deleted the post. He posted again, and again, and again, until eventually she had to make a new account. Casey didn’t want people to find her. She was leaving town. Casey was
going to change. She just wanted a clean slate. Casey got on the Greyhound at six in the morning on December 23rd, 2011, high on cocaine. She fell asleep, and when she woke up she wasn’t Casey anymore. I was Alice.

On that bus ride I was alone, aside from the friends I was moving in with. I texted them constantly, threw myself entirely into my new life, and made some strong decisions. No more drugs, none at all. I would not associate myself with people who might have what I was constantly aching for. No more casual sex, no more strangers in bars that I was too young to enter. No more wallowing, no more believing I deserved this, no more self-loathing. I would find one thing I liked about myself and focus on that, finding complementary traits until I got to a point where I could live without constantly feeling like I was bleeding.

I would do this externally, and then move on to internal self-love. To do that, I had to metaphorically kill my former self. I didn’t like Casey very much. I didn’t like who she became. I spent that bus-ride holding a private funeral for the girl I was. I was distancing myself mentally from her thought patterns, deciding who I wanted to be, and what I wanted out of my new life and my fresh start.

Over the next seven years, I let in certain people who knew Casey when she was alive, sometimes reaching out to those that tried to help, but leaving the others who only wanted to harm out. I refocused myself and planned for the future again. I didn’t realize that I had stopped doing that; I didn’t realize I had forgotten how at some point. I had one last rocky relationship before finding someone supportive and kind and loving. The kind of person who loved me so much that I eventually learned to follow their example and love myself too.

I built up a protective shell of false ego that eventually turned into the real thing.
I decided that I wanted to help people like me; the vulnerable, the alone. I started college with the express goal of becoming a teacher. Casey had teachers in high school that walked her through the worst of it, that got her through graduation before Casey imploded on herself like a dying star. I want to do what they did: provide the weak and faithless with just one person who genuinely cared.

I didn’t think about it as killing myself until recently, after I talked through the whole ordeal with my therapist. We spoke about strength, what I had done, and the process I as Alice took to cremate Casey and rise from her ashes. I had given myself the opportunity for rebirth, for growth. I worked on forgiving her for the things she had done; I worked on forgiving myself for having to kill her.

I know it’s not suicide in the traditional sense, but I figured that if I was going to give up my life anyway, I might as well try something different. Move away, change my name, be someone else. When I was suicidal, I almost followed that instinct to its tragic end. Instead I tried to live, albeit as a different person. Why wouldn’t I?

At that point I had nothing to lose, and everything to gain.
I NEED A HAIRCUT

BY BRITTANY ALFORD

MY HAIR RESTED IN TANGLED NESTS AROUND MY HEAD
AND WHISPERED INTO MY EARS
THE SAME WAY YOU WOULD
FOG MY EARDRUMS WITH WET
DAYDREAMS—

IT TICKLED.
IT PULLED AT MY ROOTS.
IT RIPPED MY SCALP—STRAND BY STRAND
ENDS OF THE FRAYED
SPARK PLUGS THAT USED TO CONNECT US.

IT CARESSED MY CHIN AND
COILED AROUND MY NECK UNTIL
IT SUFFOCATED ME.
IT KNEADED THE CREVICES BETWEEN
MY SHOULDER BLADES,

AND DETACHED
EACH OF MY VERTEBRAE
INTO TINY DESOLATE ISLANDS
THAT NO ELECTROMAGNETIC
SOS
COULD REACH.
Urchin  by Anne Kelley

The ocean claimed me,
   dragged me beneath the sea foam
   to bury my limbs
   into the cold sand
   like coral

   Yet my neon arm floaties refused,
   spit me back under the sky
   so that I could breathe
   that second, third crashing wave
   whose salt lick breath tickled my lungs

I learned early that the sea takes what it wants,
decides what belongs where
   and puts me there:
   under the waves
   with sand between my tooth
   and salt under my eyes.

   Later, after I shed my floats,
   I went back to the sea
   to be sorted again, or
   to find the creature that the ocean made of me;
   with broken shells for nails.

   That current, quietly violent,
   took the shore from my feet,
   pulled me into its salty swell
   and made sleep
   crash over my eyes.

   I floated,
   half held by salt,
   and sinking
   into the yawning waters
   where not even corals can breathe.
Albania is a small European country, not very popular, but overwhelmingly beautiful. Our culture is one of the richest and our story one of the most ancient. From the beginning of our civilization, Albanian culture has been constantly evolving to adapt to new ways of living. However, the essence of our culture has been sacredly passed on generation to generation like the most prized gift you could give to your child. Our culture is our temple, our identity, and the paint that draws on the canvas of our personality. And part of this culture are superstitions.

Albanians have always been obsessed with marriages. We love getting married, going to weddings, eating in weddings and dancing. However, we love nothing more than deciding which partner is going to have the upper hand. How do we do this? Well, whoever steps on the other person’s foot first will take the lead on the other one’s life. Something else we love about marriages is deciding whether the bride will bring sweetness in the partner’s life or not. This is determined by the way she bites the cake that is offered to her by the husband’s mother. If crumbles fall off the cake it means she won’t be able to make his life sweet.

Another superstition that is very famous in Albania is “the shoe” superstition. The shoe is basically our way of defining bad luck. If your shoes untie while you’re walking it means that something bad is about to come your way. Additionally, if your shoes smell after a long day of walking, it means that someone close to you is going to die since the smell of dirty shoes is so disgustingly hard. Ridiculous right?! At the end of the day I hope that these superstitions are just that—superstitions, because we all have smelly shoe days.
SOUTHERN STIGMAS
BY SAMUEL F. BAKER
I began my education like most other people, in elementary school. I did my work, made some friends, and went home to repeat it all the next day. However, as I matured, I began to notice something that I had never truly appreciated until my senior year. Unlike the other schools in my area being majority white, I went to a majorly African American high school.

I was born in 1997 and began elementary school as soon as I was able. However it wasn’t until middle school that I began to see the issue with South Carolina and some of the people here. When I began seventh grade I attended Williams Middle School, and this is where I began to see exactly what being a certain race in South Carolina meant. The other two schools in the area were Sneed and South Florence, both majority white. My school, the third of the trio, was the only majority African American school in the area. I played on both the football and baseball teams during my years in middle school and this is where the racial tensions began to rear their ugly heads.

One night, while playing in a football game, I got my first experience with the racial problems in my city. After a particularly rough quarter, my team was down by one touchdown and we were three yards from the goal line. We pushed through and one of our offensive members was able to dive across the end zone. The stands exploded. Our side cheered and split the air with a cacophony of applause, but the other side did the exact opposite.

Fans jeered, booed and made obscene gestures towards our stands to show their disapproval. That’s when it happened, a steel-jacketed word bullet flying from the mouth of the white quarterback and hitting the ears of our jubilant, African American running back. Upon the impact of the verbal shot, his expression immediately changed from jubilance to fury.

In an instant, our running back broke into a sprint towards his adversary and tackled him, stripping him of his helmet and replacing his face mask with a set of knuckles. I heard the same thing everyone else had, but it hadn’t affected me at all. I heard that sort of language all the time from distant family and close friends. I didn’t think any word held any different sort of weight at the time because I had grown up hearing things like that all the time under a context that was not harmful towards me. Everyone else didn’t hold the same sentiment that I did.

The first to get involved were the players, then the coaches, then the fans. The once-organized game between two competing schools of people had devolved into a gladiatorial arena. I remember watching as people beside me sprinted towards the brawl as I stood in horror, confused about what was actually happening. My parents shouted at me to get off the field right as I caught a glance of the local police driving onto the field in the direction of the slugfest.

The fight was by far the worst of what I witnessed during my time in middle school. My friends had thought of it as a fight
started by white people who later asked why the black people had gotten so angry and violent. Most of my friend group was black. At the time I didn’t agree with them. I thought that it was idiotic to fight over a single word that was shouted in the heat of the moment. The word held no meaning to me, after all my family used it all the time, so why it would hurt anyone to begin with was beyond me.

A second incident that echoed with the same kind of hatred happened just a year later. It was senior year and my brother and I had just arrived at school. We began to walk towards the door of the school and noticed that the wall of our baseball clubhouse had been covered with a large white sheet. We took notice of it and made a mental note to explore what resided under the sheet when we went to practice. After school, I met with my brother and we walked towards the dugout. The shouting reached our ears before we had a chance to investigate the sheet. We approached the dugout, a near-holy place that housed my brother and I over four years, where we had made our best friends and learned some of our greatest skills.

Our coach stood inches away from a black player’s face, saying he had no proof that it was the other school that had done it and that nothing could be done. The player exclaimed that it was bullshit, and that “we always take this kind of crap without retaliation”. My brother and I walked past the group of players that had gathered in front of the sheet to investigate for ourselves. We lifted the white sheet and discovered exactly what you’d expect to find under such a garment. There it was, staring at us in bold black paint— the dreaded six-letter word that’s only known by its first letter.
An opponent school had broken in and vandalized our home turf with the harshest word they could muster and our school was forced to sweep it under the rug because we lacked proof of who had done it. My brother and I soon began to realize that the reason our team was always looked down upon was because of race. It was because the majority of the team was black. We realized then and there that different races come with different hardships, and every race had their own unique struggle.

By college I had begun to realize the fault in the state and its people. I realized that other white people around me held the same hatred that our enemy schools had the night of the fateful fight. It was a moment of introspection, of taking a step back and seeing my place among the rest of those around me. I had to separate myself from them. It was when I saw the state of my community and how it affected my friends that I began to make an effort to educate myself. I wasn’t going to fall into the same hole that everyone else in this state seems to have grown accustomed to. I started by going back to that middle school football fight, looking up the other side of the story, and really sinking my teeth into the other side of the issue; the side I will never be apart of.

I told myself to view situations from another person’s skin. I stopped making assumptions about people based on their skin color. I stopped asking about the skin color of those people that I didn’t know. And with continued practice and making a habit of these simple things, I changed myself. Upon reflection, I believe that in my youth I had also held some form of resentment towards people of another color. So the question that stuck out in my mind was, why? Why had I viewed fellow humans as different enough from me to automatically warrant different behavior? The only thing that I could deduce was the color of their skin.

Somewhere between middle and high school I had absorbed the hate from those that surrounded me when I was outside of school. I had become prejudiced to people of color. It was at that very moment that I realized just how much my surroundings had affected me, and I was disgusted. I immediately forced myself to change my ways. I silenced thoughts and prejudices that had been grafted into my mind by some foreign entity. I actively made the choice to stop judging people. I struggled and fought for over a year during my senior year of high school to correct myself and change my way of thinking to something that I was proud enough to write about.
Looking back at my previous mindset, I am disgusted and quite frankly appalled at the way I used to think. It took time and a lot of effort to pluck this seed of corruption from my mind, allowing me to completely destroy it forever. Every time that I began to judge someone, I reprimanded myself. I thought long and hard about things before I said them. I chose to view things from each side and then make my decisions, instead of simply looking at it though my own lens. As I write out these words and proclaim outwardly that I used to be racist, I feel a sense of pride and hope for the rest of the corrupted. I plucked out the very essence of my being and molded it how I saw fit. Sometimes I had to pound it into submission if it didn’t want to cooperate with me. I punched, kicked, screamed and cried until I had finally come out the other side as someone that I was proud to look at in the mirror. If I was able to correct years of racism and prejudices, then anyone is able to do it.

I only speak about this now because, as I look around I see the divide between the races becoming more and more defined. I see the excuse, “It’s how I was raised” being tossed around. To that I say, anyone is able to change their character and no one decides who you are. The only person that is holding onto those prejudices is you. In times like this we deserve to feel safe and connected to other people, and judging based on skin color, sexual orientation, or religion, dramatically limits you from growing, not only as a person, but as a part of a movement larger than yourself. A movement to treat all humans on this planet as equals, regardless of their race, sexual orientation, class, age, and yes, even political affiliation. We will never truly reach our full potential as a race unless we notice our differences and embrace them while simultaneously weaving them into everyday life.

I’d like to acknowledge that not every transformation will be as dramatic as mine, but every little change in the right direction is a step towards making the world a better place for everyone. Take time out of your day to interact with someone of a different culture. Ask them questions about how they live, learn about where they are from, and ask about how they feel. In the end, if we follow simple practices like these we will end up connecting more with the people around us, fighting for the right side, and one day we may even be able to abolish all this unprecedented hatred.
“The only person that is holding onto those prejudices is you.”
Dipsomaniac by Justin Joy

(After Francisco Goya’s “Saturn Devouring His Son”)

"First you take a drink, then the drink
takes a drink, then the drink takes you."
- F. Scott Fitzgerald

On a day smelling of ice and sterile
glass with a sun-stained
sky outside, I—we poured
the first, consumed
by the idea of
beginning—again,
and in the dark
you come alive, bronzed
breast, eyes bulging,
mouth gaping to gorge
on grain
alcohol, our tongue
flailing like the
arm of a clock,
ticking the time to the second—
the third drink of
whiskey or bourbon
from the bottle
like some holy chalice.
Yet we are dying—
you desire motion and I
stillness. With teeth red,
bite by bite—
bit by bit you
devour me—
and I, willing host, climb
unrestrained into
the maw of the wild
beast I’ve become.
While The Fireworks
by Jacob Anderson

A marginalized stop sign says his angles are too flat
While the red is fading and the blue lights chirp innocuously;
"Move along, nothing to see here"
Or speak about
Or unionize.

Inequality like a flag, burnt at the stake
Held up at liberty amidst gun violence on the 4th.

"Don't start no fires,"
Mama says.
She's tired of puttin' em out
And she's runnin' out of flood water
And plagues
And disaster
And genocide.

Heaven birthed a miracle and misnamed it
Disassociation with the guilty few
She put it on me, so I put it on you
As if the blood bath washed me up
Knowing my Sunday's best is stained
At the heart of it all
I wish they'd been right.

"Don't you just love A*****?"
All in all, I don't but I do
Because love
Keeps movin'.
BEHIND THE PALE LINES

BY JUSTIN JOY
The first time was hard. I was sixteen, and while I ripped open the new pack of razor blades, my parents were downstairs completely unaware. I remember having trouble pulling the blades apart, but not because I was nervous. No. I was actually very calm. The trouble came from the oil that was on the blades to keep them from rusting and to maintain a straight, sharp edge. Now armed with my piece of steel, I climbed into the shower and dragged the blade across my upper forearm—not too deep since I was just starting and didn’t want to hurt myself too badly.

At first, the cut didn’t hurt. I watched the blood seep from the fresh wound and I remember marveling at how thin the cut was for the amount of blood that came from it. I did two more cuts next to the first and the blood from each began to mingle. I put my arm into the tub water to wash away the blood and that’s when the pain kicked in.

In the coming months I would come to accept that I was depressed, and I spent some time trying to understand that, and myself I guess. My medication was cutting and drinking. I cut every part of my arms and wrists, my thighs, even my chest until at one point I had 1000 cuts. Even now, I can’t quite put my finger on why I became depressed. The things I loved slowly began to feel like a burden. I was jaded with playing soccer and always tired from lack of sleep. I drank too much and always felt left out of my friend group. The girls I liked in high school either didn’t feel the same way, or worse, agreed to go out with me only to break up with me for one of my friends.

Through all this I kept coming back to the same question: What was wrong with me?

This all came to a boiling point in the summer between my junior and senior year. I became something of a hermit. Before this year and my depression, I would be at my friend’s house every weekend and we would play video games later than we should have. During the week we would go out for food or sit at Starbucks talking for hours, but during the summer where I went dark, I ignored my friend's phone calls and texts. Food lost all taste, and things I once cared about left me feeling hollow. I spent my days watching Achievement Hunter on YouTube or playing video games by myself. During the night, I mixed my dad’s Heineken with sour watermelon PowerAde or mixed my mom’s rum with Dr. Pepper while laying in the bed staring at the ceiling fan or reading to escape my own life.

During the summer I had nothing to do and no one around. In my free time my depression slowly dragged me to the idea of suicide, but because I’m the type of person who overthinks everything, I wanted to kill myself in a spectacularly creative way. So I experimented. For my first attempt, I poured bleach into a tealight candle holder that was relatively the size of a shot glass and downed it. It burned, leaving an acrid taste in my mouth which no amount of spitting or drinking water could get rid of. I realized that was not the way I could go out. Before giving up on the idea completely, I put the bleach away and poured myself a shot of Drano. It was thicker than the bleach, coating the inside of my throat, and made me sick to
my stomach, but I couldn’t go to hospital or tell my parents. So, I self-medicated with rum as I laid by the toilet trying to force myself to throw the cleaner back up.

My next attempt, I mixed two household chemical cleaners that explicitly said not to mix and locked myself in the bathroom. The room filled up with this putrid yellow smoke and while I felt lightheaded and began to cough, it ultimately didn’t have the effect I desired. This led to me drive to Walmart and buy a package of cookie dough and rat poison. I got home, mixed up the cookie and added the crushed pellets of poison. I loved baking, and still do. So I delicately rolled the dough into balls and then flattened them slightly. Right before I put them in the oven, the thought struck me that these cookies needed sprinkles. So, with newly added sprinkles, I put the cookies in the oven. They came out a pallid green color and smelled terrible; tasted even worse. I managed to eat two with the help of a glass of milk before I began to feel sick and threw them in the trash. I tried to clean the baking sheet, but no matter how hard I scraped the pan, the burnt-on pieces wouldn’t come off and I was forced to throw it away.

Then, my senior year started and I found myself trapped in limbo. I was not getting any better or any worse. I went from a straight-A student to barely making passing grades and showing up to school without supplies and sleeping through all my classes. I failed my first class, Probability and Statistics, and realized I couldn’t do school anymore. So I stopped going. I would get in my car and drive down the road where I would wait for my parents to leave for work and then come home and do nothing the whole day. When my parents got home I would retreat upstairs and wait to intercept the phone call from the school. I got away with this for a week before my parents finally got to the phone before I did. Naturally, they sat me down and we had a talk.

I told them I was dropping out of school. My plan was to either get my GED or go to summer school. They accepted this with the requirement that I go see a therapist. The therapy made me realize that I had to change myself for the better. I opened up to my parents and stopped pushing my friends away. I stopped trying to fit the image the world wanted me to be and figured out what I wanted from myself. I realized I didn’t want to play soccer for the rest of my life, but rather, to work my mind instead of my body. I had always been drawn to writing and the worlds, characters, and stories that I created. This is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and I still do.

I’m better now, and I joke about being a functioning alcoholic. While I do not regret what I’ve been through, I wish I could go back and do things differently, and yet the past cannot be changed. These are the moments I have to live with, and for that, I am living. It can only stand as a reminder to myself and a story for others to learn from. I simply hold it in my mind, keeping my past close to my skin. These pale lines on my arms will keep me true to my desires, always reminding me that tomorrow is another day for moving forward.
In my family, well-wishing doesn’t occur before the actual celebration or else bad luck will follow them. For instance, baby showers are unheard of. When my aunt became pregnant with her first child we were not supposed to congratulate her until the baby was born. This was difficult for me! I am a German-American, my oma immigrated from Germany when she was a teen, and with building our family she brought her superstitions with her. Being unable to congratulate someone before the event happens because in German culture we have a superstition that if you wish someone congratulations in advance you are assuring that you will survive until that day. This is the heart of most of German superstitions. We can’t act that we are sure that anything will happen. Wishing somebody luck actually turns their luck the other way. Wishing people luck before the day of the event basically increases the probability of that person dying.

We don’t wish a Happy New Year until the new year has started under the same guise. Before midnight, on the 31st of December, we wish each other “einen guten rutsch” which translates to “a good slide” into the new year. If we see each other for the last time in the old year, it brings us all good luck into the new year. After midnight and the following days, we continue to wish each other a Happy New Year. We believe that things will inevitably fail if someone says they won’t. The perfect example of this is what my mom and oma say, “du sollst den tag nicht yor dem abend loben” meaning don’t praise the day before the evening.

Finally, weddings are the most outstanding superstition that I can think of. Before the food is officially served at the reception, everybody files outside and circles around a large pile of various porcelain objects. This pile mostly consists of plates and other dishware, toilet seats and lids, a couple of objects I never recognize, and of course a whole toilet in the center of it all. The bride and groom position themselves in the center of the porcelain circle and together they pick up the toilet and let it fall to the ground, shattering it to pieces. With the cue, everybody joins together in the porcelain shattering, throwing plates and toilet seats until there is nothing left but dust and broken dishes. Afterwards, everyone watches as the couple works together to clean up the mess that everyone made. It represents how the new couple will need to work together for the rest of their lives.

My oma has instilled these superstitions into our family, and even though she practices so many of them religiously, they aren’t all huge part of my life. However, they are tradition. These practices are pieces of my heritage and I always smile knowing that I have these wonderful, and sometimes silly, connections to my roots that I can partake in forever.
Daughters
by Alice Kitchen

we are the daughters of Persephone
braiding flowers in our hair,
though our skin is chilled by the winter wind.

we hear the tales of her rebirth
we watch as they transform into
warning lights for pretty girls
"Keep from the shadows" they say
"or you'll be dragged into the maw of hell."

we know better
we know our mother well.
yes, she walked in innocence and beauty
but she also designed the deadliest flowers
to have the sweetest scents.

the historians would call it rape,
but she walked into the underworld with open eyes
and a spine as straight as a thousand-year tree.
she grew roots in untamable land,
and she ate the seeds herself.

they named her 'the maiden'
she planted seeds and brought new life.
she turned those seeds into her escape,
greeted death like a lover
and chose the name 'destroyer.'

we are the daughters of Persephone
and we wait for winter,
sucking pomegranate juice from our fingertips.
ON PAINÉ’S FERMENT
Kansas City, MO

by Connor Uptgrove

Falling beneath the branches,
I landed on the two-for-five blankets
that bred the static fuzz
that clung to my socks.
My hand met and sketched
the shape of a tree on yours.
And when we kissed,
the hairs below my watch rose
as though lightning had struck
the metallic dendroid we sat below.
But, it was a cloudless sky
that drenched us with light.
You used my chest as a pillow,
my lungs rising and falling.
Oxygen: a casualty of breath.
And the first leaf fell
when our fingers locked again,
knotted like the twisted joints
of stainless-steel reflecting
the rays of warmth.
The tree with leaves never grown
became an icon of the August heat
like a green glow across a dock.

But other leaves fell.
During the winter, I itch,
fermented by the dying garden.
And when I drive across the Hill
filled with Golden Trumpet trees
and the lawn covered with frost,
until spills of leaves
stop at the fresh snow,
I see just another tree.
We’ve all had that one friend.

That one friend that was terrible for us. The friend that was toxic, but for some reason we still wanted to keep.

If you haven’t, then you will.

It was sophomore year of high school. I was in a video production class. This was the first time I hadn’t been in band for fourth block in two years. I was around a new environment of people without any of my band friends and sat at a table of people who were merely acquaintances. I had known most of them since first or second grade, but not very well.

After a few weeks of sitting together, I naturally grew closer to those at the table and over time became best friends with the girl with long blonde hair and warm brown eyes named Bridget.

Bridget and I were the kind of friends everyone at the school knew as being inseparable and exactly alike. We were friends from this first semester of sophomore year until our senior year of high school. We had been acquaintances since first grade and always gotten along, but this time was different. This time we basically lived together.

Bridget and I said the same things, went to each other’s houses every day after school, went shopping together, went to eat together, and experienced all of high school and all of our firsts together. We were the kind of friends that laughed together and cried together, who knew all of each other’s secrets: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

We were coined the “good girls” of the school. We didn’t drink or go out to parties, we didn’t sleep around or say curse words or do anything else that could be considered bad. We just enjoyed life together in the simple ways. We had girl’s days doing face masks, watching a movie with popcorn, and going out to eat. We spent time with our families together and got a thrill out of riding around with the windows down playing music. We never needed large crowds or drugs, something synonymous with my high school, because our friendship was enough to keep us happy.

Then, things started to change. Bridget entered a relationship with a guy who just so happened to be the biggest player in the school. He was this football star with huge muscles and a lot of self-confidence. He collected girls like playing cards, and too innocent to know any better, Bridget fell for him. After dating Chapman, Bridget was never the same. He took every bit of her self-worth and happiness, and when he left her, she acted like she was alone in the cold. Eventually she resorted to anything that would make her happy, if only for a minute.

She changed a lot, but she was still my best friend, so I stuck with her through it all.
Before Chapman, everyone knew Bridget as the happy girl who had enough love and kindness to spare, but afterwards… it didn’t appear she had a sliver of that niceness left. Beginning with her revenge for Chapman, Bridget eventually sought out revenge for everything in life that wasn’t perfect. She began attacking and hurting people, eventually even innocent people, and it was only so she could feel in control.

Bridget began going to parties and drinking way too often, even drinking and driving. She was okay with trying anything, no matter the consequences, and she also began cheating on everyone she dated. She turned into the person that other guys cheated on with. She was a homewrecker, and that was only the beginning of her carcinogenic crusade.

Although this new behavior changed several people’s perception of her, but I still loved her regardless of her flaws: I knew who Bridget was underneath all of this, and why she had changed. I could look at her and see the hurt she felt as I watched her brown eyes turn cold. I felt sorry for her as well as all the people she was hurting. I tried to reach out to her and help her find her way back to who she was, but nothing helped. She was too far gone.

After several attempts to help Bridget, I finally gave up and accepted that she was changed. Although I knew she wasn’t a good person, and saw her hurt several of my other friends, I still maintained our friendship and loved her through it all.

However, things didn’t stay contained at the level they were at. Before I knew it, I would see the names of guys I was talking to in Bridget’s texts. Although she always had an excuse, deep down I knew what was going on. On top of worrying about her health and safety while she made unsafe decisions involving sex, drugs, and alcohol, I now had to worrying about myself and my relationships as she began to attack them. Her newfound negative lifestyle hurt me the way that secondhand smoke does. Even though I stayed out of the lifestyle she was choosing, by staying near her I could still feel her smoke filling my lungs.

Eventually I got so frustrated that I chose to be the one to hurt her first, instead of the other way around. A guy who she had been seeing stopped talking to her and began messaging me. At first reluctant, I eventually started messaging him back more and more until I couldn’t deny the fact that I had feelings for him. Although I felt somewhat guilty, I also felt justified in my actions because she had done the same to me for so long.

When Bridget found out, it was awful. She hated me and trashed my name as much as she could. Even constantly reminding myself of the things she had done to me and pain she caused me. I couldn’t alleviate the pain I felt for retaliating against her and no amount of apologizing helped. I still felt terrible and stopped responding to the guy, but there was no justifying what I had done. The only thing I could do was work to clean up the mess I’d made, we were still friends after all.

After a while, we moved past it and got back to being good friends the way we had been. Everything was fine for a long time, until suddenly it wasn’t.
One night on a page known for broadcasting crazy college parties, I found a video of Bridget along with my other best friend, India, in bed with the guy I had been dating. All half-naked and covered in the same shade of lipstick, there was no denying what had been going on. I was disgusted, devastated, and outraged.

I was still the kind of girl who didn’t drink or party and who stayed home when they went out. Knowing that this was what they did while I was at home and they thought I would never find out made me livid. These were my two best friends. They were the people who I would have done anything for, and I couldn’t believe what they had done to me. I didn’t talk to them for weeks and after word got around in school about what had happened, her reputation was ruined a little more than it already was.

I tried to move on and months later, we were on speaking terms again, but never friends, just mere acquaintances as though the past few years hadn’t even happened. The next guy I talked to fell subject to her as well, and then she took him to our senior prom. By the time high school ended, I decided not to have any kind of relationships with guys until I moved away. Every guy I had ever been with had become addicted to Bridget’s personal brand of nicotine, and it felt impossible to get away from this pain while I stayed in the same place as them.

After moving away and going to college, I was slow but finally able to move beyond my friendship with her. I found two supportive best friends who were there for me through it all. They helped me through the trauma I faced while loving and supporting me. They were never the kind of friends I had to hide my boyfriend from. I finally got rid of Bridget’s nicotine and felt as though I could breathe again. I learned that friendship should never make you feel unworthy.

Looking back today, I should’ve left her. I should’ve given her up when she hurt me the first time… or perhaps when she started hurting others. Reading this, the signs are obvious, and it may seem as though I was responsible for my own torture, but when you’re in a friendship like this sometimes it’s all you know. It might be easier to stay through the bad times because you remember and hope for the good, but with someone like Bridget, those good times never come back.

I know it seems hard, and this kind of friendship may be all you know, but there is more out there and you will find it.

After Bridget, I realized that there is more out there. Anyone else in my position knows that eventually we will all find that better friend because it’s what we all deserve. It’s hard to warn people not to fall victim to a toxic friendship, and sometimes it takes a few hurtful times to realize what we deserve, but there is always a line of no return.

In a relationship like that, red flags were everywhere and it was up to me to notice them. But it was also up to Bridget to no be that kind of person. Be aware of your actions and words. Never make someone feel unworthy. It doesn’t increase your self-worth, it just makes you a cancer.
BE AWARE OF YOUR ACTIONS AND WORDS. NEVER MAKE SOMEONE FEEL UNWORTHY.
We had to leave the apartment late. I don’t remember the exact time because the nerves were encompassing every synapse in my brain—but I think it was around 2:15 in the morning. The air was thick with humidity. The August heat seeped inside of my black jeans and made sweat drip down from the underbelly of my bra and into my hoodie threads. Adorned in black from head to toe, all four of us were hiding under the cover of nightfall. I kept calm, trying to reduce sweating as much as possible. This part of the mission was quiet.

My legs were cramping from bending over, trying to look like a stray cat, or, something more akin to those giant birds of prey found hovering over dead animals. Buzzards? I don’t know if that’s the actual name, but it’s what my granddad called them. That’s what I felt like while trying to blend in with the metal roofing I was hunched over. Veronica was sitting a couple feet behind me, and she didn’t make a sound. Every time I looked over, she was looking down at her phone. Maybe it was a good thing I stayed on the roof.

Aside from the hollering bar patrons next door, and the occasional rustle of the creatures fucking with me and laughing at my heart rate from the bushes below—the world was set in this ominous frozen state. It felt weird to be breathing. I was on lookout. My hands were still trembling, and my mind kept disobeying orders, as my eyes became a glazed-over projector echoing my cowardice.

“Brit, go.” Chase and Myles both were pushing me to jump down, with wire cutters in their hands. My body was stagnant, but my mind speed could beat the world record for fastest land animal. Cheetah? Probably.

A few seconds earlier, I had just watched my best friend jump down from the building, and into a concrete pen. I remember my heart stopping, and my breath-taking shelter in my lungs. He hit the ground on his feet and fell backwards into the cement. His bones made an awful audible clank on the rock, but his widespread pupils let me know that he was too coked out to feel it. I guess that’s one advantage to an addiction. Myles could see something in me in that moment that he hadn’t seen before; I was afraid. The strong and fearless tiger woman he had always known was hiding in this quivering shell.

The storage units were under construction, luckily enough, so Myles dragged a plastic mesh sack full of hay over to where my landing point was estimated. I could see every pale, skinny muscle in his body pulled into overdrive to haul the bundle. But my body still wouldn’t let me jump.
Myles and I bonded from the first moment we saw each other in a creative writing class freshman year of college. And two years later, I saw that he was looking for someone to move into his shared apartment over the one social media app we followed each other on. I moved in a month later, and I have never wanted to live with anybody else. I would say that I’m not sure how we bonded so quickly, but in reality, I can probably piece it together.

Throughout my life, my family had never really been... normal, or complete in any way. Very far from perfect. From the day I was brought home from the hospital, I lived with my grandparents. I’m not sure if it was because my parents truly weren’t ready to have a child, or the possible fact that no matter how hard they tried during their pregnancy, they just couldn’t want me. I don’t blame them for that; 20 is an incredibly less than ideal age to have a child. I can’t even begin to imagine what that would be like, and I’ve got two years on her now. I don’t think I want children either. Living with wolves didn’t teach me how to love an infant. Only how to string them up by their fur, and skin them in a drunken, violent haze. Myles’ mother was too busy with a pipe between her lips and stars in her eyes to even see the demons inside her lover—Myles’ father. He put a loaded 12-gauge shotgun to the base of his chin and pulled the trigger. She couldn’t even stay sober long enough to see those same demons transfer to her son. The same way my father couldn’t see the fear and anger in my eyes when he put a Glock 90 to his temple while screaming I’ll do it, Tina. I’ll do it right in front of your daughter. The same way my mother didn’t run over to me to hold me, or take me away from all of it, but instead she placed a box of 100 golden bullets in his lap and demanded he pull the trigger. Right in front of me.

That’s probably one of the reasons we fit together so naturally—we both never really felt a familial love from the ones who were supposed to tuck us in at night under the blanket of bedtime stories, and the embrace of emotional intelligence. So in the moments we found each other, we found shoulders of clarity and understanding—compassion and reciprocated love. Someone to talk to; someone to hold my hand and walk beside me as I led our expedition through gunpoint memories, and tear-soaked hiding spots in my bathroom shower.

Every night we meet in the kitchen and joke about how many times that day we felt like jumping out of a 12th story window as we cross our arms, and dodge the swinging fridge doors, pouring soy and almond milk in each of our bowls of cinnamon-sprinkled Cheerios.

“Have you ever been arrested?” I slur out through a spoonful of O’s in my mouth.

Myles purses his lips and squints his eyes in response, “Pssh, no,” the toaster flings two pieces of crisp bread 3 inches into the air, “what kind of drug dealer do you think I am?”
“A dumb one.” I smile and pass him the single butter knife out of the repurposed Whitman’s chocolate box we put all of our utensils in from the move. He took the knife from my hand with a shrill mimic, dips the knife in a jar of chunky peanut butter (mine, by the way), and lashes my chest with the nutty weapon.

“Says the one with nut all over her chest,” he giggles over my gasp. Every night at approximately 9pm our kitchen turns into a wrestling ring where peanut butter and laughter coat the backsplash. I wouldn’t want it any other way. After we both tap out, and are laying cross-legged over one another like two rogue pretzels mended together, he puts both of his warm hands on my cheeks.

“I need to ask you something,”

“Yes. I will marry you, Myles. But there are rules: We have to be open and poly, you have to ask me in an overly-dramatic and ridiculous way—if I don’t like it, I’m gonna say no, and you’ll have to do it all over again, multiple times. Then, we have to have a celebration ceremony every single year. Oh, and Bean gets to be the ring bearer.”

He drops his hands onto the floor and flails his body in an uncontrollable outburst of laughter, “OKAY, yes! That is all perfect, duh. Except, I want Bean to officiate the wedding. Our son is way too perfect to not have the spotlight with us. Plus, his constant meows are so many octaves louder than anybody I’ve ever met.” I nod my head in agreement, as I grab the tail of our little happy boy licking peanut butter off of any surface that will have him.

“But seriously, if I ever do get arrested, will you bail me out?”

“Myles,” I pause for emphasis, “who do you think is going to be in that cell with you?” His smile was bigger than his lips could conceal. “You’re the only real family I have. You’re my… sister,” there was a sparkle in his eyes that only grew bigger by the second, “I love you, biiiiiiitch—” I started to sing as he cut me off, chiming in, “I ain’t gon’ neva stop lovin’ you, biiiiiiiiitch.”

Funny thing about dying; it makes you do a lot of stupid shit. The same goes for boredom. I guess that’s how we ended up pulling this heist on a storage unit with our new roommate and his Russian girlfriend we had just met a month ago from my summer job at a local Italian restaurant. A few months ago, Chase’s mom was diagnosed with stage 4 brain cancer. The primary motor cortex, or M1, is one of the principal brain areas involved in motor function. This is the part of the brain that is responsible for the ability to create with hands, walk, and talk. The cancer had already enveloped hers.
Buried deep in the abandoned storage unit was a hand-knit Ohio State blanket she gave to Chase as a kid. And there was no way in hell he was going to let a piece of her mildew away in a metal box. That's where the wire cutters came into play.

I was supposed to be down there with them in the pits of the mission, but something inside of me paralyzed my legs from jumping down into the concrete. Even though the sparkle in Myles’ eyes told me that he wouldn’t let me get hurt.

After what seemed like the fifth hour of crouching on top of the roof of the storage unit, Chase and Myles run back to where we are, and begin to throw up to me white garbage bags filled with forgotten clothes, a flat-screen TV, and the tools of the night. I was stretched across the roof, and dangling over, looking at the trenches of the cement pit. I helped them back on top of the roof before we had to then throw the goods down to Myles, who had jumped down first, again, on to the grassy side of the steel cages.

“Okay, you have to do it this time, Britta,” he promised to never let anything happen to me. I lay on my stomach, between the creaking metal bars and pine straw, before swinging my legs over the side, and slowly lowering myself down into a dangle.

“You have to let go, it’s okay. It’s just a three-foot drop,” he promises, again.

“Dude, you’re over six foot tall. That shit is like 9-fucking-feet below me!”

I breathe. I close my eyes... and I let go.

He said he had me, but our timing was off.

His hands were on my legs, but the minute I let go was the same one he picked to wipe sweat from his forehead.

In the minute-long time frame it took for me to hit the ground on my back, I felt at home. I learned how similar freefalling from a building is to trusting a stranger’s promise of monthly rent—or how easy it was to find myself in his rotten-toothed grin. Falling is free. Falling grounds you. Falling is what led me to my family.

We took the bagged goods in our arms, and returned to our primary location, throwing the sacks over barbed wire fences, and climbing back through the holes in the iron chain link fence I cut for us as I led the journey a few hours earlier. We got back to Chase’s dark blue jeep that we had covered with mud earlier in the day as our cover story in case things went south. Veronica wipes the sweat from her brows. She glances at Chase in the driver’s seat, then turns back at Myles and I in the backseat, as I take off all of the sweat-drenched clothes, and Myles rips off the hoodie I spray painted a gold Venus symbol on, and whispers,

“You know if we go to jail, we’ll still be roommates. That’s funny.”
I grew up in a family of three give or take, my mother, my twin sister, and myself. At times I’ve had step-fathers and step-siblings, household pets, and relatives of varying distance, but the only true constants have been the woman that raised me and her daughter I grew alongside. The relative smallness of our family meant I inherited very few traditions or customs, something I accept gratefully, as it’s given me the opportunity to develop my own. However, the unfortunate consequence of my upbringing was that I always felt a little unsure about myself. I hardly knew where I came from, and always struggled with figuring out who I should or could be because of it.

Growing up there were a handful of aspects to my identity that I held dear, the biggest one being that I was born in Alaska. Having moved to North Carolina at the age of eight, it was something I constantly reminisced about. Next, after I’d finished middle school, I decided to go vegan and cut all animal products from my diet. Finally, like many of my friends, I was a deeply devoted fan of movies, comics, and video games. I was, and am, a geeky vegan kid from the frontier state, and until recently that was pretty much it.

Two years ago, I started putting together a family tree. I had a lot of questions about my ancestry, and the then recent birth of my new baby sister spurred me to find as many answers as I could before she started asking questions herself. My maternal grandfather had taken up the same task in the later years of his life, and although I’d managed to inherit his various sources and reference materials, most of what he’d made of them was lost; I started from scratch. After digging through local history books, preserved family records, online databases, and as many spare facts as my mother could recall to me, I’ve been able to build a growing web of 192 ancestors and relatives that traces all the way back to 17th-century England and colonial America. In my research I’ve learned much more than names, dates, and locations.
I’ve found photographs of faces that bear shocking resemblance to my own; I’ve read stories of heroism, and tales of hardship; I’ve even discovered some living relatives, previously unknown but completely accessible through social media, but the most valuable experience I’ve had is discovering just how alike some of my ancestors and I are.

Henry Carleton Lang was my 4th great-grandfather. He was the third of a total nine children, and the first son. Henry was born in Lincoln, Maine, sometime in the year 1815. The Lang family had been native to Maine for three generations, residing previously in New Hampshire following the immigration of Robert Lang (1646-1716) from Devonport, England. As an adult, Henry gained the reputation of a master builder, which he shared with his father. That was something I was really pleased to learn as a kid. To this day, if I’m honest, one of my favorite things to play with is LEGO. Among my more impressive builds were fully-articulated LEGO Transformers that I could easily change from vehicle to robot without any reassembly. I can make nearly anything out of those bricks. I figured that’s a trait I inherited from my biological father who was a carpenter, however in hindsight I might have Henry and his own father to thank for that.
The two eventually moved south, to Sandersville, Georgia, where they helped build a bridge over the Oconee River. I can’t imagine the culture shock of moving from Maine to Georgia in the 19th century, but I think my own travels from north to south are a decent enough reference. In Sandersville, the pair assisted in the construction of the state capitol and governor’s mansion in Milledgeville, but as the Civil War began to foment, the elder Lang returned home to Maine. Henry, however, decided to stay in Sandersville, where he met his wife Nancy Davis and built the county’s second courthouse and the Masonic Hall.

On November 21, 1854, a small fire broke out in the shoe shop of a man named Ebner. His shop was consumed, as was that of a tailor and nearby tavern kitchen. The roof of the courthouse also caught flame, but in an act of heroism or perhaps pride, Henry Lang climbed his way to the roof saved the building that he helped construct. By early 1855, Henry had received a citation and a gift from the town for his bravery, but his efforts were proven inevitably for naught; four months after the initial fire, a second blaze consumed the courthouse and most of Sandersville. What occurred in the remainder of Henry’s life has been lost to time, but it is known that he outlived both parents, seven of his eight siblings, and his wife, and was survived by his only child, Samuel Goodrum Lang, who he named after his father.

Not to be outdone by his father’s heroism, Samuel proved to be a prominent member of the Sandersville community. Born July 16, 1851, he spent a few years after the Civil War in Portland, Maine with relatives, where he worked in a railroad machine shop. After returning to Sandersville, he started a machine shop of his own with partner O.H. Wilt. Through the 1880’s, the two sold and repaired cotton gins, steam engines, and related items. After Wilt left to establish a separate business in 1899, Samuel’s machine shop burned down. Perhaps recognizing what may have been some form of a family curse, a new building was designed and built on the same site in 1900, this time made from brick. Christened as “Lang’s Variety Works,” Samuel saw great success as an entrepreneur and made the Lang name one recognizable throughout Sandersville. I like to think it’s Samuel that gave me a sense of pride in my work.
Samuel was thrice married and fathered six children. He lived to be one of the oldest residents in Sandersville, dying at the age of 84. My own grandfather, William Kennedy Lang, was born May 13th, 1932, and inherited the first name given to his father, and his father’s father—Samuel’s eldest son. Being the oldest member of my family tree that I had ever known personally, and in making an effort in his life to preserve as much information about our ancestors as he could, I owe much of my research to him and give him all due credit for stoking my interest in our shared history.

Like many Langs, my grandfather was born in Sandersville, and like me, he had a keen interest in engineering. At age 17, he enlisted into the U.S. Air Force and served as military police at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. I still some of his guides and manuals, which offer some insightful survival tips as well as a few instructions for making improvised explosives. His service coincided with the Korean War, but he never saw active combat, so I doubt he ever found more than a recreational use for such info. After being honorably discharged, he began working in telemetry at General Dynamics, an aerospace/defense company. During his time there, he did contracted work for the Gemini and Apollo projects at NASA. In 1967, he moved to Bethel, Alaska to work on the White Alice Communications System, a USAF telecommunication network of 80 radio stations that connected remote Air Force sites to command facilities and was, in some cases, used for civilian phone calls. While living in Alaska, he started his own business as an electrical contractor, and later opened a hardware store. Often, he would travel to small villages, sometimes for weeks, to add or repair electrical wiring to their existing buildings. In 1977, his wife Josephine gave birth to their first child together—my mother, Niki.

When I was reading comics like The Amazing Spider-Man and The Fantastic Four as a child, stories of exceptional heroes and brilliant minds seemed like things of fantasy. Yet as an adult, I can say truthfully such characters do exist, and admit with pride that I’m related to them. I am the son of bridge-builders, firefighters, and machine workers. I am the kid from Alaska with big dreams and the confidence to make them a reality, just like my ancestors before me.
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