

An abstract painting with thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of purple, blue, red, and white. The composition is dense and textured, with various colors blending and overlapping. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the painting.

Iconoclast

Spring 2019

Sponsored by the
Daemen College English Department

Iconoclast

The Literary Magazine of Daemen College

Spring 2019

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The Ballad of Two Buffalonian Beloveds // Brian Morreale

Two beloveds on a pleasant summer's day
Nestled in the grass along the bay
As clear, cool water steadily softens crags
"Revelation of Truth through God!" is the battle cry of Bouvier

The ophidian and women forever bound by enmity
A beloved donning two masks of transparency
"Revelation of Truth through God!" is the battle cry of Bouvier
Two beloveds under the mantle of One Holy Trinity

Striking to attack the beloved's limb
Stand guard cherubim and seraphim
"Revelation of Truth through God!" is the battle cry of Bouvier
Buffalo's sacrificial knight allows the venom to take him

The beloved is saved
But the knight was not unscathed
"Revelation of Truth through God!" is the battle cry of Bouvier
He is petrified in time with love enslaved

Dance of the Pegasus // William Olkowski

If you haven't, you must
Close your eyes
Take the time to dance with the Pegasus
In the land of cool breeze,
Laughter and peace
Spinning round and round
The stallions play with no care
Free
Hurry
You must go
Without hesitations
For it will be gone
Soon as you open your eyes
The smell of corruption will return
Structure
Balance
If you haven't, you must
Release and let your mind
Dance with the Pegasus

? // William Olkowski

Feeling unwanted
Old
Used
No one notices that I watch over them, nor do they care
They have no interest in me
All they care about is their text messages, twitters and Facebook
Like it is their master
They are nothing but its slaves
Like if they don't answer
It will not feed them

Why am I here?
Why do I listen to my heartbeat?
Thump, thump
Why won't it just stop?
That would make things easier.

Alone
Even though I am sitting in a crowded room
I constantly glance over everyone as if I am the security system
Making eye contact with a few
But their souls are hollow as a coffin that is waiting for them
They turn away.
Are they ashamed that we crossed paths?

No one to talk to as the room roars louder, but would anyone even listen?
The seat next to mine is empty

No one is looking to fill it
The party is almost over and yet it just begun

I am wanting death
Like an addict wants drugs
Like a baby wants his mama's tit
The empty darkness fills my insides as the brightest day burns my skin

But does it even matter?
Do you even care?
If I leave here tomorrow
Like a tumbleweed in the wind
Like a second passed by a minute passed by an hour passed by a day passed by a week passed by a year
Would it matter?
Would you remember me?

Suicide // William Olkowski

The final solution to my every question
No refund if I buy a ticket
No better alternatives to stop the quotidian pain
Relieving all stress pushing down upon my mind
The sadness finally terminated
The cold I will never feel again
The flow of my broken heart stales
My mouth shuts out the air
My lungs flatten
My blind eyes open
Surrounded by darkness I will never see
Released from the madness of existence
Many tears may roll but easily wiped away
Remembered momentarily
Forgotten forever
Was this the correct answer?
I will never know

Night Awakens

I awake with the moon as the Sun sleeps from the exhaustion of playing.
The stars are the baby bird's nightlight as they slumber.
The grass lays down to rest as there are no clouds to be seen.
The wind whistles to start the party,
as the crickets begin to dance in celebration of the ants hard-work.

A New Day

I sleep with the moon as the Sun begins to play.
The birds chirp to turn off the star's sparkle.
The grass stretches and sweats the morning dew,
as the clouds begin to take their daily jog.
The wind yawns from an exhausting night of partying,
No crickets can be seen
as the ants go to work.

Hummingbird // Mikyla Fisher

Sweet melodies dancing in the skies,
tell me why you halt.
How the wispy clouds coated my eyes and
you were gone.

Descending down plywood aisles,
I call and shout.
Reverberating noise unmatched
by your power.

And open.

To your podium among
beds of flowers.
Of lilies, sweet one,
and chrysanthemums too.

Each they fade.
Vivid essence pouring,
trickling across the sand bed
some creatures call home.

Her Face Fell // Mikyla Fisher

I could see it, tarnished and worn,
like a candle's desire to liquify its home;
eating away molten memories of
homemade cookies made to linger
in an oven that is turned up too high,
or a bouquet of roses left to wither away,
a drought on a rainy day,
fresh cloves in the yard out back
taken to an axe and fallen. All these
scents of sweet nostalgia lingering and leaving
through an air vent only to get
trapped in a heap of dust.

I could see it,
when I spoke those words
that ignited repressed emotions
of a love worn out, and falling down the
neck and shoulders were realities
melting away and ready
to face the present day.

Remembrance // Mikyla Fisher

Tender shoulders
falling in reticence.
Blacked out awareness.
She lay still, desperate,
longing to know what's gone.
Spiraling peaks of fervor
crash
to silent cries
of uncertainty.
The pressure rose,
hands fell, quick
to find the source.
Blared screams of nothingness
bashed on a headboard.
Rage subsided.
Washed out into
muddied piles
of ash.
Clinging to familiarity,
shoulders collapsed
to sobs.

What does it mean to love?
To throw your life away?
We're taught about commitment as being
lost
time without meaning.
We live for ourselves, but dear,
know
that love is a being,
encompassing your body to
tell
you that trust is okay.
It is the breaths lost amongst the air
interacting and
creating
something worth more than
yourself.
Love is every one of us,
but mostly, love is
knowing
without knowing.
It's a sense none of us can truly believe
exists,
and when you find it
you become
whole.
It's the acknowledgement that
Life
Is complex. And together
you discover that it is meant to be
explored
not understood.
That our identities are worth more

than simple constructs
left to define who we are.
Alone, we are ourselves.
Together, we're something more.

Need // Mikyla Fisher

Hushed breaths trapped where
throats could not bear the way
blue light
flickered to the screen and I saw your face.

Brisk brushing of branded skin
conversing.

Perhaps it was your smile,
unmeasured time,
but the light,
it faded into something new.



Untitled // Brooklyn Crockton

The eternal blackness of the abyss; space may be a subject of terror for some, but for me, or, at least, what I thought was me, it was the ever-expansive sea of opportunity and hope. There I sat, looking out at an infinite arrangement of star and planet, separated only by screen and metal. The harsh chrome cockpit of a vessel so strange yet oddly familiar. I felt unceasing pain yet had no recollection of why; immense dread, but without an end to fear.

Then, like a flash, my dreamlike lullaby, cradled among the stars, ended with an abrupt crash. “Surprise!” the crash spoke. Ah, of course. It was my birthday. I was...twenty-nine? Thirty? In all honesty, at that moment, I had no recollection.

As I sat there, puzzled, wondering about my daydream, now so unceremoniously ended by the exclamation of another year of survival on this earth, I started to realize that the chatter among friends drifted from the jovial conversations of a celebration in motion to the worried whispers of those witnessing death.

I looked around, blinking several times. I exclaimed with great energy to assuage worry. “Ha-ha! Sorry guys! You really got me with that one!” They all smiled, and the night continued as many would expect it to. Perhaps not because they believed me, but because each of them, in some small way, would rather have the night go well than work through the troubles that seemed so clearly present.

When I sat down at the table, a small, modest, unassuming birthday cake waited for me. I sat down to join it, and soon my colleagues did the same. “Well Charles,” One of them said “Are you going to blow out the candles?” I looked over with confusion. Charles? Oh right. Though I was Charlie back home—Charlie Wainwright—now I was Charles, a change ushered in by the suits, ties, and cubicles.

My wife sat next to me, a pleasant enough woman named Mira. She held my arm and nodded. “Go ahead, Charles,” she proclaimed flatly, as if delivering a report. I lazily drifted my head forward, and with little more effort than a leaf falling from a tree, extinguished the light of another year of existence. As the night gave way to morning, with the same unremarkable proceedings, now furnished with alcohol and party chatter, I awoke in much the same manner as I always did. *Shower, brush teeth, breakfast, get dressed, go to work.*

It was Saturday. I often went in to work on Saturdays, and, though most of my co-workers knew that, few ever endeavored to meet me. Which is precisely why I worked Saturdays. No noise, no nonsense. A man can scarcely work among the chatter of fools. I had promised Mira I wouldn’t go in, but I think even she knew that I was going regardless. Besides, while my routine did dictate working on Saturdays, I was feeling a bit irregular today. I had made plans to visit my old home town, not an hour’s drive away. I inspected my home one last time before my journey—*keys, wallet, phone.*

In supplementation of my great irregularity, my gaze fell upon a letter on the nightstand, a letter to the United States Space Force. A letter filled with my hopes, dreams, and aspirations among the stars. A letter that work, family, and responsibility told me was foolish to deliver. I tucked the letter into the breast pocket of my coat and strode out the door.

As I started down the driveway towards my car, I spotted an old yellowed newspaper, with the headline “Missing Woman Found” sitting listlessly in my driveway. I thought it odd, mainly because I was so attentive to keeping my living space clean, and yet...this. I tossed it into the trash without a second thought and pulled away from the driveway of 956 Salinas Parkway, heading towards my old home.

The drive was largely unremarkable: unremarkable roads, unremarkable signs, unremarkable trees and unremarkable skies. All the boredom of a typical Saturday morning drive. As my car’s wheels traversed blacktop with great speed, they sped past a sign that signaled “Plaingreave”, my old town. The place was barely a satellite town, little more than a few shops and houses.

I pulled up to my old home, giving my family greetings. They were as plain as always, and our interactions about work and maintenance barely broke the surface of anything resembling meaningful. After my afternoon with them, I left with a solemn assurance that I would return. Though as the sun waned in the morning sky, my true intentions for this journey began. I ventured over to a house on the far west side of town, the house of a man named Elmer Dagget.

I met Elmer when I was about 8, and I had spent many an afternoon speaking of baseball and the sky

with him. His wife had died 5 or so years before, and with no children, we benefitted mutually from our exchanges. I sought wisdom, and he sought a legacy. With the stories he would tell me, I could carry on his memory to those that I knew, and in time, I imagine I was much like a son to him.

When I was 12, my parents sat me down in the car, just after finishing school that day, but before driving home, and informed me, with tears in their eyes, that Mr. Dagget had killed himself. I was inconsolable for days, and I had never dared visit the house again. First out of grievance, then out of anger. "If he was so wise, so knowledgeable about life, and how to get on with the proceedings of the world", my bitter heart asked, "then how come he didn't see the damn thing to the end." After that, Elmer's words meant nothing. His stories were forgotten. His wisdom died with him. These ideas swam in my head, dancing like so many fireworks in my brain. As I stepped up to the porch, I could see us on those hot summer nights, speaking of how to get Jenny to talk to me, or the reason fireflies glow, or why the forest was dangerous at night. I shook my head, pushing open the door.

The door was never locked, in life or in death. As I strode about the house, inspecting and remembering, I noticed a picture of a little girl on the nightstand. His wife, Theresa Dagget. The photo was old as one could imagine, no color, and its place among many a living room window didn't help its aging process: its edges were curling, and its image was almost completely faded. On the rocking chair in the living room sat a sewing needle, now completely rusted, threaded with a crimson. From my recollection, these things were always left here, it was his way of remembering Theresa; like she still lived here.

I ventured through the abandoned house, through the disheveled rooms and the chipped paint. When I reached the bedroom—a sickly sight of yellowed curtains, rusted bed frames and paint chips scattered like leaves on the floor—I found a small book. A journal, it seemed, though Elmer had never mentioned it. As I turned the pages I confirmed it to be his. Besides the name on the book jacket, the handwriting and prose were unmistakably his. As I read through it, my eyes darted across each page with great fervency. Towards the second half, each page held a more horrifying scribbling than the last. "What is it?" "Who do I tell?" "Do they know?" Each of these scribbles seemed to point towards one thing, as it repeatedly mentioned an old military bunker north of town. On the last page, I jumped; a small blue transparent tube had fallen into my lap. Among the destroyed objects and withered furnishings, this single thing remained frozen, untouched by the callous entropy of time. I shook it slightly: a bright blue liquid lay within it, and it jostled with a consistency not unlike maple syrup. On the same page, a small note, folded 4 times.

"Charlie, check the trunk of my truck, the key is in the closet, you have to go, you have to know what this all is."

I shot up out of my seat, groping for the key on the small shelf above his old coats. Once I had found it, I darted down the stairs, sprinting towards my object of revelation. This was it, this had to be it, Elmer wasn't suicidal, something must've happened!

As I turned the key inside the lock of the old trunk, my hands trembled. I could scarcely push my fingers between the accumulated rust and debris, but I managed it, due in large part to my great desperation. I freed the trunk of its captivity, swinging it open: the contents inside lay untouched, safe from the harm of time's hand.

There it lay: a small briefcase, a briefcase I knew well. It was Elmer's fishing briefcase; the code was 1112. He thought it was clever. As I opened the case, the usual trappings of line, bait and hook sat in their expected places, but in the middle of it, lay a note. "44.891102, -67.993706" Longitude and Latitude—they were coordinates.

I hopped in my car as fast as I could, and left the rusted automobile, nearly broken down, sitting open in the driveway. It was of no importance now; I needed to know Elmer's dying wish. As I drove, I entered the coordinates into my phone. It was only a few miles north. When I reached the location, sure enough, a bunker sat there, moss retaking it as nature often does. I kicked open the rusted door, its lock barely functioning as more than a decoration, and I scoured the area.

It was a military bunker, its hardened stone exterior mirrored by its interior, and its ancient radios and computers long since dead, save one here and there whose staticky feedback could be heard upon calibration of its knobs and buttons. A door at the back of the room promised answers, and with another show of brute force, I bashed my way through. However, the follow-through of this attack on the steel door sent me careening towards

the bottom of an unforgiving flight of stairs. With a loud thud, I slammed into the metal gun cabinet at the bottom of the stairs, and with great pain and hesitation, my groaning body lifted itself from the stonework.

There it was. At the bottom of this bunker, a large computer, still functioning. Its black screen acted as a void, as if peering into that very same abyss that I dream of every night, and whose image haunts me each day. With green text scrolling consistently, my delight of revelation turned to horror.

“Searching for server...Server not found, searching for server...Server not found...Searching...”

Over and over, the same line repeated. Meaningless, this whole thing—a waste of time. Mr. Dagget’s legacy, his triumphant discovery, the final wisdom imparted to a broken man, with even more broken dreams, was just the insane dribbling of a madman close to the edge. I sank to my knees.

“No...No...No!” I screamed in defiance “I’ve had enough of this charade!” I stood once more, gripping the tube left for me, more likely than not a concoction of nonsense brewed from a withered mind. I tossed it onto the ground, its shattering was so satisfying, like the breaking of an old bond, closure. But as I sat again, my head propped against the desk holding the old computer, weeping, the blue liquid in the vial started to radiate a hideous odor. A smell of otherworldly monstrousness. Its stench, like so much death, reached my nose like an assault, and soon...my eyes. As the vapors touched my eyes, I was nearly blinded, but, accompanied by a searing hot pain, my vision returned. The screen was...blue now, its text far different than that of before. It read “Historical Log.” I looked up, amazed, and stood slowly.

Before I could muster a thought worth having, I stepped lightly towards the device, using a familiar keyboard to navigate its menu. As I scrolled up and down, my amazement and delight, my vindication, the exoneration of Elmer Dagget’s legacy, turned to a fear the likes of which words cannot muster description. It was an account of events: three in particular had caught my eye.

The First: “Observation of humanity and earth begins.” The second: “Attack begins, Earth’s defenses are insufficient, humans manage one escape vessel.” The last: “Vessel captured, one human left aboard, mentally unstable, Charles Wainwright, human admitted for study and analysis.”

I looked on in horror. Was this what I was seeing? Were those visions real? But I had never entered the space force. Before I could complete my own thought, my eye caught another event.

“Human dies due to testing. Analysis and synthesis complete. Construction of replica earth begins, analysis of all possible natural ends and possible future prosperities of the species will follow.”

I fell on the ground. The gravity of what I had just read sent me into a feverish state, and before I could make sense of any of it, before I could begin to grasp what I had read, I lost consciousness. The still blackness of nothing, an ocean of nothing. Soon, I awoke from that place, as I often had. But now I was driving home, returning from my visit with my parents. The bunker, the historical logs, the abyss...It was all there, I could remember it...but it was tucked so powerfully into the back of my head, I couldn’t rally the strength to dwell on it, so I didn’t.

I drove home, parking in the driveway of 956 Salinas Parkway. I walked into the familiar unremarkability of my home. Hanging my coat on the rack, taking the letter addressed to the Space Force, and tossing it into the fireplace. Mira walked out from behind the kitchen wall; “Hello, Charles,” she greeted me. I nodded. She continued, as would be proper: “How was work today?” I glanced over. “Hmm? Oh...Fine...Same as usual.”

Mr. Harper's Last Thanksgiving // William Olkowski

Beep....Beep....Beep...Beep...

A heart rate monitor mounted on the wall next to a bed where an elderly man is sleeping, constantly beeps, showing that there is still life. The room is spacious, filled with fresh flowers and photographs of the man's family. A flat screen television is mounted on the wall at the end of the bed so the man can see it in comfort. The rising sun beams in through the window providing natural light as the day has just begun.

"Good morning Mr. Harper! Happy Thanksgiving! It's time for your meds," says a nurse as she wakes the elderly man.

"Oh, Rosita, why don't you give me some sugar and then I'll take my meds." I say as I pinch the nurse's butt.

"Mr. Harper!" The nurse slaps my hand. "You know I am not Rosita! But if it will help you take these meds, then here." She kisses my forehead.

Rosita. My sweet Rosita. My first love. I remember our first kiss. My first kiss. It was the fourth of July. We were just teenagers.

I was playing football with the gang. Tommy was playing quarterback because he thought he was Joe Montana or something. Ricky was trying to cover me. Little Ricky cover me, what a joke. I ran past him every time. Touchdown after touchdown.

Then you walked up like a ray of sunshine, with your girlfriends, Carey and Anna.

"Can we play, too?" You giggled.

"We're playing tackle!" I smirked.

"Isn't that the only way to play?" Rosita smiled.

Rosita covered me. I knew I could beat her just like Little Ricky, but I didn't want too. For some reason I liked it when she tackled me. It tickled. It felt good. Over and over again Tommy threw me the ball and Rosita tackled me.

"Let's play a new game. Hide and Seek. Anna you count and we will hide. Come with me." Rosita grabbed my shirt.

We hid in the shed next to Tommy's house. It was cramped with all the yard tools and stuffed in there. But I was squished up to Rosita and for some reason I liked it.

"I really didn't want to play hide and seek. I wanted to do this!" Rosita kissed me right on the lips. My body exploded. Fireworks were everywhere.

Beep....Beep....Beep....Beep....

"Mr. Harper the parade is on. Want to watch the parade?" The nurse turns the television on.

“That would be nice.”

The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. It was a yearly tradition for my family. Right out of bed, still in their pajamas, my kids would stare as the marching bands, singers, and floats would go past on the screen. My wife would make the sweetest most delicious hot chocolate with mini marshmallows, which I loved. Sipping it would burn your lips, but it was worth it. We would sing along with the songs like we were the actual performers. I remember one year my daughters even stood up and kicked their legs as high as they could into the air as if they were the real Rockettes.

“There he is, Daddy. It’s Santa!” My littlest one Phoebe would yell out with joy. “I got to make my list, because I have been a good girl this year!”

“What do you want Santa to bring you this year sweetie?”

Beep....Beep....Beep....Beep....

“Mr. Harper, I need to draw a little blood. This won’t hurt at all.” The nurse sticks a needle into my arm.

“Incoming!” Sargent Snead yelled.
Explosions, fire, blood, and death were everywhere.

“Take cover Harper!” Sargent Snead pushed my head into the dirt. Machine gun fire flew through the air. The ground erupted around me with every mortar shell landing.

“Return fire!” Sargent Snead yelled.
I pulled my rifle out, unloading a clip at the invisible target in front of me. I don’t know what I hit, if anything at all.
A sharp sting ran up my arm. A pain I have never felt before. It burned. I had been hit.
“Medic!” I screamed.
“No time to bleed Harper! Keep firing!” Sargent Snead yelled at me.
A bullet struck Sargent Snead’s skull and his brain flew out the other side as if he just blew his nose for the last time.
“Medic!”
“Medic!”
“Medic!” I cried.

Beep.... Beep.... Beep.... Beep....

“Can you put the football game on?”

I was quite the baller back in the day. It was a Thanksgiving Day tradition to go up to the school yard and play in the turkey bowl. No matter how much snow was on the ground, the game would be played. This was no ordinary game of football. This was a war. A war among men. No uniforms to tell you what school you were from. No pads to protect you from being hurt. Just straight up tackle football. We played for pride. And I loved it.

I would lace up my Nike Sharks, tight. I put on my beat-up Thurman Thomas Jersey. And lastly put on my lucky wool knit cap. This was my armor for the battle.

I remember when I was sixteen, the snow had to be at least two or three feet high. There were eleven men on

each side. It was cold. It was wet. But we still battled. Tommy was the quarterback.

“Blue fifty-two, Blue fifty-two, hut, hut, hike!” Tommy yelled out as the ball was snapped to him. I spun left then right, breaking away from the defender. Tommy threw me the ball. I caught it and was immediately tackled by a grown man. He had to be at least forty. He had a full-grown beard that was as white as the snow on the ground.

“Good catch kid.” The man said as he picked me up off the ground.

“Time for the double reverse, Harper.” Tommy pointed at me.

This was our signature play. When we did it right, we were unstoppable.

“Green one eighty, Green one eighty, hut, hut, hike!” Tommy yelled out as the ball was snapped to him.

Tommy pitched the ball to Joey as he ran at me. Joey pitched the ball to me as I ran around the right side of the field. The other team was confused as I ran into the end zone.

“Touchdown Bitches!” I yelled as I did my celebratory dance.

Beep.... Beep.... Beep.... Beep....

“Time to eat, Mr. Harper. Look what is for dinner. Mashed potatoes, stuffing, turkey all covered in gravy. Umm Umm. Time to eat,” said the nurse.

Thanksgiving Dinner was always a spectacle in my home. I would wake up at 4 A.M. to prepare the divine bird for the festivities that were about to take place. I’d lather him with butter. Cover him with parsley, pepper, salt and a little red pepper for spice. I’d set the oven to 350 and stick him in. He would cook all day, filling the air with his mouth-watering aroma.

At around noon, I would set my eyes on which sides I would make for the scrumptious feast. I always made corn beard casserole, a recipe handed down from generation to generation. My children would always make me make their favorite cheesy tots. I would make green beans fried with bacon, sweet potatoes smothered in marshmallows, acorn squash with melted butter, hand whipped mashed potatoes, corn, and peas. My wife would insist on making Stove Top stuffing out of a box, because stuffing the bird was gross. Phoebe’s favorite was cranberry sauce out of the can.

Once the bird was done, I would pull him out of the oven and put in the rolls to bake. I would take all his juices, add some flour and make the perfect Thanksgiving gravy, to be used to cover the irresistible feast.

Beep.... Beep.... Beep.... Beep....

“And for dessert pumpkin pie,” said the nurse.

I love pie. Pie and I have a huge tradition. On Thanksgiving, I ate a lot of it. When I was a kid my great-grandma would bake several different pies for Thanksgiving: apple, cherry, blueberry, triple berry, banana cream, coconut cream, chocolate cream, mincemeat, peach, raspberry, key lime, lemon meringue, pecan, sweet potato, and, of course, pumpkin. Our house was turned into a bakery for one day.

As soon as I woke up, I could smell that the fresh baked pies had taken over. I would run down stairs as fast as I could to find a fork and a pie. I would then go on a pie eating frenzy. Eating pie after pie, all day and all night. One slice of apple pie, two slices of cherry pie and one slice of chocolate cream pie. I could not get enough pie.

Beep.... Beep.... Beep.... Beep....

A little girl runs down the hall past the room's doorway.

"Phoebe is that you?"

When Phoebe was seventeen she went to the Prom. She wore a beautiful pink lace dress with long white gloves. She wore clear plastic heels. Her hair was blonde and had curls that took hours to create. Hidden in the curls was a fake diamond tiara. She was truly a little princess.

"I love you, dad!" Phoebe kissed me.

"You be safe and bring her home by midnight."

"Okay, Mr. Harper," said the sharply-dressed young man.

That was the last time I saw Phoebe. She never came home that night. Their car was hit by a drunk driver.

Beep.... Beep.... Beep.... Beep....

A single tear rolled down my cheek as I held on to a picture of Joanna.

"I am sorry, I am sorry!" I yelled out. "Why did you leave me here? Why?"

Joanna was my wife. She was everything to me. I remember the night we first met. I was out with the boys, living it up in Niagara Falls. We had all had a little too much to drink, like we usually did. We went to the park to see the mighty Niagara Falls and to sober up a little. It was dark. Tommy and I got into a fight—about what, I don't remember, and it doesn't really matter. Tommy punched me right in the face. I didn't flinch. I just took it. I wasn't going to hit him back. He was my best friend. Instead I ran away.

I ran into the darkness away from my friends as fast as I could. In front of me was a tunnel under a bridge. The light post was out. It was dark. I was afraid.

"Come out! I see you in there! Don't make me come in there and kick your ass!"

Out of the darkness came an angel. The world became bright. I knew then in that very moment she was the one I would marry. Her eyes sparkled. Her lips wanted my kisses. Her hair needed my fingers to run through it.

"Can I help you?" She said.

Beep.... Beep.... Beep.... Beep....

"I miss you so much!"

Joanna passed earlier this year. We went to hell and back several times, as if it was our yearly vacation. We had four amazing children that our lives revolved around. Her smile and laugh would always pull me out of my daily depressions. Why did she leave me here all alone? I miss her.

"Don't worry we will be together soon!"

Beep....

Beep...

Beep..

Beep.

The room becomes cold and dark. My body becomes stiff and empty as I float above it.

Beeep

The heart rate monitor mounted on the wall next to the bed flatlines. Nurses and doctors run into the room. They try to save me. They are too late. I am gone.

Joanna is with me.

Phoebe is with me.

I can see Sargent Snead in the distance.

October in Newark had settled in with the sort of familiarity that small towns had always been romanticized for. The trees were brilliant orange and red, and crisp leaves coated the ground. Gone were the days of summer where the older folks would sit on their porches in their rockers, their necks wrinkled with age and from peering over the fences of their neighbors. There wasn't much to do in Newark except gossip, and the citizens were exemplary at it and virtually nothing else. The web of gossiping ran so deeply in the tiny town that the only thing in all of Newark that no one seemed to know was what had happened to little Charlie Dagget on the day of October 3rd. For a town that prided themselves on knowing everything, the realization that a child had been snatched out from under their noses was perhaps more distressing than the fact that the child was gone to everyone but Detective Mira Wainwright and Charlie's parents, Mary and John Dagget.

Detective Mira Wainwright arrived about a half hour after the girl's disappearance under the strict scrutiny of the neighbors, who had been gathering about the house rather indiscreetly. One of the most notorious gossips, Mrs. Featherby, walked her tiny dog by, slowing down and craning her extraordinarily long neck towards Mira and trying to listen in to what she said into her police radio. Mira had long suspected that Mrs. Featherby's long neck was the distinct advantage that had put her in the forefront of knowing all the towns gossip, because with a neck like that she hardly needed to strain at all to see over all the fences of the tiny streets in the tiny town. Her little ankle biting dog helped her as well, since it gave her an excuse to stroll past areas of interest and use her distant advantage to find out whatever people would rather keep secret and then tell it to her book club.

The inside of 956 Salinas Parkway was cheerily decorated with brightly colored balloons and streamers. A birthday cake sat in the middle of the table, the brightly colored wax of the eleven candles melted all over the pink frosting as it sat forgotten in the chaos of the afternoon. Mary Dagget sat at the kitchen table, looking hollowly at one of the candles, which listed to the side and dripped gobs of blue wax down onto the cake. She held a cobalt blue beer bottle that was nearly empty in her shaking hands.

"Who was here when you last saw Charlie?" Mira asked gently.

"My brother, Elmer, had just arrived. I went out front to help him with the present- he got her a new bike, and the box was pretty big." John answered. He looked over at his wife. "Mary was inside getting all the food ready. The rest of the company was supposed to arrive just about now."

"I'd just sent Charlie to her room, she'd come back from playing outside and got her dress all muddy." Tears filled Mary Dagget's eyes as she spoke, making her pale blue eyes look cloudy. "I'd yelled at her, it was a new dress we'd bought just for the party. Pink with little white polka dots- a real nice-looking dress. I'd told her to change, there was a nice blue one for the first day of school I'd said she could wear instead, but when I- "Mary paused, looking down at her drink. She took a swig from her bottle before looking back up at Detective Wainwright. "I went to go and get the dress from her, to treat the stain- and she was gone." From her lap, Mary produced a piece of red construction paper. It was the kind of note that Mira had always thought was reserved for the movies, made of cut up letters from magazines and newspapers that were pasted with glue and made up two short sentences.

"She is alright for now, but that can change. Don't look for her." Attached with a paperclip was a picture of a little girl, her hair in braided blonde pigtails. There was a small strip of duct tape over her mouth and her eyes were wide and scared and a startlingly bright shade of green. Mira frowned at the picture.

"Where did you find this letter?"

"It was on her bed." Mary said softly, peering down into the blue bottle as if it would give her some answers. "The window was open, and the letter was right there, open." Mary burst into tears again, and John patted her back awkwardly. Detective Wainwright didn't miss Mary Dagget flinch as her husband touched her.

There were several more questions and a search of the house before Detective Wainwright was able to leave, watching 956 Salinas Parkway disappear as she headed back to the station to gather a plan of action. Newark had never had a kidnapping, and just like Charlie, Mira was lost.

The search party through the woods behind the house had turned up nothing, and with no fresh leads, Mira suspected that at least someone had to know something of note: enemies of the family, a suspicious presence around the house, a car that they didn't know parked up the street. The note had also turned up no known fingerprints, so Detective Wainwright decided to head downtown and see what the locals knew. As much as Mira hated to admit it, she needed the gossip queen, Mrs. Featherby.

Mrs. Featherby was, of course, delighted that Mira had sought her out. Mrs. Featherby was never happy except when all attention was on her, and she excelled at that by dealing out juicy secrets about others and leaving the town hanging on every word that dripped from her lips. Mira sized the older woman up as she sat down. She had to get her to talk without revealing any facts she knew about the case.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Featherby." Mira started out cordially. Mrs. Featherby's eyes gleamed.

"Why, good afternoon detective!" She said, much louder than was strictly necessary in hopes that some of the other patrons of the little restaurant would give her some attention. "What brings you here today?" She smiled but her eyes remained beady and hawk-like, which was a disturbing juxtaposition from her apparent friendly demeanor.

"I just had a few questions I'd like to ask you. I remember seeing your face at the scene of the crime and was hoping to glean a bit of what you saw."

"Well now, I wasn't there all that long, I was just walking my dog and I saw your car parked out front, with all the lights on. Very out of the ordinary for our little town, so you can imagine I was quite shocked." Mira thought it was much more likely that she was delighted at another thing for her to gossip about with her bridge club, but she kept her mouth shut. She had found that once Mrs. Featherby started talking, it was unlikely that she would stop unless she felt that no one was giving her enough attention. "I walked up Salinas Parkway and I hear the little Dagget girl, Charlie, is missing! Unbelievable!"

"Did you see anything?" Mira asked, growing impatient. Featherby had a flair for the dramatic, and Mira sensed that she could drag her story out for as long as she felt she needed attention. Charlie might not have the luxury of that sort of time.

"Well, I saw that old rusted truck of Elmer's. He seemed to get out of there in a hurry after Mrs. Dagget started all her hollering and crying. If I recall, he was gone before you even arrived! Strange, you'd think he'd be more interested in his niece going missing."

Featherby smiled smugly, as if she'd single handedly cracked the case. Mira had already known Elmer had rushed away. The Daggets had told her he had thought he'd seen a red car drive away quickly, and he'd dove in to pursue it. It had turned out to belong to a neighbor who was only driving to the grocery store and did not turn out to have little Charlie.

"But you didn't see anything of importance?" Mira said again impatiently.

"I did see those bruises on Mary's arms. Her sleeves were rolled up from cooking when she'd first come out of the house to scream for Charlie. My nephew says Charlie's got the same sort on her arms. Makes you wonder."

Mira felt her jaw clench. She had a sudden, sickening thought that perhaps he had hit too hard, or shoved too far, and something had happened to the poor little girl. Was the kidnapping a ploy? Was Charlie gone already, and the letter the work of a man desperately covering up his tracks?

Mira breathed a sigh of relief when she remembered the letter and the Polaroid. Charlie had been alive when someone had taken that picture. That letter had been pre-done, the glue long dried and too many letters to be a rushed thing.

“Well, thank you for all your help, Mrs. Featherby.” Mira said, standing up quickly. Hopefully, she could escape before she tried to weasel any information out of her. “I have some important matters to attend to.”

“Of course.” She answered, smiling. “If you need any more assistance on the case, you know where to find me.” Mira sincerely hoped it wouldn’t come to that a second time. She had barely anything more than she had before, but she had been reminded of Elmer Dagget once again, and she felt she hadn’t thoroughly exhausted him as a witness or potential suspect. It was early afternoon when Mira found her way to Elmer Dagget’s, the lights of the house were dark, and she suspected that maybe he wasn’t home, or at least was pretending not to be.

Knocking at the door garnered no response, and without any reason to believe the child was locked in the house, Mira knew that the law dictated she had to leave. It didn’t stop her from sneaking around the house, shining her flashlight in every window, hoping she’d see something that would give her probable cause.

Disappointed, she walked back down the driveway, the gravel crunching as she passed the rusted truck in the driveway. Mrs. Featherby hadn’t been wrong about it being an eyesore. The truck had once been red, though it was now mostly rust colored as the metal was eaten away over time. It was dented and scratched, probably due to Elmer’s rather notoriously bad parking skills that had resulted in Mira having seen him more than she would like to. Her eyes slid over it until they saw something out of place. A bit of hair was peeking out of the trunk. Mira shone her flashlight on it, heart freezing as she saw the familiar looking bright blonde hair. She ran over to the trunk, yanking on it. How long had she been in there? Was it too late, had she suffocated hours ago? Had Elmer put her there, or had the kidnapper placed her there to blame him?

The trunk of the rusted automobile was locked, and Mira sprinted back to her car to grab the crowbar from her trunk. She ran back over, jamming one side of it under the trunk lid and putting all her body weight on it as she ran through every prayer she knew that the little girl would be all right. The trunk popped, the rusted lock ripping and sending a spray of rust into Mira’s eyes as it flew open. The owner of the hair fell to the ground, unmoving.

It was a doll.

A very expensive doll, one of those lifelike ones from American Girl Doll, with her hair in two braids just like Charlie’s. Mira let out a strangled sort of noise, half in relief and half in frustration. Charlie was still missing, but she hadn’t just found the dead body of the child. Her hands shook as she dropped the crowbar and bent over to pick up the doll, reaching in her back pocket to pull out a pair of gloves to collect evidence with so as not to contaminate anything. Mira wondered, briefly, if the doll was for Charlie’s birthday. That would be two very expensive gifts.

She set the doll aside and looked at the rest of the trunk. There was a scrapbook, one of the pink ones decorated for a baby girl.

Curious, Mira opened it with a gloved hand, careful not to touch it. Inside were pages upon pages of pictures of a younger Elmer Dagget and a baby. The closeness with which Elmer and the child behaved seemed like a parent child relationship, but Mira knew Elmer had never married nor had any children. As the pictures stretched

on in time, the child grew older and become very clearly a young Charlie Dagget: Her hair was pale blonde like her mothers, and her eyes were a startling green that must have run in the family because Elmer had the same shade, slightly faded with age. Mira had the distinct feeling in her gut that she was looking at something very personal. The scrapbook reached all the way up to Charlie's current age, with more pictures of the pair. It seemed a bit excessive for an uncle and a niece.

Mira had a pit in her stomach. The excessive photos, the extravagant gifts- she could imagine they were for a reason, and the one that immediately popped into mind when paired with a missing girl was not at all pleasant.

She closed the scrapbook and looked through the rest of the trunk. There were a few photos that looked that had been pulled from frames, faded in the center and not in the edges where the frame would have been. Most were much the same as had been in the scrapbook but there was another photo, an older one, a picture of a young man and woman dancing. It's a bit blurred as the figures are still in motion, mid spin; a blonde-haired woman and a brunette young man that Mira could tell was Elmer Dagget. Mira wondered if this was with the rest of the photos by mistake. She had never known Elmer Dagget when he was young, but she could imagine that this could be him with some young woman, before he dented dozens of cars in the parking lot at the grocery store every year, smelling of liquor but never failing a sobriety test.

When Mira finally left, tucking the items carefully back into the trunk, she had more questions than she'd had before. She decided to head back to the Dagget's house.

Through the living room window, Mira could see the pair screaming at each other before she even got out of her car. She sat in the driver's side, watching what was going down. John made his way to the front door, opening it and storming into the yard. Mary followed him, screaming. In one hand was a slip of paper and in the other another blue bottle.

"I've had enough of this charade!" Mary yelled, holding out a piece of paper to him. John turned around, grabbing it out of her hands and ripping it to pieces. He screamed something unintelligibly at her, and then made like he was going to swing at her. Mira reached for the door to get involved, reaching for her taser, but Mary seemed to have it handled. She swung the beer bottle at the side of the house, breaking it in half and leaving her holding a blue transparent tube that was jagged at one end. She brandished it at him. "Don't you dare. Sign the paper, John."

"I won't." He said. "I'll never sign it."

"Then you've left me no other choices. Get out. I won't have you at the house." John spit at her and stormed to his car, slamming the door and driving away. As soon as he was gone, Mary slumped against the doorway, bottle dropping to the concrete porch and smashing. Mira leapt out of her car and headed over to the woman on the porch.

"Are you alright?" She asked. Mary looked up, startled.

"Oh-yes. What do you need, detective?"

"I was hoping to get a chance to ask you more questions about the case, maybe look around the crime scene again."

"Actually, I'm glad you're here. I found something odd in the basement of John's." Mary said, pushing the glass off the porch with her slippered foot and beckoning her to come inside. Mira followed her down to the basement, where there was a worktable covered in scraps of paper. Newspapers and magazines covered the table's

surface. Mira reached for an old yellowed newspaper with the headline “Missing Woman Found.” Bits were cut out, leaving holes in the paper like swiss cheese. The notes were made from bits of newspaper and magazines.

“Did you ask him what they were for?”

“Yeah, that’s what the fight was about.” Mary sighed, prodding a red mark on her wrist. It looked suspiciously like a hand. Mira felt sick to her stomach. She saw another letter laying half-finished on the table, undelivered. The evidence was stacking up against the father quickly.

“Do you need any help? Is he usually like that?” She said suddenly.

“I-” Mary paused. “Yes. I’ve been trying to have him sign divorce paperwork- he’s been violent with Charlie and I in the past. I-” She went suddenly quiet. “I think he’s taken her. He knew he wouldn’t get custody, and then I find this-” Mary looked close to tears. “But I don’t know where she is.”

“Is there anywhere he visits frequently, somewhere he could keep her?”

“No, I don’t think there’s anywhere-”

“A cabin? A vacant house? A storage unit?”

“No, I-” Mary paused suddenly, furrowing her brow. “He has a storage unit at that place by the edge of town for his hunting stuff. I told him I didn’t want his guns in our house. It’s unit 37.”

“Stay here, don’t let him back in. Better yet, find someone else’s house to stay at.” Mira ran upstairs and across the yard. Sirens blaring, she rushed across town to find the storage unit. She grabbed the crowbar out of her trunk, which was still covered in rust from earlier. She knocked on it and heard someone moving inside. Since no one could lock themselves in a unit like this, Mira decided that it was all the cause she needed. She stuck the crowbar under the door and slid it up. The door broke open, sliding up to pour light into the small room. Inside, little Charlie Dagget was sitting in the corner, an old blanket wrapped around herself. She backed away as the door opened until she blinked and saw Mira’s badge and the red and blue lights flashing in the background, at which point she rushed forward and leapt into Mira’s arms.

At the station, Mary and Elmer fawned over Charlie, who had no injuries to speak of. She’d spoken very little except to repeat that it had been John Dagget.

John had been arrested to find out why daughter had been found in a storage unit, and why his basement had all the materials to make her kidnapping letter. John refused to speak except to ask for a lawyer. Mira shook her head and headed out to the family to wait for a lawyer to arrive for John Dagget. Charlie sat in her uncle’s lap, being fussed over by her mom.

“You’re sure it was your dad who did this to you.” Charlie nodded quickly.

“It was John Dagget.” Mira furrowed her brow. Every time she’d asked that question, Charlie had refused to say he was her dad, only referring to him as John Dagget. It could have been the feeling of betrayal, but Mira felt it was something deeper. Almost like someone had coached the girl to say it was John.

Then there was the issue of what had been in Elmer’s trunk. If John had done it, it didn’t explain the suspicious she had about Elmer.

Mira decided to take a walk and clear her head. She was nearly around the block when Mrs. Featherby called to her from her front porch. She was sitting on her rocker, sewing up a hole in a little red skirt with a needle and thread.

"I forgot to mention something to you the other day, Detective Wainwright!" Mrs. Featherby called. Mira walked up to the porch. This could be another desperate grab for attention from the woman, but she decided to indulge her. "Elmer and Charlie both have green eyes."

"Yes?" Mira asked. "Green eyes are hardly unusual."

"They are when the parents have blue and brown eyes. Nearly impossible." Mrs. Featherby said, sewing another few stitches with a bemused expression on her face. "They're much more likely when the parents have blue and green eyes." She looked up at Mira, her meaning plain. "Like Elmer and Mary."

"You don't mean that--"

"I mean exactly what I said. Strange, isn't it, how close the child and the uncle have always been." Featherby said. "Almost like a father to her."

It would explain the trunk, certainly the scrapbook. It would mean Elmer knew, and Mary likely knew as well, and perhaps even Charlie. It would explain why Charlie refused to call John 'dad'. A divorce might be made much easier if Mary was able to sever all ties to John by severing parental rights for good and sending him to jail. It would have been easy for Mary to plant the newspaper and everything in her own basement. She would have had access to John's keys to get to the storage locker. It would explain why Charlie had hardly seemed the part of a traumatized child.

Mira started running back to the station. She ran inside, looking around for where the family had been sitting. In their place was a lone letter with words pasted on green construction paper.

Mira didn't even have to read it to know what it meant. Sure enough, when she ran out into the parking lot, she found Elmer's truck long gone, and the family with it.

The town of Newark had always prided itself on knowing everything that went on in it, but the only bit of gossip anyone cared about anymore was exactly what had gone down on October the 3rd, when Charlie, Mary, and Elmer Dagget had disappeared. It was a case that would bother Detective Mira Wainwright for the rest of her career. Had arresting John Dagget helped a mother and daughter escape an abusive household, or had she allowed them to kidnap a child? She didn't think she'd ever know. She could only hope Charlie Dagget was safe, where ever she was.

Contributor Notes

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