

Amanda Budejen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

Educator: Shawntee` Herring

Category: Short Story

But Still it Rained

Atop a very high mountain was a town where it always rained.

The town's name had been forgotten twice. The first time it had been upon hearing of the discovery of the New World. The messenger of the news in question was a youth from a city a day or two away, who had never set foot upon shores that weren't his own but one day hoped to- and upon having told his neighbors the legendary stories that had been filtered through to him dozens of times, they'd politely suggested that perhaps it would be better if he were to go "bother someone else" who hadn't heard them yet. The very same day, he'd run all the way up the mountain and announced to a rapt audience that the ocean was not infinite, but rather a path to a strange land of even stranger beings.

The messenger could not set foot in the town itself (on account of the unbearable rain within the borders), but he stood on the outskirts and yelled his strange news to the townspeople- or at least to those who had deemed the message was worth getting wet for. He did not know the answers to the questions thrust upon him, but proceeded to invent on the spot such wonderful and fantastical tales as had ever been told. This, along with the fact the townspeople could barely hear him (on account of the rain) and so took to adding their own extravagant details whenever they could meant that the stories grew wilder and wilder until by the time the news reached those at the very back of the crowd it had not simply been a new continent discovered, but several; that the trees there were seventeen times as tall, inhabited by winged lions and rats the size of dogs; and that the people found living there did not know what a paella was. The townsfolk, in such an effort to remember everything they could about this new discovery, had forgotten the name of their own town.

The mayor at the time, who was both very bold and highly incompetent, had decided that it had been quite an ugly name anyways, and that this lapse in the collective memory was in fact a golden opportunity to name themselves something more dignified. A new name was quickly selected, and by the third or fourth year changes had been made on those maps unfortunate enough to bear the town's location.

The exact details of how the town's name was forgotten a second time have been lost to time or apathy. But most agree that it began with Antonio Bardal.

During the early days of his mayorship, he was often found pacing the halls of the Mayor's House, his top hat- made for someone with a significantly larger head- slightly askew. The floorboards creaked beneath his feet, riddled with rotting patches after years of steady leaking from the roof (on account of the rain). His small hands clutched a piece of paper full of large, looping handwriting that was not his own. He was the latest mayor, the boldest and most incompetent in a line of mayors very bold and incompetent indeed. His predecessor's portraits judged him silently from the walls around him, crying at the sight- though whether it was the tears of those watching their town come to ruin, or simply leaking raindrops, no one can tell.

This town was a town where it always rained. The inhabitants all knew each other well, for it had been decades since anyone had moved to the village, and centuries since anyone had left. The mountain guarded its village and its people jealously- whenever anyone tried to leave, the rain would fall so suddenly and heavily that they would have no choice but to turn back or be lost to the deep ravines. The few stolen hours a week without rain, the town came out of its stupor like a cat waking from sleep. Preparations were made (for the rain would come again)- children ushered to school- business attended to- tea spilt- rain damage inspected and dealt with as well as possible. The moment the

weatherman (raised high on a wooden platform, so as to feel incoming rain as quickly as possible) announced the rain was returning, the streets lay barren once more. The town froze again, days moving by at the sluggish pace of a glacier. All eyes drifted to windows and peepholes, and all ears longed for silence, waiting for life to begin again.

Mayor was both the highest office and lowest position available- an honor that no one wanted and many had held. It was the mayor's job to protect the town, to solve its problems- and naturally it had fallen to the mayor, centuries ago, to do something about that aggravating rain. There had been countless attempts over the years- but the rain had continued, perhaps because of the nature of the problem or perhaps because of the nature of the mayors. Umbrellas were useless against the consistent downpour- the sky only grew angrier at any attempt to defy it. Giant fires to evaporate the water had proved unsuccessful. The clouds had been pleaded with, to no avail. Negotiation was fruitless. And escape attempts, all escape attempts, any escape attempts, were deadly.

Every mayor had tried, every mayor had failed, and every mayor had left the post in disgrace. There were no true elections- how could there be, if there were no candidates? It was growing increasingly difficult to find someone- anyone- willing to take the job. So when it was announced that a ten-year-old boy had volunteered to become the next mayor, the vote had been unanimous.

It had seemed a good idea at the time, but perhaps it no longer was. The rain had been letting up slowly, and would soon stop- the first dry spell in Bardal's short time as mayor. Tradition dictated it was time to reveal his master plan to the townspeople- for he must have a master plan- and implement it.

Arrangements had been made, and a speech prepared for him by someone- his parents, or a teacher, or one of the previous mayors. All he had to do was read from the small slip of paper, and he would be able to retire from his position with dignity.

That was the plan. But Bardal, upon seeing such strange and unpronounceable words in the speech as "obsolete" and "precipitation", had decided to improvise.

When the rain stopped and he stepped up on the balcony to face the slowly growing crowd, he did not give them an excuse or promise them a solution. He simply held his hands upwards, palms upwards, as if trying to carry the sky- and announced that there was no rain.

The townspeople muttered among themselves. The tension began near the front of the crowd and spread its way back. Surely this was a joke? There was no rain at present, but what of the inevitable heavy storms already looming on the horizon? What were they to do then?

The weatherman sounded the alarm: *LLUVIA!** A drop had been felt, the rain was coming. All eyes were on the small mayor and his large top hat. Bardal held his ground as the drops fell faster and faster. Within a matter of seconds he was soaked, his clothes dripping at the corners, his top hat flooded to the brim, his hair matted against his forehead.

"Rain? What rain? I don't see any rain. There is no rain."

A peal of thunder rang from somewhere in the distance. The crowd shuffled nervously and pressed closer together, as a herd does when faced with danger they cannot escape.

The mayor disappeared momentarily, only to be seen again walking out the front door of the Mayor's House. He strolled about, unconcerned, making small talk with people he recognized and ignoring the steady pounding that drowned out his words.

"Me? Cold? But it's such a sunny day outside."

"Nice weather. Good time for a picnic."

"Rain? Where is the rain? There is no rain."

All eyes stayed on him as he sat down beneath a tree, hands behind his head, eyes upwards as if looking for shapes in the clouds- perfectly at peace.

But still it rained.

The news spread like ripples. The solution- *a* solution- had been found. If the rain was not *acknowledged*- if it was *ignored*- then it could hold no power over them. It is easy for a town to notice, but it is even easier for a town to forget- and that's just what the town did. The unmistakable noise of water hitting rooftops was blamed on the next-door children's new drums, or repairs happening down the street, or the cow's unusual behavior. Frequent comments were made about the unbearable dry spell the town was going through. Months passed, and it became routine: outdoor festivals were held, picnics were eaten, walks were taken, and the rain was ignored.

But still it rained.

The mountain itself was distraught. The rains fell harder and harder, and were ignored more and more fiercely. It could only watch on the day its worst fear came true: a family who packed their bags and descended down the mountain, the first to leave in centuries, no longer wary of storms.

But still it rained.

Along with the mountain's fury grew the town's stubborn insistence that the rain was not there, taking on a mind of its own. A new theory proposed that rain was just a legend, a trick of the mind- and Bardal, intrigued, organized a town debate. They say that it was here, as the people gathered to decide whether rain had ever existed in the first place, that their willful ignorance could no longer hold back the waters; the mountain let out a scream of rage, and with it came a storm so fast and fierce that the town was wiped out by the huge tidal wave in its wake.

There was no time to scream.

Atop a very high mountain was a town where it always rained. It is gone now, vanished. No one remembers what it was called- Bardal's infamous name has stolen its spot in legend and history. No one remembers how it was built- they only know it destroyed itself, at first slowly and then all at once. And no one remembers where it was. But if you ever find the mountain, and make your way to the top, you'll find the town's crumbling foundations swallowed up by an ocean of sweet water- and the ophelic shadow of a boy in a top hat, still whispering that there's no such thing as rain.

*Lluvia: Spanish for "rain"

Amanda Budejen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

Educator: Shawntee` Herring

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Once, there were dragons.

Once, there were dragons.

□

I. Dragons are born of fire and belief.

A candle is lit, and the flame rises and rises until the small curled form of a miniscule dragon can be seen at its center. It stretches, and sneezes. Even this proves tiring, and they roll up to sleep for a while longer, relishing in the warmth of the flame against their scales.

Dragons thrive in heat. They carry within them tiny sparks, and seek out kindling to turn into magnificent blazes. Children are known to be rather flammable amongst dragons.

Our blue hatchling has stumbled upon a schoolyard full of children out for recess. It lands on one, spreading flames first into their hair, then through their skin into their veins. The fire spreads quickly, and the child is delighted, holding up his hands and turning them around as they seem to glow. He runs towards his classmates and tags one, spreading the fire even more, until the entire schoolyard looks more like a fireplace from a story than a break before lessons.

And as the flames grow, so does the dragon.

It isn't long before one spots the scaly reptile in the first one's hair, and she reaches out. The dragon obliges, jumping into her hand and running around, now about the size of a mouse. They all gather around her, in awe of their small visitor.

One of the caretakers comes to see what the fuss is about. But she does not see the dragon- for her, it simply does not exist. When her eyes tell her it is there, her brain tells her it is not, and that's that.

She is deaf to the children's explanations, and they look at each other, curious. Could this be a game? Or could they possibly be wrong? No one much mentions the dragon after that. And three of the classmates swear that it has vanished, and that maybe it was never there, or just a trick of the light.

The blaze has dwindled into ashes by the time school is brought back in session. The girl with the dragon puts it within her jacket and our little friend shudders, shrinks, desperately clinging on to the heat of the wavering flame within her.

□

II. Dragons are born of air and wishes.

In the springtime, dandelions have bloomed, and these are quickly plucked and blown and asked for everything imaginable- times of fun, or a new love, or a chance to travel. And the dandelions listen, and scatter themselves out into the wind.

Within every seed is a newborn dragon. These sing at the thrill of flying on the wind, and cling as fiercely to the dreams they were given as to the seeds themselves. They warble their goodbyes to their siblings as the wind spreads

them over miles and centuries.

Once the seeds land, the dragons feast on expectations and doze beneath the light of the moon, scheming and plotting and growing stronger. And by the time it is fall, they are ready.

The dragons take to the air on new wings, seeking out those dreamers that spoke to them long ago. And they fly through their ears and into their minds. Many do not realize they have dragons within them, and others hear echoes of what they call subconsciousness. But the dragons sing incessantly, through the storms and the dark nights and the tear-stained times.

Some of the dragons enter to find a den, with a hearth and soft pillows and jars of stardust marmalade. Others find abandoned caves, which they fix up, and add pretty curtains and fragrant flowers.

A youth is laying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She wants nothing more than to do something, yet cannot bring herself to do anything at all. Screens and screams and secrets have sapped her strength, until there is nothing more to give. But the dandelion of a dragon within her strokes her hair, and gives her just the smallest nudge. She flops onto a desk and grabs a pencil, and begins to sketch.

Hours later, she is still absorbed, finally having found herself within worlds of her own making. She spins in the chair and admires her creations.

Some of the dragons enter to find a den. Others find abandoned caves.

And yet other dragons find blocked tunnels and closed doors and high brick walls, and cannot enter, no matter how much they scratch at them. And these have no choice but to leave, and their solemn cries join those of crickets during the long nights.

□

III. Dragons are born of water and fear.

A youth stands at the edge of a waterfall, cautiously looking down. His friends are waiting for him below, splashing and laughing their heads off.

He really does want to do this. It's tradition- the tradition of his older sister, of his parents, of their parents before them. He wants to launch himself off and soar to the water below. He wants to remember this day forever, his last day of freedom before the dreads of the stuffy boarding school he is to go to tomorrow.

But his feet are rooted to the ground. His knees refuse to move. His hands won't stop shaking. It's a long way down.

Still peering down the waterfall, he doesn't notice the dragon as it emerges. Brilliant blue scales that turn into rippling water under the light of the sun. Curved claws that are harder than stone. Two slender horns seemingly taken from the oldest tree in the woods. Wings the span of a thousand yards.

The youth doesn't notice as the dragon emerges, but he notices it when it roars. It has the fire of a thousand years stored inside it, and in his eyes, it looks dreadfully hungry. This is no longer boredom, with the chance of excitement. This is danger, with the chance of survival.

Adrenaline pumps through his veins. The absurd thought that perhaps water will harm the dragon enters his mind as the youth leaps for the waterfall, positioned to kick the dragon in the snout.

That blow never lands. And suddenly he is falling into the water, and coming back up for air. His friends are laughing and elbowing him. *What a leap!*

He splashes them back good-naturedly, looking upwards with a slight sense of unease. There had been something important up there... but he'd forgotten. What had compelled him to jump like that? Any notion of threat has been dissolved by the streaming sunlight, replaced by the thrill of the fall.

The dragon looks on from beneath the waterfall, and smiles. Its job here is done.

□

IV. Dragons are born of earth and avarice.

A small village sits at the foot of a mountain. It is a simple village, of people who live simply: they work carving stone to sell, or own a small shop, or mend and wash clothes, or farm. Nothing terribly exciting has ever occurred here, nor is it likely to occur. All is well.

The sun is lazily beginning its ascent. A man sings to himself while he mines. From here, he will go home, to celebrate his youngest's 4th birthday. His older daughter is making a cake, and his wife is likely putting the finishing touches on the gift: a new dress.

His pick strikes oddly, sending bits of rock flying everywhere. But something catches his attention: for a bit of rock is reflecting light in an unusual way. He picks it up, his eyes widen, and he heads straight for home.

The man shows his discovery to his wife, and they spend a few minutes whispering. He goes back to the place, piles up some rocks, and then returns home, pushing it out of his mind until the next day.

Another stonecutter rises and goes to the mountain. The stone seems to be loose over there, so that's where she starts. She strikes, only to make the same discovery as the man. Soon, everyone knows about the gold.

Thousands come in search of fortune. Tens of thousands of pickaxes hack at the mountain every day, stealing precious golden drops. Soon, big companies arrive, with their giant machines. Gold is rushed from here to there, bought and sold and bought again. There is yelling in the streets. Whose mountain is it, anyways?

It is the dragon's mountain. She rises above the city with a mighty roar, beating her powerful wings. She takes all the gold she can find: the goblets and crowns and swords and jewelry and coins. And she makes her lair in the center of the mountain, driving away any who come near.

She will guard this gold for centuries, making sure it can never corrupt another human's soul. Until the humans inevitably come, with their arrows and sharp blades.

◆

V. Once, there were dragons.

There are no dragons anymore. Maybe they died off, or left for the stars, or hid where we could never reach them. Or maybe they're still here- and we just forgot where to look.

Amanda Budejen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

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Category: Short Story

Euphoria

They gave them to me as a gift. Truth be told, I didn't really care about the reason, because I wanted them so badly. Besides, I trusted these people. They would never do anything to hurt me. A lecture about responsibility and limits later, then I had them.

They didn't look like anything too special, just two little white pills in the palm of my hand. Unassuming, true, but so powerful. An escape. Oh, when the world found out about them. They sold out within the hour. Then they sold out again, and again, and again. Everyone at school had them. Well, at least I think they had them.

I don't really pay attention to those things.

Everyone had been ignoring me lately. At first, I thought it was my fault, before I realized what was going on. And even then, one can never be too sure if they were flying above the clouds or simply found me irritating. I despised those little things. And then I came to want them more than anything.

I slipped them in my ears. My senses had never been so sharp. It's like the colors became more powerful all at once, like I had been seeing my whole life through frosted glass. There were bright splashes of green and gold, blue and red and yellow and silver that bloomed like wildflowers. They disappeared without a trace, only for a new symphony of shades to replace them. The sounds had never been so strong. My emotions were all in tune. It was like being filled with starlight and soaring through clouds. I started floating off the ground, my soul spiraling upwards in a magnificent arc of flight that I never wanted to escape. My feet barely grazed the concrete as I left, very well knowing that I would never be the same.

The next day at school was the same euphoria. They kept me awake throughout the dull morning, away in my own little world. Drifting from class to class, hovering in my seat and trying not to bump into the ceiling. No one noticed that I was only physically present- that my mind was wandering in far off lands, swimming through rivers of liquid happiness.

No one noticed.

Sure, there were some subtle changes. Conversation dwindled down and eventually became extinct. Phone calls increased, but not as much as you might think. I had company near up here now, clusters of students hovering around me. Some people just went through the roof, kept going upwards until they reached Cloud 9. The teachers had accepted the fact that they had lost the war. They resorted to megaphones and sign language for important announcements. Projectors in classrooms were pointed down at the floor so that those flying could see better. Large sticky notes attached to the ceiling replaced lined paper for classwork. A ladder was kept nearby to rescue those who got caught in trees.

Of course, there were people who called for backpacks to be filled with rocks, for bricks to be attached to shoes, for us to be tied down to reality. But once we had them, who could stop us? How many people would actually notice a change? How many noticed now? It's not like teenagers had an amazing reputation for their conversational and social skills to begin with. Really, it made no difference to the world.

And yet isn't it funny how often chains come disguised as freedom? A way to escape from a reality that you could never quite come back to once you left. A way to deal with social situations by locking you out of them. A way to

cope with the fact nothing is fine by pretending away. Isn't it funny, and also wretched?

Everything was blissful oblivion for me until Tuesday I had to hand them in. And then- nothing. Nothing. There was nothing there. And the clouds became mist and I fell through, landing badly on my ankle. Clutching my throat because I couldn't breathe. Frantically wondering what had gone wrong. Had I gone deaf; the music was gone. Had I gone blind; the colors had left. Had I gone mad, the happiness had left, the bliss had left, the joy had left, the rush-

What goes up must go down. An idiom that's easy to endure until you're a bird with a cannonball hurling your way. They said they were trying to help me. They said I overdosed. It's been 2 days, 3 hours and 45 minutes since I was unplugged. Now there's only silence. But maybe they're right. I hear a lot- I know I do- but I can't remember the last time I listened.

Amanda Budejen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

Educator: Shawntee` Herring

Category: Poetry

Brown

Her eyes are
Brown
Not the green of wilderness
Not the hue of a cloudless sky
They are not a brilliant blue of the sea
They don't hold oceans
They are dry
Not the color you'd ever find
On the eyes of anyone in
The romance novels she's always reading

Her eyes are
Brown
They are the brown of earth
The fertile fields of undiscovered worth
Just beginning to bear fruits
They hold so much potential
Absorbing everything the world has to offer
They are the brown of wild bark
Of tangled roots
With the layers of tree rings
And so she grows
They hold whole forests within them
It's so easy to get lost
And when the wind hits them just right
her eyes sing

She doesn't know
No one's told her how beautiful they are

Her eyes are
Brown
They are the brown of chocolate, the
Thousand shades of dark sweetness
The bearers of surprised flickers
They are messy
Stained fingers after Valentine's Day
You can't expect this much hope to stay neat
They drink up the sun and melt

Her eyes are
Brown
Modeled after violins and cellos

They string together melodies
She is a muse
And a creator all at once
She can't be played
Her eyes refuse

Her eyes are
Brown
The brown of dry tinder awaiting the match
Just wait until they light up
Ignite a blaze that can't be contained
Needing no oxygen and no permission they burn
Flowers of flame
They bloom without scrutiny
In a world that's all but forgotten the meaning of botany

Her mind is sharp and
Her smile is real and
Her back is straight, she's not kneeling to anyone
And her eyes
Her eyes are
Not green, not gray, not teal
But brown
And she romanticizes every little thing about the world so maybe it's about time
The world start romanticizing her

Amanda Budejen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

Educator: Shawntee` Herring

Category: Poetry

My Life in Structured Poems

"So this is what it's like-" (villanelle)

So this is what it's like to lose a friend-
To realize that there's nothing you can do,
The feeling something's coming to an end.

The globe beneath your feet seems to extend,
The oceans that divide grow yet more blue-
So this is what it's like to lose a friend.

Hold your breath as the decisions impend
The essays and responses soon ensue,
The feeling something's coming to an end.

This is something that you want to defend
(The messages you get become more few)
So this is what it's like to lose a friend.

All those moments that you used to misspend
The memories become your favorite view
The feeling something's coming to an end.

There are some things that time cannot amend.
You wave goodbye and know that it is true:
So this is what it's like to lose a friend-
The feeling something's coming to an end.

"The Yearly Christmas Play" (English sonnet)

And so it goes, the yearly Christmas play-
November brings some quiet train of thought
Or song that sort of sets me on the way
And by December some script is begot.

The cast are given roles, or the roles cast
The actors grow in number by the year
And WhatsApp messages start coming fast
Nothing is ready as the show draws near.

My garage turns into a dressing room
I help the children with their lines, and pause
As on my kitchen stage they perform, bloom,

And close the show to thunderous applause.

They can't wait 'til the next one, they all say-
And so it goes, the yearly Christmas play.

"Dreams in a Bubble" (haiku)

It rises, floats, light
A universe of color
And then, it bursts. Oh.

Amanda Budejen

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

Educator: Shawntee` Herring

Category: Novel Writing

Persephone

Brief summary:

On his school's anonymous blogging platform (the Brighblogs), Alex finds Persephone's poems and falls in love with her. He starts flirting under the name Quicksilver, but Persephone claims she's in love with someone else. Alex turns to his best friend Isa for advice, but accidentally gives her the wrong account name ("Penelope"). Isa has been writing love poems to Alex for years, but he doesn't know about her feelings. She publishes the poems under the pseudonym Persephone. When Alex says he's in love with "Penelope" (presumably a classmate), she decides to sabotage. Alex gets Persephone to like him. They begin trading British, American, and Hispanic poem recommendations. Their conversations in the comments of her blog post attracts a following. Thinking she's Persephone, Alex asks Ellie (who knows about Isa's feelings and her blog) to the winter formal. Isa is heartbroken, and goes with Alex's track rival, who publicly humiliates her. Alex feels guilty, and realizes Ellie isn't Persephone. Ellie and Carlos (the first to figure out who everyone is), plot to get Isa and Alex together. Isa learns that Alex's track nickname is Quicksilver, and decides to not tell him she's Persephone, as she thinks he'll be disappointed. The Brighblogs are shut down. Alex publicly announces that he's Quicksilver. Persephone doesn't respond. Alex realizes the reason he likes Persephone is because she reminds him of Isa- and he loves her instead. Isa decides she's tired of waiting. Both confess their feelings, and Isa says she's Persephone. He's not surprised.

Excerpt:

Ch 17 (part 2): Isabel's Journal
12 / 13 / 18 11:46 PM

Well, it finally happened.

Everyone learned my big secret. I don't mean the Persephone one, though at this point I'd almost prefer that to this.

No, I mean the fact that no one likes me and I'm a horrible and overly trusting person whose pride was the metaphorical death of her. So if you need me, I'll be in hiding under my covers until further notice. Or forever. Yes, forever sounds good.

You know what the worst thing is? He's right. Thomas, that is. And Alex is also right, and Ellie, and Carlos. So I'm the only one who's left in the wrong.

But I should probably back up and explain, so that when I read this again in 20 years and wonder, "what was I so worried about?" I can remember exactly what happened. Not that I'll ever forget it.

Alex (who decided to trust him with a car?) and Ellie gave me a ride. Thomas had offered me one, but I've seen how fast he goes. Thomas actually went over to my house, my mother told me later, but I'd already left.

Ellie looked spectacular. She'd finally decided to leave her hair loose, a beautiful explosion of black curls. She had on this epic green dress that I knew she'd gotten months ago. I could tell she'd come to dance. And Alex- he was wearing a suit with sneakers. And sunglasses. During nighttime.

He was just perfectly- Alex.

It feels awful to know your two best friends (one of whom you have written 92 love poems for) are together. But going with them, and *only* them, in a car to your high school's biggest dance of the year... It's just driving the knife in even more, when I thought it had already stabbed me up to the hilt. I'm glad Alex was wearing sunglasses- there's no way I would have been able to look him in the eye.

But that wasn't the worst thing. I've heard that if you're ever stabbed with a knife, the best thing to do is to leave it in there, because it clogs up the blood and makes sure you don't bleed out. (Don't ask how I know these things. It's a writer thing. You wouldn't understand). So I was more than willing to smile through the pain and just wait it out and forget about Alex. I was more than willing to leave the knife in.

Yeah, that didn't work out. Fate had other plans. Ah, my good old friend fate- who is neither good nor a friend, so I guess it can only be described as old- decided that it wasn't satisfied with the pain my mistake had caused.

WHY DID I TELL ELLIE TO SAY YES? Why did I think I could handle Thomas? Why did I ever let myself believe that I was better than this? Why did I ever let myself hope? As much as I love Emily Dickinson, she was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Hope isn't the thing with feathers. Hope is the thing with claws.

We got there, and found Carlos, and I found Thomas, and I pretty much ran away from Ellie and Alex as soon as possible. The Winter Ball was held outside in the courtyard, where a spectacular (but failed) attempt at decorating with Christmas lights and tinsel and such had been made. But there was a DJ on a little raised stage who was playing good music, and fancy dresses everywhere, and it was looking like I was gonna have a pretty good time, no matter who I was with.

Thomas didn't want to dance, or get anything to eat, and mostly spent the first hour talking to various people and introducing me to them. Usually within sight of Alex and Ellie, which made everything worse. It almost felt like he was showing me off- is it weird if I kind of liked it? It almost felt like someone... felt I mattered.

...

I spotted Delila, who sits behind me in Creative Writing, and went to go say hi to her. She introduced me to a friend of hers (whose name escapes me) with hair dyed bright blue. She must have been from that fancy writing program Delila's always missing class for. I couldn't see Thomas anywhere, so I went to get food with them. The punch was just as obnoxiously pink as it had been last year. Seriously, what do they put in it?

Then Thomas somehow found me, and dragged me over to the side to talk. I tried to introduce him to Deli and her friend, but he wasn't interested. The music had gotten louder and I couldn't hear too well, but he'd said something about him and his friends going to the track. He opened his jacket and showed me the bright tip of a can of spray paint. Apparently the track needed "a bit of a makeover".

Here comes my first big mistake. Actually, my first big mistake was telling Ellie to say yes, my second was agreeing to go with Thomas, and my third was ignoring Alex and Ellie's warnings so...this would be my fourth big mistake.

At this point I was both fed up with Thomas and pretty sure I didn't want to get myself involved with whatever he was planning. So I told him no way, that sounded like a pretty bad idea, and besides, hadn't he quit the track team like months ago?

And he yelled back that no, he hadn't, he was just taking a break from it (which I took to mean he was failing classes and had therefore been kicked out), and that if I'd agreed to go with him to the dance then I should try spending time with him.

And I yelled (because of the music volume, not because of anger, though I was angry) that if he'd invited me to go to dance, then he should have been ok with staying at the dance. And I turned back to my phone and kept writing the poem.

That right there was mistake number five. And apparently fate has this rule that if you screw up five times, the rest of your life (or possibly just high school career) will be as miserable as fate can make it.

A hiss, and then there was a bright streak of silver spray paint across my beautiful red dress. I froze in outrage, and Thomas stole my phone (which is bad) and READ THE POEM (which is much, much worse because, firstly, it wasn't finished, and secondly, YOU DON'T READ A WRITER'S STUFF WITHOUT PERMISSION, and thirdly, did I mention it wasn't finished?).

I tried getting it back from him but he's a LOT taller than me. So I could do nothing but complain very, very loudly and enthusiastically as he continued reading, my face getting redder and my fingers crossed that he didn't understand metaphors.

He looked at me in disgust, raised an eyebrow, and started walking. Still holding my phone. Towards the stage. Presumably to READ THE POEM. TO EVERYONE.

I think it was at this point where I knew things would continue getting from bad to worse. My original plan was to try to get in front of him (thus attempting to prevent him from getting on the stage) or possibly to get on the stage myself (to get Ellie's, Alex's, and possibly Carlos' attention so that they could help).

He stepped on someone else's dress, and tripped, though, and I managed to get it back.

I thought the danger had passed. And perhaps the very, *very* worst thing that could have happened was avoided. But there's always the eye of the hurricane. And then comes the rest of the storm. I was foolish enough to think that my poems were my only weakness.

News flash, Isa: they're not.

Silence, and then a sudden wave of feedback from the microphone turned everyone's attention towards the stage. Where Thomas had taken the microphone.

Life in high school is a lot like playing chess. The moment you focus on one piece and move to avoid one danger, another piece attacks from somewhere else. I moved my bishop to save one piece. His rook captured another.

Then I realized that regardless of whether he had my poem or not, he'd pretty much put me right next to the stage. I felt everyone's eyes on me. But it would be fine, I thought. *What's the worst thing that could happen?*

The worst thing that could happen sounds a little like this: "Isabella, you're PATHETIC. I just want everyone to know I only came with you to get back at Alex Evans. You wouldn't stand a chance with anyone otherwise, and it's about time you realized that."

Dead silence followed. A fitting soundtrack for my heart, which had sunk to my stomach and kept sinking through the floor. The words *my name is ISABEL* stuck in my throat.

And the worst part? Every word he said was true. Snippets of them echoed incessantly in my head. *Pathetic. About time. Alex. Alex. Alex.*

Alex had been right. Ellie had been right. Carlos had been right. Thomas- even Thomas had been right.

So I did the only thing I could do. I turned and fled, with tears streaking like shooting stars down my face and a bright band of accusatory silver across my dress.

I could have left the school, I suppose, but Alex was going to be my ride back- not to mention the fact that I was on the opposite side of the entrance. I would have to walk through everyone to get there.

I ended up taking refuge in the little hallway (if it can be called that) leading to the portables- just a roof held up by small pillars, with little lights every now and again. It smelled of shame. My phone was buzzing uncontrollably, but I couldn't bring myself to answer it. Perfect vibes for crying my heart out.

I put in my earbuds and turned on La Oreja de Van Gogh.

Of course, fate had other plans. In the shape of Carlos.

He let me know he was there and then sat down next to me, and I told him to go away. Carlos didn't say anything. He just sat there, and we both pretended that he didn't see me crying. Eventually, my tears slowed down a little. Just a little.

He stood up and held out his hand. I ignored it. He probably had somewhere better to be than trying to make a pathetic poet feel better. Especially when nothing could make me feel better.

"Come on. We're going to go get ice cream."

Ok. Maybe *one* thing could make me feel a bit better.

It took me a few tries (given that my voice was choked up because of the crying), but I finally managed to tell him that there was *no way* I was going through everyone to get to the door, and besides, wasn't the ice cream place really far away?

He smirked and led me further down the passage. We walked for a few minutes until he suddenly turned, cutting through the grass, then going left, then left again, until finally I could see the parking lot.

Of course Carlos would know a secret way out. He knows everything.

He had a bicycle, and his plan involved me sitting on the handlebars. I'd never done it before, and my dress made things difficult, but we managed. Carlos passed by the track at a distance, but close enough for us to see Thomas and someone else yelling at each other. I guess I'm not the only one fate is after today. Then Carlos sped up and we spent the rest of the ride laughing and screaming and trying not to crash.

We got to the creamery relatively quickly. I got a chocolate pomegranate seed (as always) and Carlos got cookies and cream. We talked about everything and nothing while we ate.

And I told him how tired I am of being Hero.

Ok, I guess I should explain. Shakespeare has this play called *Much Ado About Nothing*, and there's this girl called Hero. And she does pretty much nothing in the entire play.

I mean, she does what her dad says. She does what her boyfriend says. When she's accused of cheating on him, ON HER WEDDING DAY, she does nothing but faint. Her fate is passed around like a cheese platter. And now, it feels like that for me- being handed over from Silver to Alex to Thomas and now to Carlos.

Or Persephone herself, for that matter: she was the goddess of spring, daughter of Demeter (goddess of like grain and harvest and stuff). Perse's mother wouldn't let her do anything. And eventually she caught the eye of Hades, god of the dead (who I think is super misunderstood but that's another story), and he kidnapped her. Demeter got mad, unsurprisingly, and went to go complain to the king, Zeus. Who was also her brother. And Hades's brother. And Persephone's dad. Long story.

Anyways, Zeus was all like "lol, your problem."

And Demeter made everything stop growing. So then Zeus was like "WAIT WAIT OK OK" and told Hades to give Persephone back. But because Persephone had eaten 6 pomegranate seeds in the Underworld, she had to stay 6 months of the year with Hades and 6 months with Demeter. And that's why the Greeks thought there were seasons. In winter and fall, Persephone was in the Underworld and her mother Demeter was sad and nothing grew. In spring and summer, Persephone was with Demeter and everything grew again.

That's how I heard it, anyway.

But back to Persephone, and everyone bossing her around. Her life decided by Demeter, then Zeus, then Hades, then Hermes, until she ate the pomegranate seeds and put her fate into her own hands.

I'm Isabel, but I'm also Persephone. And I so love pomegranate seeds.

Oh, Thomas. I'll make sure history doesn't forget you. No, I'll make sure it hates you for all eternity. But that poem comes later.

And then Carlos said he had something important to tell me.

The first thought that went through my head was, *oh great. He's gonna tell me he likes me.* I mean like, he's epic and I love him but... not like that. And if there's one thing I really didn't need today, it was to lose another friend.

So I was like como, "Carlos you know you're an amazing friend but- I like someone else- so-"

And he looked at me strangely and said, "No I meant about you being Persephone".

Oh yeah. He knows.

I thought about denying it, but it's *Carlos*. He wasn't asking because he didn't know. He was asking to see how I'd react. Besides, I knew he wouldn't tell anyone.

Then he asked if I knew who Quicksilver was, and I said no, and then he kind of nodded and looked away. I haven't asked yet, but...

I think *Carlos* knows who Silver is.

I mean, it's highly likely that Silver is on the track team.

(A horrifying thought: HE'S NOT THOMAS, RIGHT??? RIGHT?????? Well, if it's Thomas, then I'll literally never write a poem again. FATE, DON'T DO THIS TO ME. I WILL GET ALEX TO FIGHT YOU.)

Guess who else is on track? Carlos. And if Carlos can figure out who Persephone is... then he knows who Silver is too.

I'm not sure how to feel about that. Do I want Silver to know who I am? LOL, NOPE. But do I want to know who Silver is? Of course. But do I want to ask Carlos who Silver is? That's the question.

Then he dropped me off at home and told me he'd see me at school tomorrow and to read the poem that Silver had recommended. I guess I'll do that now.

"LOVE OPENED A MORTAL WOUND" by SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ who is literally A M A Z I N G

Love opened a mortal wound. Ahhhh that's an understatement

In agony, I worked the blade

to make it deeper. Please,

I begged, let death come quick. Um... Silver... what... ?

Wild, distracted, sick,

I counted, counted

all the ways love hurt me. Pfff too many to count

One life, I thought—a thousand deaths. Leave it to Sor Juana to sum up ~this~ in a sentence

Blow after blow, my heart

couldn't survive this beating. Well that's encouraging

Then—how can I explain it?

I came to my senses. I said,

Why do I suffer? What lover

ever had so much pleasure? ...she's right

Well, Silver, I can't promise I'll get past this

But I can promise I'll try

Isn't it strange, how fickle fate is? It's been against me this entire time. When I gave Silver a poem last Friday, it turned into a cruel irony. When I was at my very worst, it sent me Thomas. And yet the poem that Silver gave me today was exactly what I needed.

And isn't it strange, how if Ellie or Alex or Carlos were to tell me that Thomas had no right, that he was wrong in every possible way about me, I might not believe them? But that poem from Silver somehow managed to make me feel better?

Isn't that strange?

I suppose it's time to finish that poem I started. Inspiration is a fleeting thing, after all. And all the famous poets were full of sorrow.

(On a different note, I should really text Ellie. She'll be worried. And I just realized that when I jokingly told her to go yell at Thomas, she might have taken it seriously.)

(Nah. She wouldn't actually confront him.)

(Right?)