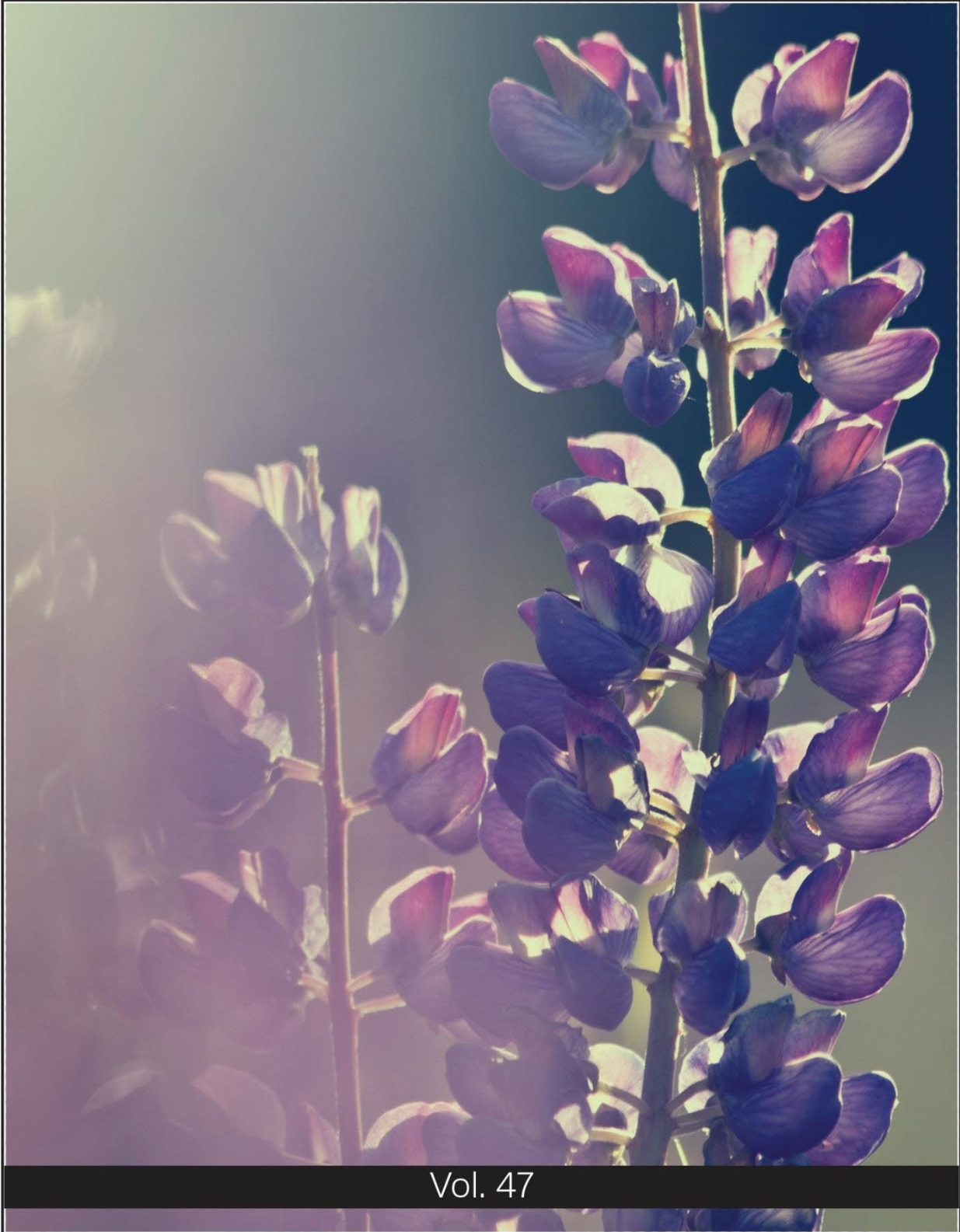


SCOP

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EDITOR

Todd Sukany

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Sarah Tarrant & Brittany Gilbert

COVER DESIGN

Latisha Russell & Sarah Tarrant

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“The AI” – by Nicole Whitsell

“Good job today!” Sarah exclaimed, running up to my side. I smiled as she graced me with her presence yet again. If there was anyone on earth that could pull off neon blue scrubs, it was her, and she did it with that natural nurse-like grace that didn’t care what other people thought of her, but had obvious training in being a lady.

“Thanks,” I started, “but it was nothing. I was a babysitter back in middle school, so I had to take a first aid class. This is nothing new.”

Sarah rushed ahead and started walking backwards so she could look me in the eye.

“That just goes to show how good of a nurse you’re gonna be! You must’ve had a passion for this even back then, so now you’re great at it! Freaky great!”

I giggled softly, tilting my head a little. That had to be at least the thousandth time I’d been told that, whether it was from my mother, my friends, or any number of my teachers. I was a little sick of hearing it, but a compliment was a compliment.

“You’re freaky great too, y’know. Seems like you only have to see a procedure once and then you can do it flawlessly. Like during our 10:00, when you did CPR and the Heimlich for the board.”

She beamed at me, placing both fists on her hips and chuckled proudly. I rolled my eyes, steering her gently out of the way of a pole.

“We’re both freaky great! How about that?”

“Fine, fine. We’re both freaky great. Now let’s get some lunch, yeah? I’m starving, and I think I heard that they’ve got chicken strips today.”

She nodded, turning back around and following me out the big double-doors towards the common building. Needless to say I was exhausted from the day’s classes already, and we were just barely half done. It made perfect sense, now, why they had spread out First Aid and CPR alone across a couple days when I had initially learned it at twelve. We had just managed to squeeze it in a couple of hours here at college. My brain was fried.

The moment we stepped into the cafeteria, instant relief. The smell of deep-fried meat, gravy, sugar, and potatoes cooked several different ways permeated the air. I could practically taste my signature for these days: chicken strips dipped in barbecue sauce with a side of waffle fries and a Diet Coke. I could tell Sarah was feeling it too, but in that moment nothing else mattered. Nothing but food, glorious food.

After an eternity in line, I was handed a plate with the most wonderful delicacy on earth. Now, today had been special already; should I get a chocolate chip cookie, or an ice—

Suddenly, screams rang out from the other side of the cafeteria, jolting me out of my foodborne trance and into a panic-driven one. The drone of a hundred or better voices hushed as only two or three started to cry out for help. I whipped around and searched the crowd, but couldn't find—no, there. Over in the southwest corner, movement. I rushed over, dropping my chicken strips entirely. There was a group of students huddled around a sophomore boy, frozen in shock as he lay on the floor. He clutched at his throat, face already turning blue as he reached out for someone, anyone, to save him.

CLICK

Medic mode: ON
Analyzing scene...SAFE
Analyzing patient...
Condition: Choking (Conscious victim)
Recommended procedure: Heimlich
Gaining consent...complete.
Starting back blows...complete.
Starting thrusts...complete.
Starting back blows...complete.
Starting thrusts...complete.
Starting back blows...object dislodged.
Analyzing patient...
Patient in recovery mode.
No further injury detected.
Medic mode: OFF

CLICK

I came to with the young man, who was now gulping down air, slouched and limp in my arms, halfway on the floor already. Relieved onlookers gawked at

me and gathered around their friend, making weak last-second attempts to help him through the little coughs that scratched the back of his lungs.

What had...?

What was...?

I let the boy loose, raising my hands in defense. He fell to his knees, then got up on his own and gave me a weak but grateful smile. Several people began to pat me on the back and thank me. What I assumed to be his girlfriend rushed in and hugged me, sobbing profusely into my shoulder. The Dean, even, was nearby, offering to reward me for my service. I couldn't hear any of them through the rushing blood in both ears as I tried to figure out what had happened.

Every single one of my nerves was alight with static electricity. The room began to tilt and spin slowly, lights dancing in front of my eyes, causing my stomach to roll. Actually...was it getting dark already...?

POWER LOW. REENERGIZE NOW.

That voice. I—oh gosh. I couldn't stay here, there were too many people, too many, too many too *many too man*—

"I-I...I have to go. Now."

I rushed out of the cafeteria and into the nearest bathroom, eyes wide and jerking around to make sure I wasn't being followed. The great wooden door and then the smaller stone one both shut behind me with a loud slam. The instant I was sure I was alone, I fell to the ground and covered my head. There was something—someone—a voice—in my brain. In my *mind. Inside of me.*

"Who—what—" I sobbed out. "Please...please please please get out of my head..."

"I'M AFRAID IT'S NOT THAT SIMPLE."

I shrieked gutturally.

"*Get out—get out—get out get out getoutgetoutgetout!!!*"

Boiling hot tears forced themselves out from the corners of both my eyes, and snot ran down like waterfalls from my nose. I shook my head furiously, as if it would throw the voice right out of my brain, then finally lay my head down on the tile. I had no clue until later how much time had passed then. All I knew is that there were voices outside the bathroom, and then there weren't.

"Are you...?" I asked eventually.

"Again, I'm afraid it's not that simple." The voice was back. Quieter, but back. My crying picked up again.

"Please, do not be afraid, young lady. You are not schizophrenic. I am not here to hurt you."

The voice whispered nothing and everything in the back of my head. Tears poured down my face for at least a good ten more minutes, but eventually I stopped again, getting used to this...voice...oh, gosh. If this *thing* was right—if I wasn't going crazy—I had questions, and lots of them.

"Who are you?" I demanded, feigning bravery. "What are you doing inside me?"

"My name is NA-7081. I am an artificial intelligence that was implanted in your brain during orientation. My job is to activate your downloaded clinical knowledge when needed."

I took a couple minutes to take this in. When would I have had something like this...and then it hit me. Nursing school orientation night. The hospital visit. The strangely saccharine nurses, smiling even though there was a man cursing them out. The IV. The weird instruction pamphlet they gave all of us about "calibrating." Was that what all of that was about?

It had to be. I hadn't had any other strange sci fi operations, not unless I had a ton of repressed memories somewhere in this head that now had a woman's voice in it.

"You're...an implant?" I questioned, still registering this. "Why would they do that to people?"

A series of images suddenly began to flood my vision: the entire history of nursing. Herbal remedies began to morph into scientific research; unhealthy environments turned clinical, and even sterile. The nursing staff slowly grew

from one per hospital to dozens for each wing, and the learning process they had to go through slowly evolving to where it was almost too much for any one person to bear.

Then the chip was invented and implanted into learners. A situation was put into place, and each one snapped into action. Their actions were fluid, but somehow still robotic.

"They performed perfectly," stated the AI, as if it were the most obvious solution. "These implants reduce the margin of error by 90%. Childhood mortality in the United States has fallen by 15% and is still falling."

"But..." my voice quivered as the images subsided. "This can't be right. There's no way people would just let doctors put chips in their heads, even if there's that much knowledge to nursing."

"It was in the waiver you signed. Page 37, paragraph 3, clause 9. 'By signing this contract you give the Nursing Department permission to perform whatever necessary procedures they deem best for your knowledge, including but not limited to: required study hours, required clinical hours, implantation of microchips, etcetera.'"

I swallowed dryly as all this new information finished sinking in. I did remember signing that waiver, but not that clause. If there was going to be a voice in my head, you would think someone would have mentioned it before I had to read fifty pages of contract. I sat up again, hugging my knees to my chest in an attempt to comfort myself of my new fate.

"So this is the new normal," I stated dryly, less a question and more a symbol of rebellion.

"Yes."

"Then keep to yourself, alright? I don't care what you are or what you do, just don't yack in my ear while I'm with my friends."

There was a beat of silence, as if she was surprised. Hah. An artificial intelligence, surprised.

"Understood."

...

"Sir, the data?"

"Of course. Class 7000 is doing better than others of the same grade. 81 managed to save a choking victim in their cafeteria today. However it was discovered by the student when she came to. They will need further calibrations to maintain cover."

"And the girl?"

"..."

"She is of no consequence. Her relationship with 81 is mutualistic for now. But keep track of her. If she discovers anything further about the agency she will need to be..."

"Of course, sir. I will enable synapsing tonight."

“Satan Deceives Himself” – by Kacey Conrad

Heroes are intriguing. Something about the heroic nature instills hope in the world. Because heroes are so inspirational, literature offers an abundance of heroic characters. Arguably, the world’s most unlikely literary hero is Satan. However, many readers believe he displays a heroic nature in John Milton’s Epic, *Paradise Lost*. Satan, the prideful, power-hungry, fallen angel condemned to an eternity in Hell, is by popular opinion a hero. This is undeniably controversial, but he does meet the guidelines to function as the hero. However, he does not adhere to the guidelines for the entirety of the poem. Satan is a diverse character torn between conflicting emotions. At the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, Satan appears to be the hero, eliciting confidence and sympathy from the readers, but as the storyline progresses, his character steadily deteriorates and Satan loses his heroic believability, revealing that he is the deceiver.

To properly assess the nature of Satan, his characteristics and degeneration throughout the Epic must first be understood alongside some of the guidelines denoting Epic heroes. John M. Steadman explains the deterioration of Satan’s character throughout *Paradise Lost* in his article, “The Idea of Satan as the Hero of ‘Paradise Lost.’” Steadman explains:

The Satan of the first book is a spirited commander who successfully rallies his defeated troops, restores them to military discipline by putting them on parade, and oversees the foundation of a new kingdom and the construction of a new capital. In the second book he is simultaneously monarch and parliamentarian, strategist and space explorer. He alone has plotted the overthrow of man; he alone undertakes the perilous voyage. (269)

Steadman lists characteristics that easily qualify a heroic leader and accurately summarize Satan’s actions in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*.

Milton opens Book I describing the fall of Satan and his demons, followed by their course of action after condemnation to Hell. Pandemonium is in distress. The demons are unsettled because of their banishment from Heaven and the uncertainty of their future. One demon exclaims,

[I]f there be in Hell
fear to be worse destroyed: what can be worse
Than to dwell here, driven out from bliss, condemned
In this abhorred deep to utter woe. (II, 84-87)

The demons wallow in pity and hope God will have mercy on them. They are full of regret for their actions and are determined to carefully plan their next steps to ensure they do not suffer more than they already have. Despite this, through a devious speech, Satan is able to single-handedly pull the

demons out of their stupors and convince them to once again attack God's power by targeting His creation. In *Paradise Lost and the Modern Reader*, Thomas Wheeler explains that Satan "gives hope and renewed life to his followers" (100). Satan has a strong command of language, allowing him to excite his demons' rebellious spirits.

Satan's speech is so eloquent and cunning that he is able to sway his demons into becoming his troop, laying aside their desires to appease God. Satan is quoted saying, "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (I, 224-225). Later, he even suggests, "This horror will grow mild, this darkness light" (II, 220). He believes his "immortal hate" will make him a powerful force (I, 106-109). Satan sets himself up as the demons' mighty leader while also working to convince them that Hell is not punishment. Instead, Hell is their new kingdom. These characteristics are not only admirable in a leader, they also constitute Satan to be deemed an Epic hero. John Swafford, an English instructor at Ramona High School, explains that Epic heroes embody "loyalty, valor [or] courage, sense of justice, dignity, [and] persistence" (4). Although misguided, Satan strongly displays these characteristics.

Milton gives Satan characteristics that set him apart as a determined leader loyal to the cause he is fighting despite previous failures. He is persistent in his attempts to gain what he views as justice while standing in the middle of the consequences of his first failed attempt. He had the courage to stand against God's undefeatable power once and is ready to rebel again. Milton's Satan is a powerful, courageous presence that meets the standards Swafford lists. Satan is described as "majestic" with "Atlantean shoulders" and a look that "drew audience and attention still as night" (II, 305-308). Satan looks and fills the part of hero to his demon followers, inspiring readers to find confidence in his abilities. Not only does Satan display these outward qualities, he also displays inward heroic qualities that appeal to the readers' emotions.

Satan is an attractive character readers want redeemed. In an article titled "Dante's Satan and Milton's 'Byronic Hero'" by Anne Paolucci, she states, "Milton's Satan has all the tragic grandeur of a Greek hero" (144). She qualifies her statement by drawing attention to Satan's "humanitarian impulses" and "depth of feeling" (143). These traits are important as Swafford explains that a hero "overcomes great obstacles [and] opponents but maintains humanity" and "experiences typical human emotions [and] feelings" (5). Satan's human qualities and emotions make him a character readers easily sympathize with. His struggles are relatable.

When readers are first introduced to Satan, his character is still holding on to some light from his angelic nature. He has not yet fully accepted his fallen nature. Therefore, readers are able to connect and empathize with him. Satan not only fits the characteristics of the Epic hero, but is a believable hero. In their essay, "Milton's Satan: Hero or Anti-Hero?," Edith Kaiter and Corine Sandiuc explain, "[Satan] is easy to identify and sympathize with because the weaknesses he exhibits...are predominantly human" (453). Between his internal conflicts and longings for the perfection he once was a part of, readers are able to feel hope that God could redeem him. Satan could choose to repent.

However, as the story progresses, Satan loses his light as he is filled with despair and hatred. He begins to embody those feelings until he is Hell and desperation within himself. Paolucci analyzes these facts in her article. She states, "In spite of the momentary glimmer of hope which flares up at the sight of the luminous heavens, Milton's Satan is doomed to renew his despair and hate" (142). When Satan begins to embrace these feelings, he transitions from hero to villain. His pride overtakes him, and he becomes a character full of rage and jealousy. Kaiter and Sandiuc explain that "Satan's courage diminishes, and his character deteriorates greatly...as he becomes an egoist who is only looking for personal glory" (454). This deterioration takes place progressively in Book III and Book IV of *Paradise Lost*.

Satan makes his fatal transition in the third book. Steadman explains that in Book III, Satan assumes his first disguises in Eden. He describes the disguises as "symbols of his progressive degeneration" and "evidence of his prudence, and his fraud" (269-270). Steadman then explains, "The Satan of the fourth book is sometimes regarded as a different character altogether, or else as the real Satan, stripped of his pseudo-heroic mask" (270). Satan transforms from the fallen angel of light, still clinging to some of his heavenly characteristics, to the embodiment of Hell in four short books. He accepts his changes and embraces his new feelings, using them to fuel his desire for destruction. When Satan loses the qualities that allow readers to sympathize with him, he loses all his heroic believability and readers see that he is a fraud. Satan admits in Book IV, "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (IV, 75) and "I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere; / Till pride and worse ambition threw me down" (IV, 39-40). Satan himself reveals his decline.

When Satan encounters Adam and Eve in Book IV, he is overcome with such conflicting emotions that his character crumples even more. Paolucci explains, "He is painfully sensitive to light and love; his despair is awakened sharply at the sight of Heaven and Eden" (144). She further explains that at

the sight of Adam and Eve, Satan yearns to ask God for forgiveness, but cannot bring himself to face the shame he would suffer from the demons he now rules over. Satan cannot escape his "immutable destiny" to be the ruler of Hell. He is "Hell's dread emperor with pomp supreme, / And God-like imitated State" (II, 510-511). The torment of remembering all he has lost causes him to "renew his despair and hate" (Paolucci, 145-146). Through Satan's interactions with Adam and Eve in Eden, readers see his inner turmoil and destructive intentions. Sympathizing with Satan becomes increasingly difficult as he consciously rejects repentance and internalizes Hell, ridding himself all remnants of his former angelic nature.

In the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, the concept of Satan as the Epic hero completely falls apart and evidence of Satan as deceiver is abundant. Because Adam and Eve had sinned after being deceived by Satan, the Archangel Michael arrives in Eden with news about Jesus, Satan, and the future; Jesus is coming and will provide salvation to fix the wrongs that Adam, Eve, and Satan have caused. Satan is put in his place as Michael describes him as the "adversary Serpent" (XII, 312). Michael makes it clear that Jesus is the true hero that will fix the damage that Satan began through "a better cov'nant" and "free acceptance of large grace" (XII, 302,304-305). Satan is exposed as a fraud.

Satan's heroic nature was deceptive. In his book *God, Man, and Satan: Patterns of Christian Thought and Life in Paradise Lost, Pilgrim's Progress and the Great Theologians*, Roland Frye states, "Satan operates through the perversion of truth and the invention of lies" (28). He is the deceiver, the destroyer, the trickster, the liar. 2 Corinthians 11:14 reads, "But I am not surprised! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (NLT). Just as in *Paradise Lost*, Satan may appear good, but the more that is revealed about him, the clearer his deceptive, evil nature becomes. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan deceived Adam and Eve and destroyed their innocence. Today, Satan prowls the Earth seeking souls to entice with a falsely heroic nature only to destroy them and condemn them to an eternity in Hell alongside himself. Satan was written to deceive Milton's readers and show his true character, to compete with God like he believed he could, and to make readers question what they believe. Satan was written realistically. Because *Paradise Lost* is written from the perspective of Satan, he is portrayed the way he sees himself. Satan views himself as a hero as he rallies his followers and causes destruction. He deceives himself.

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"A Tree Falls" - by Sarah Tarrant

You wanted your family there—
so that you could be with your roots
as you became unattached to them.
The truth is
you were already unattached
by the time we got there.
You had teetered upon life for as long as you could
all while keeping a great distance from your roots.
And before you realized it,
you had let yourself decay.
We barely recognized you—
your limbs shriveled and gnarled.
We stood watching you,
as your leaves turned yellow.
And when we left,
you fell
 without a sound.

Colonel without Glory – by Sarah Tarrant

Characters:

Pops
Chica
Nuger
Chikita
Nuemi
Chace
Nunzio

Act 1

(Scene opens with a loud beeping noise. CHICA, NUGER, CHIKITA, NUEMI, CHACE, and NUNZIO are all lying in a heap in the middle of a round circle. They don't move for several moments after the lights come up. POPS is curled up in a dark back corner of the stage, but he doesn't move at all until later. The audience should only see him as an unidentifiable black bump on the floor. CHICA is the first to awaken and sit up. She rubs her cold arms and legs and looks around at the carnage around her. She yawns.)

CHICA

Well, of all the places I expected to wake up in, I didn't expect *this*.

(CHACE awakens.)

CHACE

Oh wow! We get to do this again! I thought that last night was it.

CHICA

We didn't fulfill our purpose last time.

CHACE

But now we have the chance to do it again. Oh, this is so great, Chica. We'll do the purpose thing and then . . . Well, whatever happens we'll be doing what we're supposed to.

CHICA

Who all is still with us?

CHACE

Let's do a head-count.

CHICA

Me, you . . . Nuemi, Nunzio, Chikita . . . is that Nuger?

CHACE

Oh gosh. His legs are gone!

(CHICA and CHACE rush over to NUGER who has fallen into a mass of goo and is moaning softly.)

CHICA

He's already fulfilled most of his purpose. Oh! I didn't know it was so awful!

CHACE

Nuger! Can you hear me? Nuger, answer me!

(NUGER's moaning fades away.)

CHACE

He's not going to make it! Look, the goo is dissolving his skin.

(CHIKITA and NUEMI wake up when they hear CHACE.)

CHIKITA

Get away from him! He'll dissolve your skin too if you keep touching him!

NUEMI

Oh gross!

(CHICA and CHACE drop NUGER back into the goo, and the goo splashes a little bit all over everybody.)

CHIKITA

OH MY GOSH! How could you do this to me? I've been so careful to stay uncontaminated. Oh, I hate you all! Get out of my WAY, Nuemi!

(Nuemi moves as CHIKITA runs over to the microwave fan. CHIKITA raises her arms and spreads her legs wide, trying to dry off.)

CHICA

Poor Nuger. All he ever wanted was to fulfill his purpose. He kept us all together during the bagging season.

CHACE

We can't dwell on the losses. Remember what Nuger always said? It's all for that final crunch . . . or something like that.

CHICA

He was so inspiring . . .

(NUNZIO awakens.)

NUNZIO

Oh . . . good . . . gravy . . .

CHICA

Are you okay, Nunzio?

NUNZIO

Do . . . I . . . LOOK . . . okay?

*(CHICA, CHACE, and NUEMI
consider NUNZIO as he
shivers.)*

CHACE

You're always cold. I mean, no wonder you didn't fulfill your purpose last night. You didn't even get above 100.

NUNZIO

Just because I'm the biggest one—

CHACE

I wasn't saying you were—

NUNZIO

Oh, I think you were. You're such a tiny nugget. I'm surprised you made it through the bagging season. You're more like a crumb than a nugget. I wouldn't be surprised if you were just a ball of breading without any meat at all.

CHACE

HOW DARE YOU?

CHICA

Alright, everybody, shut up! There are only 6 of us left. And we've got to make it count. We'll never have the chance to do this again. Leftovers like us don't get third-chances. So, let's just be as crispy as possible and stay away from the goo.

NUEMI

What about Nuger?

CHICA

Just stay away from him as best as you can. We can't save him now.

NUNZIO

Yeah, the only way Chace was able to touch him without dissolving his breeding was because he's so tiny and SO crispy.

CHACE

Hey! Just because you'll never be crispy—

(A voice comes from the back of the microwave.)

POPS

CAN'T AN OLD MAN GET ANY PEACE AND QUIET AROUND HERE?

(CHICA whispers.)

CHICA

What was that?

(All the conscious nuggets scream when POPS stands up and comes toward them.)

POPS

Oh, I remember you guys from last night. There used to be more of you.

CHICA

How do you know we were here last night? I don't remember seeing you here.

POPS

Do you only believe in things you can see?

(CHIKITA interrupts.)

CHIKITA

Hey, I think this microwave is broken. The heat stopped but the door didn't open.

CHACE

Oh no! It stopped? HURRY!

(All the nuggets jump back into a pile, careful to stay away from NUGER and the goo. They wait for a minute while POPS starts pacing around the circle.)

POPS

After all the seasons I've lived here, I've never seen such a wild group of nuggets. Leftovers are supposed to be cold and groggy. Not springy and excited. It's unnatural!

CHACE

Well, we aren't natural. We're chock-full of nitrites and nitrates and antibiotics.

CHICA

Shh! Chace! That door's gonna open any moment.

NUNZIO

Well, it hasn't . . . We've been forgotten! We'll never fulfill our purpose thing!

CHICA

Would Nuger want you to talk like that? No, he wouldn't. Now shut up and act like a crispy nugget.

(NUNZIO starts crying.)

NUNZIO

I'll never be a crispy nugget!

CHACE

Oh my gosh, Nunzio. Don't start sweating through your breading. You'll never be crispy if you keep doing that.

NUNZIO

Well, what am I supposed to do? It's all over. The heat stopped. The door's gonna open. And I'm gonna disappoint everyone. Just like I did last night!

POPS

What's he crying about?

CHACE

He's too fat to be crispy.

POPS

Oh good gravy, get up. Everyone, come over here. If you want to be crispy, you've got to do what the chicken nugget girl was doing over here.

CHACE

We can't move. What if the door opens and we're not on the plate? We'll be disqualified.

POPS

Which is worse? Being disqualified or being wet?

(The nuggets all look at each other before quickly getting to their feet and following POPS over to the fan.)

CHIKITA

Hey, my name is Chikita, by the way. Not "chicken nugget girl."

POPS

I don't care.

CHICA

What *is* your name anyway?

POPS

I don't know.

CHICA

You don't know?

POPS

Not anymore.

CHICA

Well, normally people like us are named after what we are. I'm a chicken nugget. So, my name is Chica.

POPS

That's easy for you to say.

CHICA

What's that supposed to mean?

POPS

You never were dependent on this microwave to make you into your true form. Technically, you were already made before you got here, and now you're just getting heated up. I on the other hand . . .

CHACE

Wait. Are you a popcorn kernel?

(POPS doesn't answer.)

CHACE

So, you *are* a popcorn kernel.

CHICA

Chace, be nice. What if he doesn't want to talk about it.

CHACE

Why not? What's so shameful about being a popcorn kernel?

(Pause.)

POPS

I never popped.

(Pause.)

CHICA

I'm sorry.

POPS

You nuggets are lucky. You were only bagged with a few other nuggets. Like, 25 or 30. I was bagged with hundreds of other kernels. And we were all together for such a long time . . . past our expiration date. Then came our time in the microwave . . .

NUNZIO

What happened?

POPS

I fell out.

(Everyone gasps.)

POPS

And then I cooked too fast and burned.

(Everyone moans in pain. CHICA rests a hand on his shoulder.)

POPS

All I ever wanted was to fulfill my purpose.

(NUGER suddenly sits up.)

NUGER

Purpose! I must fulfill my purpose!

(Everyone gasps in surprise and takes a step back, still terrified of getting sauce on themselves.)

CHICA

Don't move, Nugger. You'll only make it worse.

(NUGER ignores her and starts to move towards the others even though he doesn't have any legs.)

NUGER

Don't tell me what to do, you little crumb. I made this bag of nuggets into what it is today. I saw them through thick and thin. And what do I have to show for it? Nothing! I'll be the wettest nugget ever to exist while you five are crispy and delectable. But you know what? If I can't fulfill my purpose, then nobody can!

(The microwave switches on again.)

CHACE

Oh quick! Everyone run!

(NUGER lunges for CHICA, who evades him. The other nuggets scurry around the microwave, jumping over the goo and trying to stay away from NUGER. Their breeding sprays everywhere, sending crumbs all over the microwave floor. NUGER finally grabs onto CHIKITA's ankle and brings her down into the goo with him. She screams.)

CHIKITA

You brute!

(NUEMI takes a step forward to save her.)

NUEMI

Stop it!

(CHACE and NUNZIO grab her to keep her from falling into the struggle between CHIKITA and NUGER.)

CHICA

Oh my gosh, what's happening to Pops?

(Everyone stops and turns to see POPS standing up with his arms raised. He shivers all over.)

(POW!)

(Lights down, then lights back up.)

NUNZIO

I'm crispy now!

CHACE

My butt's black!

CHIKITA

I'M ALL WET.

(CHIKITA frees herself from NUGER's grip, and NUGER falls back into the goo with a splash. He moans softly but does not get back up.)

CHICA

Pops!

(POPS is face down on the turntable, transformed into a popped popcorn bloom. CHICA runs over to shake him to see if he's still alive.)

CHICA

Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Oh my GOSH! He's not moving. I think he's dead!

(CHACE and NUNZIO run over to survey POPS.)

NUNZIO

I don't feel a heartbeat.

CHACE

What the heck is a heartbeat?

(NUNZIO bursts out crying.)

NUNZIO

I don't know!

CHICA

Pops! Do you hear me? Wake up!

(POPS stirs and sits up. He looks down at himself.)

CHICA

Are you alright?

(POPS's voice is higher pitched and breathier.)

POPS

Am I?

CHICA

Are you?

POPS

I feel funny.

CHACE

Does it hurt?

POPS

Well . . . I don't know . . . I feel . . . yeah, it hurts.

NUNZIO

I think you popped.

POPS

I popped?

NUNZIO

Yeah.

POPS

Oh.

CHICA

Are you okay? Can you stand up?

POPS

I don't think I want to.

CHICA

Oh.

POPS

I feel . . . swollen. Full.

CHACE

You sound different.

NUNZIO

If you popped, you'd sound different too.

(POPS coughs to clear his throat. The world looks different to him.)

CHICA

Pops, you did it. You popped!

POPS

I guess so.

CHICA

You fulfilled your purpose. You popped!

POPS

Uh-huh.

CHICA

What's wrong?

POPS

It's just . . . not what I expected.

(Pause.)

POPS

I wanted to do this with *her*. We were a team. But not anymore.

CHACE

You had a girlfriend?

POPS

Well, I guess she was. When she popped . . . she was the most beautiful, buttery popcorn bloom I'd ever seen.

CHICA

You saw her? Even after you fell out of the bag?

POPS

She jumped out after me. She held on as long as she could. But then she popped, even though she didn't want to. It scared her. And then God pulled her out with the bag and other fallen kernels. Before I could say goodbye, she was gone. . .

NUNZIO

Stupid God.

POPS

That's just the way it goes here. We're always taken before we're ready. But we have to fulfill that purpose, I guess.

CHACE

Stupid purpose thing.

CHICA

Did the microwave just stop?

(Everyone, including POPS, scurries to the center of the plate and piles up. Microwave beeps. Lights down. End scene.)

“The Beagle and Other Beliefs” – by Sarah Tarrant

I gripped the inside of the car door as the hunter’s wife zoomed down curvy county roads. My fingers turned white from holding on so tightly. I remember pushing down on the floor every time we came to a stop sign as if I could help bring the car to a complete stop. I believed that if I took off my shoes and socks I would see that my toes had turned pale too, to match my fingers.

The drive took one hour to get there and three to get back. We only found out later that the speed limit was 40 mph—not 75 mph. And during that ride, because of the rapid elevation changes, my ears popped and cracked. I swallowed often, dealing the pressure against my eardrums.

.....

“Cranium fins.” That’s what my dad’s father called “ears.”

The Tarrant family contains extensive generations of big-eared people. But just because they are big doesn’t mean that our ears are any more useful than other people’s. They merely stick outward, defying the constraints of gravity. People can’t help but notice and remark about the size of them.

Thankfully my mother’s genetic makeup softened the general shape of my younger sister’s and my ears. They tuck in on the sides and looked far less pronounced than my father’s. However, my mother’s contribution to my ears also brought long earlobes, which meant that she often warned me about talking on the phone with an earring in my ear. If I plan on talking for a while, I should take out the earring so that the phone and earring won’t stretch out my earlobes any more than they already are naturally.

Overall, I believe I have a good pair of cranium fins. They just act differently than other people’s do.

.....

After that one-hour, life-threatening drive to some way-out-of-the-way corn field, the hunter’s wife and I got out of the car. The field stretched for miles, as far as the tree line allowed it to go.

I swallowed for the thousandth time to give my ears one final “pop.”

The hunter rushed up to us and began to show me the rows in the corn field where he had looked. He had taken Oscar, the beagle, out into the country to go hunting. And like usual, the hunter had put a bell on Oscar’s collar so

that he could hear wherever the little dog ran when he stopped barking. Sometimes the hunter left the bell on the collar even at home, and it sounded like Tinker Bell was roaming the yard. The whole neighborhood knew when Oscar, the tinker-dog, was making his rounds around his property.

Only now, the tinker-dog had wandered off too far. And the hunter no longer heard the dog's "tinkle-tinkle." He called his wife and told her what happened, so she peeled into my driveway in a panic and told me I was to come with her to find Oscar, the wander-dog.

It was to be my job to listen with my young ears and try to find Oscar's "tinkle-tinkle." For once, I was the hunting dog, and Oscar wasn't. But instead of having to sniff him out with my nose, I had to sniff him out with my ears.

.....

The connection between my ears and my brain has never been very good. My father and sister are musicians, and they talk about having "tonal memory," which is when a person can hear a sequence of musical notes and sing it back perfectly.

I fail every mock tonal exam they ever give me. They grimace in pain from my direct auditory assault.

They can hear things, remember them, and repeat them perfectly. But I always forget.

My hearing is different from theirs. It's like a feeling more than an actual recognition of noise. I can feel the music, but I can't repeat it. I can remember the feeling I get from hearing something. I believe that I hear it. But I can't make anyone with tonal memory believe that I accurately hear the sequence of musical notes.

.....

We wandered around the field, all three of us, for another hour, with no visible or audible sign of Oscar.

I kept feeling like he was close by, though. Which was unsettling. It was like I kept expecting to find him. Or like he was nearby watching us look for him. At last, the hunter and his wife started to walk back to their cars. They said some things about how "he'll turn up eventually" and "we'll come back later."

They didn't sound like they believed they would find their dog. They said the words, but they didn't seem to believe them. They couldn't believe what they couldn't see. Or hear. Or feel.

My feet grew tangled in the brambles on the edge of the field. I knew I couldn't leave Oscar out in that field. The hunter and his wife loved that stupid dog more than anything else. And they thought that Oscar would be their last dog. They believed they were that old. Probably because they knew what they looked like in a mirror.

"Hang on," I heard myself say.

They looked back at me wearily.

I turned around and started walking toward the trees in the distance. I didn't really understand why I was moving in that direction. It was like I felt something in that direction. I didn't hear anything or see anything, but I couldn't shake the prickly feeling in my brain. And it wasn't because of the brambles.

"Don't go all the way out there," the hunter called after me. "It's too far."

"Just hang on a second," I said over my shoulder.

His voice shook the feeling I had, almost diminishing it.

.....

My ex-boyfriend didn't believe me when I tried to explain how I can navigate a room in the dark. How I hear things differently than other people. I told him it was like I can hear the movement of air differently when I am close to an object. I can hear, or feel, how the air brushes against the desk, or the bed, or the coffee table. It was a different noise from when air moves freely without obstacles. Like how belief moves freely without obstacles.

He didn't believe me. He looked at me, saw that I was just a writer with troubling ideas, and decided I wasn't believable.

.....

As I slowed my steps to a halt, I heard the faintest of tinkles. It was so faint and so high-pitched that I almost didn't hear it at all. It tickled the outer rim of my Tarrant cranium fin. It sounded like if I could hear a snowflake fall on a piece of glass. Or feel a fog rub against my cheek.

I waited.

It got louder.

From across the field, because my hearing sensitivity was turned up to maximum, I heard the hunter draw in a breath of air to say something. He didn't feel it. He didn't hear it. He didn't see it.

Even though I was far ahead of him and his wife, I raised my hand to silence him.

Both the sound of his breath and the sound of my arm moving through the air made me lose the belief for a moment. Sometimes I have to be perfectly still—perfectly silent—and have my ears and heart wide open to feel a belief, a hope.

I swallowed to pop my ears again.

I stared down the row of corn stalks I stood in.

And Oscar stepped into it nearly five hundred feet away.

The sight of him confirmed my belief.

And the sound of his butt hitting the ground almost deafened me.

"Oh my gosh," I think I said. My hearing adjusted to a normal volume, and I was back to being able to hear with just my physical ears again.

Oscar tilted his head to one side and looked at me as if to say, "Well, duh. I'm right here."

.....

Some people think seeing is believing. But I think that hearing is believing. People have to work harder to hear than to see. And sometimes hearing is closer to feeling. Sometimes I have to feel to hear. Where there is a feeling, there is the beginning of belief.

Faith, hope, and belief aren't things that always require sight. More often than not, people have to believe in big things that they can't see. Bigger than a beagle.

“The Rise of Amish Literature” – by Rebecca Foltz

Readers find it fascinating to learn about other cultures, especially when those cultures lie within a person’s very own. The Amish are not only a religious group, but a community of like-minded people. Their prayer caps and horse-drawn buggies fascinate the English, otherwise known as those who are not Amish. This fascination has led to the creation of a new subgenre of books: Amish literature. This subgenre branches out among a variety of topics such as romance and, ironically, science fiction. Since the start of the Amish craze in 1997 with Beverly Lewis’s *The Shunning* (Bonta 2), Amish literature continues to rise in popularity.

To fully understand Amish literature, a person should know the origins of this sect of Christianity. The Amish derive from the Anabaptist church which started during the time of the Reformation. Due to severe persecution, they migrated from present day Switzerland to Pennsylvania territory in the 1700s (Štekovič 19). The Anabaptists split into the Mennonite and Amish in 1693 when Jacob Ammann called for stricter rules and harsher punishments within the church (D. Weaver-Zercher 90). The Amish wish to remain separate from the world, but it is because of this wish “that they keep attracting media attention and have appeared as leading characters in films, newspaper articles and fiction” (Štekovič 20). The Amish religion started nearly four hundred years ago, but it did not catch the eye of the curious public until recently.

Although *The Shunning* started the current Amish literature trend, it was not the first Amish novel. *Sabina: A Story of the Amish* by Helen Reimensnyder Martin was written in 1905. From the perspective of an English man, *Sabina* portrays a negative view of the Amish, calling them ignorant, strange, and commonplace. On the other end of the spectrum, Cora Gottschalk Welty’s *The Masquerading of Margaret* paints the Amish as peaceful and among the happiest people on earth (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 411-412, 416). In 1937, Ruth Lininger Dobson’s novel “*Straw in the Wind* elicited indignant responses from Amish and Mennonites” (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 419). Due to the tremendous inaccuracies in Dobson’s novel, Joseph W. Yoder—who was born Amish but was Mennonite at the time—was inspired to write *Rosanna of the Amish*, the story of his mother. Yoder’s novel comes close to presenting the Amish as ideal (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 419-420). Twenty years later, “Clara Bernice Miller, who grew up Amish, would write four romance-inflected novels, all of which proved to be as unflattering to the Amish as Yoder’s was generous” (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 421). Miller’s goal was to have Amish people read her books so that they might wholly devote themselves to God as born-again Christians. This thought then

gave birth to “evangelicalism—with its attendant emphases on a personal relationship with Christ, born-again salvation, and evangelism ... [as] the flavor enhancer that would continue to both satisfy and stimulate readerly appetites” (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 421). Authors continue to write with hope that their readers will accept Jesus Christ into their hearts as their Savior.

One main reason that Amish literature has become popular is the evangelical aspect to it. Publishers tend to target “evangelical women who are interested in stories about simpler times, closed communities, and the strength of the traditional Amish faith” (Bonta 2). Amish novels can sometimes be treated as a daily devotional. The religiousness of these novels not only nourishes the soul but keeps the romance clean.

Secular novels dominate the romance genre. With shelves full of books such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James, it has become increasingly difficult to find a romance without sexual encounters. Although there are Amish romances containing such explicit scenes, most Amish novels are published through Christian houses. This assures the reader that whatever he or she may pick up off the shelf will align with his or her beliefs.

Love Comes Softly by Janette Oke is often recognized “as the novel that launched the contemporary Christian fiction movement” (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 425). The characters in the novel are not Amish; however, “its blend of rurality, romance, and religion ... render it a close ancestor of contemporary Amish fiction” (V. Weaver-Zercher, “Tracing” 425). Amish literature takes part of the world as it was a hundred or more years ago and combines it with the modern world. Because the Amish live in a way that is separate from modern society, they do not use most of today’s technology, making them almost indistinguishable from early settlers of the American west. Author Suzanne Woods Fisher said that she loves “the contrast between the Amish and the English and how they kind of collide.” Writing about the Amish in modern times gives the reader the best of both worlds.

In the modern world, life can be hectic and full of strife. The English praise the Amish for their modest way of life. They are not caught up with movies and television or celebrities. They do experience difficulties, but they depend on family and community when in need. Fisher describes the Amish community as “a quieter world and a peaceful world.” People read Amish literature in order to escape to a simpler life.

Around the same time that Amish literature began to take off in popularity, Charles Carl Roberts IV attacked West Nickel Mines Amish School in

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Five girls between the ages of seven and thirteen died on October 2 of 2006. Due to the nature of the crime, the Amish community had every right to hold a grudge, and yet they chose forgiveness the same week the crime was committed. Their decision to forgive the man responsible for the murder of their children shocked the nation (Kasdorf 328-332). Suzanne Woods Fisher was able to talk to one of the families affected by this tragedy. Fisher recalled that "while there was sorrow, they [the Amish family] kept repeating, 'God is good all the time. God knows. We believe they're [the victims are] in heaven.'" This willingness to forgive a horrific crime made people curious about the Amish and their beliefs. To satisfy their curiosity, people turned to Amish literature.

The English are not the only ones reading Amish literature. The Amish themselves read it, too. In fact, "some Amish homes have rows and rows of the novels" (V. Weaver-Zercher, "Bonnet" 5). However, there are mixed reviews from the Amish community.

While some Amish love being able to read about characters just like themselves, other people cannot get over the inaccuracies found within the texts. A few Amish teenagers "have taken to calling her [Beverly Lewis] 'Beverly Clueless'" (V. Weaver-Zercher, "Bonnet" 6). Authors tend to skip over details about how much technology the Amish actually use, common names, type of clothing, and language spoken. Perhaps the biggest inaccuracy of an Amish novel is the cover. According to Suzanne Woods Fisher, covers of Amish books "are meant to draw you [the reader] in. It's meant to sort of pull you in, so you know you're kind of crossing into another world." However, when the model on the front of the book is wearing makeup and has plucked eyebrows, the magic of "crossing into another world" (Fisher) is just that: magic.

Amish literature got its start in the early twentieth century; however, the popularity of the subgenre did not kick off until Beverly Lewis published *The Shunning* in 1997 (Bonta 2). Since then, Amish literature has taken the Evangelical Christian community by storm. The mixture of both old and modern worlds creates a perfect balance for readers who cannot decide what time period they prefer to read about. The romance novels are generally safe to leave lying around a house full of children. The novels also answer various questions regarding Amish faith, life, and community. Although some books are riddled with inaccuracies due to authors not doing their research, most novels are written by competent authors who care about the Amish. Thanks to these authors, the Amish subgenre continues to flourish, and because of ordinary and curious people, the books keep growing in popularity.

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“The Anti-Poet of Anti-Poems” – by Sarah Anne Wruck

Another triumphant return
from the battles of sedating the soul.
We wish you all the best
in placing these
pieces of yourself elsewhere.

No Cinnamon, Please. - by Bethany Vermillion

Characters:

Elena
Barista
Leo

Act 1:

(The scene opens on a busy coffee shop early in the morning. The BARISTA is making a coffee order. ELENA enters, in a hurry. She waits at the counter for a few seconds, but BARISTA doesn't see her. She clears her throat. It doesn't work. She checks her watch and then clears her throat again. Right as BARISTA turns on the blender—)

ELENA

Excuse me.

(BARISTA continues to blend. She checks her watch again.)

Great. Hello?

(Right as BARISTA turns off the blender—)

EXCUSE ME.

(BARISTA turns around.)

BARISTA

(Monotone)

Hello, what can I get for you today? Can I interest you in our new season drinks?

ELENA

Yes, I'll have a—

BARISTA

We have a gingerbread latte, a caramel swirl mocha fudge latte, or a toasted marshmallow donut sprinkle frappe with hazelnut icing whipped cream.

ELENA

No, I already know what I—

BARISTA

Or we have our seasonal pastries—

ELENA

No, no. I know what I want, thank you. I'll have a 16oz spiced mocha with two extra shots of espresso. Hold the cinnamon.

BARISTA

Absolutely.

(BARISTA types in the order into the register.)

Oh, no. Wrong button. I'm sorry, let me just...okay. There. Alright, ma'am. You have a 12oz spiced mocha with two extra shots of espresso. That'll be 5.50.

ELENA

16oz.

BARISTA

What?

ELENA

I need a 16oz.

BARISTA

Alright, let me get that fixed.

(BARISTA starts to retype the order. ELENA taps her fingers on the counter, trying not to check her watch.)

BARISTA (CONT'D)

Alright, we have a 16oz mocha with two extra shots of espresso. Right?

ELENA

(She hands him her credit card.)

Yep, that sounds great. Wait—that's a *spiced* mocha. Right?

BARISTA

Absolutely.

ELENA

Great.

BARISTA

I'll have that right out.

ELENA

Perfect.

(BARISTA starts to prepare the drink, measuring

everything carefully and precisely. At first, ELENA tries to sit down and wait. She checks her watch, peers over the counter to see what he's doing. She stands back up and watches from a few feet away from the counter. She checks her watch again. After what feels like an agonizing wait, the drink is done.)

BARISTA

16oz spiced mocha!

(ELENA goes to the counter and picks up the drink. She gets a whiff and stops.)

ELENA

Does this have cinnamon in it?

BARISTA

Yes, ma'am. The spiced mocha comes with nutmeg and cinnamon-

ELENA

No, no, no. I ordered this without cinnamon; this can't have cinnamon.

BARISTA

I'm sorry, ma'am, but the spices for our spiced mocha come together.

ELENA

I know for a fact that this drink can be made without cinnamon. This drink *cannot* have cinnamon.

BARISTA

I'm sorry, ma'am, but that's how the drink is made.

ELENA

No, no. Because my boss is *allergic* to cinnamon. Like, deathly allergic. And this here, this spiced mocha, is her *favorite* drink. I had to drive all the way across town at 4:30 in the morning to get this drink for her after staying at the office helping her prepare for her trip until 2AM. And today she is flying to Philadelphia and is currently deciding whether she is going to give me paid vacation while she's gone or stick me with the stack of paperwork she has yet to do. And she won't make this decision until after her flight. Do you know why? Because Missy Stewart always does her paperwork on the plane. And do you know what Missy Stewart doesn't do in Philadelphia? Paperwork. Do you know who has to do the paperwork if Missy Stewart falls asleep on the plane? Me. Do you know who has to drive Missy Stewart to the hospital if Missy Stewart has an allergic reaction to cinnamon which would make her miss her very important flight? Me. Do you know who *really* needs a week off? ME. Do you know who ordered a 16oz spiced mocha with two extra shots of espresso *hold the cinnamon* at 5:15 in the morning in order to get back across town in time to drive Missy Stewart to the airport and give her her coffee at 5:45 so she doesn't fall asleep on the plane to Philadelphia so she can do the flippin' paperwork that's due next week? Yes, that's right. *Me*. So I will ask you again, is there cinnamon in this coffee?

BARISTA

I'll have another one right out.

ELENA

Perfect.

(ELENA sits back down, checking her watch every five seconds. LEO enters and stands by the counter.)

BARISTA

16oz spiced mocha with two extra shots of espresso, hold the cinnamon.

(ELENA jumps up. LEO grabs the drink and starts to walk out. ELENA runs after him and places herself in front of him)

ELENA

Sorry, you grabbed the wrong drink. That's mine.

LEO

Actually, I placed my order on the app to be ready at 5:50. It's 5:50. This is mine.

ELENA

That's a special order of a spiced mocha without cinnamon, but if you'd like, I have a perfectly good mistake order *with* cinnamon that you are welcome to have, free of charge.

LEO

I'm allergic to cinnamon.

ELENA

You've got to be kidding me.

LEO

I'm not, and I'm going to be late, so please let me by.

ELENA

I'm sorry, I can't. I *need* to have this drink and I need to have it now. It was specially made for my boss.

LEO

No, it was specially made for me.

(He whips out his phone and shows her the order)

See? 16oz spiced mocha, two extra shots of espresso. No cinnamon. You'll just have to order another.

ELENA

I'm sorry, it's just that I've waited a really long time to get the right order, and I really need to leave with *that* drink right now.

LEO

Listen, I have a conference call in twenty minutes. Let me by.

ELENA

Just give me the drink.

LEO

I'm not giving you the drink.

ELENA

Let me just—oh, wait. Did you smell that?

LEO

Smell what?

ELENA

I definitely just got a whiff of cinnamon, let me smell that.

LEO

What? No—

(ELENA takes the drink from him and walks back to her table to get her purse.)

Hey! Wait—

ELENA

Here, you can have this one.

(She hands him the reject drink.)

LEO

This is not what I ordered, and it's cold! Give me that—

(He reaches for the drink, she pulls away. He reaches again and, in the struggle, both drinks fall to the floor.)

BOTH

LOOK WHAT YOU DID! ME?

(They continue to squabble)

BARISTA

One 16oz spiced mocha, two extra shots of espresso, no cinnamon.

(LEO and ELENA both look at each other and lunge for the new drink. ELENA slips on the spilled drink and LEO laughs. She grabs the hem of his pants and holds him back. With her free hand, she takes one of the now-empty cups and throws it at his head.)

LEO

You are *crazy*.

ELENA

You *PUSHED ME*.

LEO

I DID N—Oh. I did, didn't I?

ELENA

(Getting up from the floor.)

Yes!

LEO

I-I'm sorry.

ELENA

I'm...I'm sorry I threw a cup at your head.

(They laugh.)

LEO

Why don't you take the drink? I'll order another.

ELENA

No, you take it. I'll be fine.

LEO

No, I insist. You look like you need it.

ELENA

What is that supposed to mean?

LEO

You have whipped cream on your skirt.

ELENA

Well, I wouldn't if it weren't for you—

LEO

You're the one who stole my drink.

ELENA

It was MY DRINK.

(They start arguing with each other again.)

BARISTA

Another 16oz spice mocha with two shots of espresso, no cinnamon.

(ELENA and LEO stop yelling)

BARISTA (CONT'D)

Now both of you *please leave*.

(ELENA and LEO approach the counter, grab their drinks, and exit.)

(End of play.)

“Surviving Strep with the Stuffed Squirrel” – by Kacey Conrad

I cannot remember the specifics of a day, a season, or even a year. The best I can figure is I must have been between seven and ten. What I can remember plainly is the pain. The most accurate comparison to convey the discomfort is to imagine gargling with boiling water and swallowing a coarse piece of sandpaper. On top of that, each shallow breath I took intensified the throbbing. My throat was so swollen that I am certain I looked like a snake swallowing a whole egg, and a fever chilled my entire aching body. Before this, I had been a fortunate child and never experienced any major illnesses or injuries; I still have my tonsils and appendix, and I have never had to be admitted into the hospital. Because I had been blessed with good health, contracting streptococcal pharyngitis, lovingly known as strep throat, seemed to me like catching the plague, but reflecting on the experience has made me realize God was teaching me a valuable lesson in companionship during difficult times in an unconventional manner.

Because I was so inexperienced with “serious” illness, I did not adjust well to my situation, even with my high pain threshold. I grew up with all boys, so scabbed knees, thistle scrapes, and bruised shins were ordinary, cherished accessories. I had dealt with common colds and stomach bugs, so I knew how to handle those symptoms. Throughout life, I have gotten my ears pierced, fallen out of trees, been stung, stapled my fingers, been bitten by a dog, and survived many other experiences that enhanced my pain tolerance. None of these memories make me wince, but even now my throat starts to ache in sympathy every time I think about my strep experience. Fortunately, I have only had to endure the sickness once. Something about experiencing pain when performing the necessary act of breathing breaks a person down.

What threw me even farther off kilter was the fact that my first time contracting a major illness was also the first time I had ever had to miss school for several consecutive days. Most children dream of days excused from class, but even as an elementary student, I worried about lagging behind in my school work, missing important information, and not enjoying the company of my friends. From my young perspective, being alone was one of the most tragic parts of the illness. Because strep is a very contagious sickness, I was quarantined. The only interaction I had was with my mother, but even that was minimal as she had a full time job and did not want to get sick herself. As a young, elementary-aged girl, being overly dramatic was one of my specialties, and I just knew that if I had to stay alone in my bedroom for too long, I would turn into some kind of hermit that no one would associate with, or I would be altogether forgotten and wither

away under my *High School Musical* blankets. The days of solitude put a damper on my demeanor.

Despite suffering loneliness and severe pain, I do not consider either the worst part of the experience. No, the worst part of the experience involved a stuffed squirrel. Somewhere, my mother had found and bought a stuffed squirrel in an attempt to cheer me up. She has always known how to put a smile on my face. The squirrel was presented to me with the condition that I take my medicine without a struggle. Like any child, I wanted nothing to do with the thick, bubble-gum-flavored antibiotics I had to choke down my raw, aching throat multiple times a day, but I gave in to the promise of receiving the squirrel. The company the toy brought me in my days of isolation brightened my melancholy mood and was a constant source of comfort. I remember resting the soft tail fur against my cheek and almost feeling the slightest relief.

Gradually, the pain started to diminish. First, I could breathe without feeling as though I was swallowing scalding shards of glass. Then, I could slurp soup broth and enjoy my coveted pudding cups. Eventually, I could talk in hushed tones and was quite amused by my husky voice. I do not remember how long my illness lasted, probably no longer than a week, but I know that once I began showing signs of recovery, my squirrel disappeared with my symptoms. After my frantic questioning, my mother confessed that she had thrown the beloved brown ball in the trash while I slept. She did not want to risk harboring any lasting germs and causing sickness again. I was devastated. The throbbing moved from my throat to my heart. Something about the silent company of the squirrel had made the lonely days stuck in my bed easier to bear and knowing the toy was molding in a trash heap somewhere made getting better seem bad.

If recovery meant losing my new friend, I was not sure I wanted to commit to giving up the sickness or the squirrel. The toy had become a close companion when I had no one else. I needed the comfort of knowing that the small ball of matted fur was by my side. The little plush creature had been with me through the bad times, and I wanted to carry my friend with me through the good times. I did not want to lose that source of comfort. Although, at the time, I was not thinking through all these emotions so clearly; I was simply upset that my new favorite toy was taken from me.

I did not know at the time that I would be writing about this situation that seems so insignificant years later in a college composition class and understand the lesson God was teaching me through sickness and a stuffed squirrel. 1 Corinthians 1:3-4 describes the Lord as the "Father of compassion

and the God of all comfort." God provided me with this compassion and comfort in a way perfect for a young girl. Being a quiet person, I think I value silent companionship more than most people, and I believe that is why the squirrel meant so much to me. God gave me comfort through the squirrel when others could not be around me, and I was lapsing into loneliness. He reminded me that I was never really alone.

I do not think comparing God to the squirrel in this situation would be blasphemy. God is a constant companion through life's struggles and successes, but to hear or feel His comfort, you have to still your heart and quiet yourself. To make His solace even better, much unlike the squirrel, He will never leave. Perhaps this is the reason I often choose to simply provide a comforting presence to friends in need rather than words. Because of the squirrel, I understand that silent company can sometimes provide more comfort than words could ever render. In the end, everyone deserves to know the comfort of a squirrel.

“Final Battle” – by Sarah Tarrant

“Ready for this?”

I heard that question repeated nearly a hundred times as the three of us made our way down the darkened corridor. It was an honest, caring, fearful question. But, instead of answering aloud, I gritted my teeth and nodded.

The passage was chilly, and I could feel the cold stone floor through my sandals. I stared down at the sandals of my two friends as they walked ahead of me.

Finally, we came to the door that would admit us to the final arena. Many young warriors had been through those doors to either meet their glory or their doom. I was one of the few to walk into the arena a second time.

We heard a sharp noise come from the other side of the wall in the arena, but the walls were too thick to make out what or who was making the noise.

I flinched.

One of my friends, Felix, reached out and squeezed my arm. “Your sister’s in there, right?”

I gritted my teeth again and nodded. Would my jaw ever unlock?

“She’ll be fine,” Felix said confidently. “You said she has more raw talent than the three of us put together, remember?”

I pulled away from his grip and looked to the side of the door where there stood a table with weapons on it. They had provided us with quite the variety of weapons. I could only wonder why.

My heart began to pick up its pace and seemed to drop down into my stomach.

“Do you like the automatic or the original, Ceres?” Felix asked me, referring to the weapons. He was already holding one of the original models. “You seem like the classic kind of girl.”

I raised an eyebrow at him—*classic?*—and picked up two automatics. “I’d rather have something that won’t . . . betray me. Not like . . . last time.”

I pricked my finger with the sharp end of one of them. I imagined what it would be like to sink that point into my enemy, killing it once and for all.

“Interesting,” he said, turning to the third one of us. “What about you, Philo?”

Philo, the youngest of our trio, picked up two originals, saying that the ends were sharper and more trustworthy than the automatics.

Five other young warriors came down the hall and moved toward the table to claim weapons for themselves.

Despite the many hands fishing around the table, Felix set down the original and picked up a different weapon altogether. It was sleek and black. He flipped it around in his hands, becoming accustomed to the feel of it.

He came over to stand next to me.

“You sure about that?” I asked, looking down at him seriously. “You know you only get one shot with that thing.”

He shrugged. “Clearly, I trust my aim more than you do.”

My stomach suddenly felt ice-cold, finally catching up to the temperature of the corridor and stone floor. I looked up at the ceiling, clenching my fists and trying to remember everything I had been taught. I had spent an obscene amount of time training for this fight.

Both Felix and Philo sat down near the door that we would go through to meet our inevitable foe. The others followed suit, wanting to conserve their strength.

I couldn't take that luxury. Or, more accurately, my legs weren't willing to let me take that luxury. They restlessly carried me up and down the side of the corridor while I played with my two automatic weapons. I thrust them forward, working out my timing and swinging them around to loosen up my shoulders.

“When did you get to sleep last night?” One of the girls asked Felix.

“Sometime before midnight,” Felix answered lightly. “I didn't want to be too worn out for today. I know *you* were up late. How late did you stay up?”

"Oh, I pulled an all-nighter," the girl said with a shaky grin. "I knew I wouldn't sleep anyway, so I just stayed up."

Felix met my gaze. "What about you, Ceres?"

I shook my head and sighed. "I don't want to talk about it."

"That bad?" he asked.

I slid the second weapon—the back-up one—into place at my waist. "Yeah."

He let out a low sympathetic groan. "I'm sure you'll do fine," he said.

I gritted my teeth together. "Well, if it's anything like last time . . ."

Everyone, by then, was staring at me. They knew how bad it had been last time. They remembered the gore. The injustice. The trick my opponent had pulled.

Felix got to his feet and came up to stand in front of me. "Don't psych yourself out. You can't afford to at this point. Just go out there and give it your best. That's all they're asking for."

"That's all well and good to say, Felix," I said, feeling my heart-rate rise still more. "But in the end, if my sister doesn't make it out . . ."

"Don't think about her," he said. "Just focus on yourself taking each step, each breath. Stay focused on the now. Not on what happens afterwards. Let your sister worry about herself."

I stared into his eyes, knowing that if I did, I would believe him.

"Okay."

"There," he said, letting go of my shoulder. "Knock 'em dead, Ceres."

I looked down at my set of automatics.

The door to the arena vibrated. We could hear the lock on the other side coming unclasped.

I braced myself, using the floor for support. Felix turned around, and Philo and the others stood with us, giving each other encouraging glances as they readied their weapons. All of us waited, staring at the door.

The knob jiggled.

Felix looked at me and mouthed, *"You got this."*

The doors swung open.

Eight of us rushed into the arena. It was littered with the broken weapons of those who had fought before us.

I glimpsed my sister's back as she exited through a door on the far side of the arena. She wasn't visibly wounded.

Oh, thank you, Jesus.

I took a breath and looked down at my mechanical pencils.

They'd have to get me through this final exam, my last chance at saving my GPA.

“Harrison the Savior: A Critical Analysis” – by Guy Batton

One of the most common archetypes in literature is that of a redeemer or savior. Kurt Vonnegut, through his story “Harrison Bergeron,” successfully creates a human savior in the protagonist, Harrison Bergeron, using indirect characterization as well as archetypal stereotypes to develop him. When looking at what defines the archetype of a savior—attributes including leadership, courage and boldness, humanity, redemption of the people being saved, and knowledge of the bondage—the author manages to fulfill the roles and requirements of a savior, even without liberating the people. In the story, Harrison represents the redemption of the people from a crippling government that enforces equality at the sake of individuality.

The form of characterization that Vonnegut uses most is that of indirect characterization, which is considered the art of “showing” versus “telling,” as does direct characterization. He uses this to create a full, but arguably static, character in the protagonist. This implies that Harrison has a considerable amount of development but does not change through the course of the story. This contributes to his being an archetypal savior because saviors have “full” lives through their actions, liberation attempts, and revolution but refuse to back down from their beliefs. Harrison fits this perfectly, being the focal character of the story and having the most development of any character, but his stance never shifts.

Vonnegut’s characterization of Harrison shapes him into a bold and courageous leader, which are two of the criteria of a savior. A major way the author characterizes Harrison is through the protagonist’s proclamation as emperor; this concretely establishes his leadership qualities through indirect characterization. He enters the concluding scene with reckless abandon of grace, conventionalism, and fear, saying, “I am the Emperor...I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived!” (Vonnegut 232). One of the defining factors of a savior is that they establish their position and know their purpose, which Harrison does verbally. This, along with his “plotting to overthrow the government,” expresses his intention to serve as the Emperor and ultimately liberate the people of their oppressive handicaps (Vonnegut 231). Vonnegut further reveals to the reader, or indirectly characterizes, the protagonist’s desire to save the people through his actions and becoming all that he can be (Vonnegut 232).

Harrison’s aspiration to save the people of America is further shown in boldness and courageousness of removing the restrictions and handicaps the government placed on him, as well as those of others. For example, Harrison removes six different handicaps within the first moments of his appearance

on-screen, totaling to a punishment of twelve years in prison and a fine of \$12,000 (Vonnegut 231-232). Obviously, this requires a great deal of courage, which is—again—one of the characteristics of an archetypal savior. Another example of Harrison's boldness and courage remains in his removing the handicaps of the ballerina, his Empress, and the musicians. The text does not express any resistance from these other characters, which solidifies Harrison's commanding presence, as well as their acknowledgement of his leadership and position as their liberator.

Another of the distinguishing factors of an archetypal savior's character lies in their differences from the established norm. In Harrison's case, this difference constitutes his physical and cerebral capacity. His physique and advanced intelligence mean that these capabilities far exceed those of most Americans, let alone a fourteen-year-old. However, Vonnegut reveals to the reader Harrison's differences the second time he is mentioned, where the truth that George and Hazel's "abnormal son...was now in jail" (Vonnegut 230). His next mentioning explains that he escaped from jail and that "he is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous" (Vonnegut 231). But the real information to tie it together comes in his entrance to the ballet stage, where the reader sees, through his actions, what really makes Harrison different.

He stands at seven feet tall, bears over three hundred pounds of handicaps, and his face is so radiant that Thor would be left awe-struck, which obviously is uncommon for most men (Vonnegut 232). When he chooses the ballerina to be his Empress, Harrison's differences are again emphasized as the two defy the laws of gravity and motion through their dancing (Vonnegut 233). All of this further displays, through his differences, Harrison's development as a savior for the people from the oppressive government.

It should be noted that Harrison's humanity and knowledge of human bondage deserve the same level of importance as his differences from the average human do. Saviors need to know the situation of the people they are saving; otherwise, why would they save said people? Therefore, through Harrison's eye, ear, and weighting handicaps, he renders himself equal to everyone else in his knowledge of oppression and in his humanity (Vonnegut 232). However, the single greatest depiction of Harrison's humanity lies in his death where two shots from a shotgun kill both the Emperor and the Empress, leaving them "dead before they hit the floor" (Vonnegut 233). Through his death, however quickly forgotten, Harrison levels himself with the people but remains great enough to serve as their savior. But, because of his humanity, he was unable to completely liberate the people.

Based on the above fact, it can be argued that Harrison did not complete his mission, and therefore failed as a savior—meaning that Vonnegut failed to succeed in his creation of a savior. However, a savior is not defined by their direct impact, but instead by their actions. And Harrison’s actions clearly portray a leader with courage and boldness, one who is different, but still maintains their humanity through their knowledge of oppression and bondage; the characteristics that saviors have. Therefore, Vonnegut’s use of indirect characterization successfully identifies that a savior can still be a savior even if they die before their work is finished.

Work Cited

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“Warm-hearted Sundays” – by Kacey Conrad

For most of us, Sundays are days at home; they might be cozy and pleasant experiences or they might be dull and depressing. -Michael Meyer

Sundays too I get up early,
stirred by the harsh sounds of a screeching alarm
and the stony salute of a pewter sky,
to practice in a solemn sanctuary
chilled by a week of neglect.

I hum the harmonies with frosted breath
and form the chords with frigid fingers,
waiting for the tinny strings to relax
under the collected warmth of my cupped palms
and remember their songs.

This is better than any Sunday at home,
no matter whether it's
“cozy and pleasant”
or “dull and depressing,”
because as the room fills
with the slow lull
of sober voices
murmuring adoration,
those winter Sundays don't seem so bleak.

for Robert Hayden

“Where the Gulf Meets the Pacific” – by Nevada Moenning

The late-afternoon sun no longer shone on our backs. Instead, it hid behind the resort and cast an orange-pink glow where the water met the sky. Where the water began, large waves tumbled toward land, crashed loudly on the shore, and raced each other until the bubbling water soaked into the sand.

The dancers stepped onto the pavilion and, act after act, they showcased their talent, their passion, their culture. Women guided colorful dresses with their hands and routinely twirled to the Spanish music. The gentlemen joined them in tapping their feet quickly against the wooden floor with arms behind their backs.

The small pavilion stood in the sand with its back to the dark blue water. Red, white, and green decorated each corner of the wood, and large-bulb lights moved in zig zag motions over the audience, connecting the pavilion to the roof of the restaurant. Joining the lights were small bright flags, each of them a different color cut out in a unique design, and they hung side by side on a single line and waved in the coastal breeze.

I studied the design of each flag, opened my ears to the distant waves, and inhaled the salty air. The ocean looked so much like home, yet the colors and people were different from my own.

In one act, the women wore blue tops with bright yellow flowing skirts. In another, three women took the stage in pink, mustard yellow, and dark blue patterned dresses, while the men wore maroon suits. While neutral colors are favored in America, bright colors were favored here. This is something I loved about this place, something different from my native land.

Every table was taken, so I stood to the side of the audience and watched these men and women dance in representation of Mexico. Their skin was a smooth brown, a color that I wish to be in the summer, and their dark eyes glimmered brightly as they flickered between the audience and fellow dancers. The men howled in joy and the women smiled from ear to ear as they both spun within arms-length of one another.

They loved performing. I could see it in the glint of their eyes and wide grins. When they exited the stage, their smiles lingered, showing pride in the art of dancing, a pride I respected.

Our host was a short and robust man, enthusiastic with a thick accent but easy enough to understand. He ran onto the stage between each performance and spoke like he'd drunk too much caffeine. He was the type of man who laughed at his own jokes, and he did frequently throughout the night, and the audience reflected his energy and laughed along at his jokes. He brought three couples to the stage in a dancing competition, and after he demonstrated the dance they would do, he gave himself and each competitor a tequila shot. He took the shot with an "ahh" and threw the cup on the ground.

"I hate my job really," he said as he strutted around the stage, "I never drink alcohol in my life."

"Yeah, right!" A guy yelled from the audience. Our host hunched over with one hand on his knees, and he waved off the man with a girlish giggle.

These interactions made me enjoy listening to our host, not only because he made me laugh but because he spoke with the audience like they were family, despite the fact that they came from different cultures.

Two feathered hats—double the men's height—bobbed their way on stage to what sounded like a battle cry, their outfits shimmering even in the dull light. The men appeared to move in slow-motion. They shook maracas and marched in circles to slow high-pitched music. The routine lasted for four minutes of shake maraca, spin, shake maraca, tilt feathered-hat down, shake maraca, tap feet, and shake maraca. The redundancy bored me, yet I could not keep my eyes from them.

I loved the vibrancy and unfamiliar music, so I did not notice anything around me but the dancers, not the prickly plants beside me, not the audience or waiters, and not the pale fading light of the sky. I felt like the only person on the beach.

The show's final act included full audience participation. Our host brought on four men to face one another in a competition they did not understand until their fate had already been determined.

One by one, these four men had to take a tequila shot, do an iconic Mexican scream, dance a choreographed routine, and lastly turn around and—what our host called—shake his "bum bum." One by one, they took the chance in humiliating themselves but making people laugh.

When the last two men were left standing, they announced the tie breaker by running off the stage at the start of the song "Conga" by Gloria Estafan and forming a single train behind each man. I observed as these people—strangers—danced in front and behind each other, laughing with one other.

The waiter at my left encouraged me, in his dialect, to join in, but I stayed in my spot and watched the two lines grow and move in circles around the tables. Then when the beating of the Conga drums ended, they gathered on two sides of the pavilion stage. Our host counted the two lines and, upon declaration of the winner by just one person, he switched off all pavilion lights, except a single strobe, and turned on "The Macarena."

I laughed aloud knowing that a fun dance I grew up on was playing on a Mexican beach resort among a group of strangers.

I did not join because I found more reward witnessing this event on the outside, watching people have fun on their vacation. Watching men who'd willingly been dragged along by their wives, shaking to the beat without a rhythmic bone in their bodies.

I tried to imagine the lives that these people lived, obviously so different from each other. One man in the competition stated he was from California, another Australia, another Asia. They came from different parts of the world, from different backgrounds, lifestyles, and religions. And they all gathered to one place and enjoyed a few moments of life together. Times like this made me think—just for a moment—that global peace was possible.

The pink glow of the sunset had turned to a dark gray, and the lights on the pavilion and over our heads shone brighter. I could no longer see the calming waves, but I could still faintly hear them racing up the shoreline.