

Short Fiction

AHS Capstone 2013

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Synopsis: Compilation of six short stories ranging from just over 500 words, to just under 8,000 and an author's note reflecting on some of my sources of inspiration. Stories and author's note are reproduced below, in their recommended reading order. (Though there is no connection between any of the stories.) The titles of my six stories are: *The Stars*, *They Spin*, *Reverberations*, *Requiem*, *Bushido*, *Wish Ravine*, and *Videography*.

Keywords: Creative writing short fiction stories story

The Stars, They Spin

Corporal John C. Williams let the serenity of the night wash over him.

Slow inhale.

He let his limbs go limp with relaxation as he stared, transfixed, at the unblinking stars.

Slow exhale.

Surely, such brilliance could not possibly exist outside of imagination. John could not recognize any of the constellations, but he didn't mind. They always seemed so static anyway-- frozen images compartmentalizing what should be a boundless sky. And boundless it was, tonight.

Slow inhale.

The stars were turning, spinning, revolving almost imperceptibly in an endless dance. Nothing could pierce the musical silence of this night.

Slow exhale.

Conserve Oxygen. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered except that he not break eye contact with his beloved night sky. She was striking in her beauty, and she held him fast. Held, supported, enwrapped, suffocated.

Slow inhale.

He had been doing a routine repair, replacing one of the temperature sensors on the outside of the ship. He saw the asteroid coming. He misjudged its speed and course.

Slow exhale.

Perspective is different in this plane of existence. A hundred fathoms passes in the blink of an eye. A memory passes for immortality. A lifetime passes in a breath. The stars, clinging to unseen ropes suspended in the viscous, fluid night, seem to have a depth beyond comprehension, and yet, they could just as easily be pinholes in a great, dimensionless, black sheet, blinding us in our own ignorance.

Slow inhale.

He hadn't thought the meteor would hit, but he radioed his captain anyway. No response. John's perspective shifted, the damage became clear, and the call suddenly became important-- urgent! Only static greeted his desperate cries. And then it was too late. Everything was crashing and

tumbling and jarring and spinning. John's screams of terror competed with the loud static of his radio, echoing their violent battle within the confines of his helmet. All was furious chaos and fear. The silence was abrupt.

Slow exhale.

The cold is starting to sink in. His friends are dead. To say it out loud would scar the calm perfection all around, so he hides the words beyond his understanding. His captain, the ship, the mission-- not gone, just... not here. The guidance systems were supposed to protect against this. Precautions were put in place, and they work. That's been proven. So they must have worked. They must have.

Slow inhale.

All was well. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered except that he keep his focus. Focus on the stars. Focus completely on sight so that thought is pushed aside. One-third tank of Oxygen left. Don't think of that. It would take Earth hours to notice something had gone wrong. It would take weeks to respond. He would have to hold his breath.

Slow exhale.

May I have this dance? John whispered to the twisted night he was powerless to stop. In response, the night conjured up their dance hall, which spun slowly into John's field of vision. Countless grains of sand shimmered, weightless, joining together to form majestic, sweeping rings surrounding a glowing, golden orb that flamed with life. The unparalleled beauty of the night's gift brought a tear to John's eye, and left him breathless.

Reverberations

Dance with me.

There is no music.

Why should that stop us?

It shouldn't.

Claire twirled with a chaotic grace. Her feet had mastered no step-one-two and her hands could maintain no course, but shifted and twisted in a never-ending non pattern of little dips and loops. Josh stood still, afraid to break the delicate spell. She didn't seem to notice that she alone was holding up the duet. Strands of her golden hair slid across Josh's face in the light evening breeze. He smiled, and started to brush them aside, but they fell away again before he could, and her face was suddenly very close to his. Josh's heart skipped into overdrive as he let his hand land just below her ear, fingertips nestling in her soft hair. He stared into her eyes until the dance stopped.

Josh blinked away the memory, and let the bright sun warm him away from that cool night. It was a beautiful day, but the breeze was treacherous, carrying such caresses, that were not his to feel. He felt a tug on his hand, and let his attention fall on Evan, his over-enthusiastic black lab, who was tugging on his short leash, letting his tail hit the back of Josh's leg. With a firm, but gentle pat on the head, Josh reminded the little guy that *no, squirrels were not for chasing, and the path turned to the left, not the right*. Evan reluctantly tore his gaze from his prey and eyed Josh, who gave him a *good boy* smile.

He realized too late that he had been looking down while walking, and there was someone on the path in front of him. He hadn't heard her. He hadn't heard anything at all. She came upon him all of a sudden, it seemed. It was too late to avoid a collision, but Josh was able to change course just enough to collide with the book instead of the girl holding it. The book went flying, and as Josh stooped to pick it up, she pulled her earbuds out from her ears and blustered something like, "I'm so sorry! I was reading and of course not looking where I'm going, I know I'm not supposed to do that but I just get so wrapped up in- oh." Her eyes got even wider as she noticed the official guide-dog jacket on Evan, who was waiting patiently as his master dusted off the book and held it out for her. "I'm so sorry." She repeated, feeling a newfound futility to her words. Blushing, she grabbed the book, ducked her head, and turned to go.

“Wait” Josh managed with effort, and reached his arm out as if to grasp her wrist. She stopped before he needed to though, and turned. “I am sorry. I did not mean to...” He trailed off, lost in nervous fear. This time, he was the one who turned away ashamed, and she let him go without another word. After a few paces, he turned back and saw her heading in the opposite direction, replacing her earphones and reopening her book. Her hair was dark and short, but long enough to be kept in a tight little ponytail that bounced as she walked. Claire almost never wore her light hair in a ponytail. This girl had been sweet and apologetic, where Claire would have said something snarky. She was clearly not his type. But her abashed smile, and confident way of walking were enchanting.

A nudge from Evan brought Josh out of his reverie. *You’re right boy*, he thought. The strange girl had long since turned out of sight along the twisting path. *Why should she take any interest in me?* He wondered absently what music she was listening to. *I don’t belong in her world anymore.* He turned and continued his evening walk.

Two days later, sitting on a bench, watching the faraway boats chase each other across the calm lake, Josh considered his mistakes.

Josh’s dog jumped up and started wagging his tail violently, slapping it repeatedly against Josh’s knee. There was the girl, wearing a big smile across her face. She held her hand out to Evan, who licked it enthusiastically and then lifted his nose to the hem of her blue skirt. The girl laughed and sat down next to Josh, who did his best to look pleased and bemused instead of terrified.

She saluted him in greeting, like a very casual soldier, then gave her hands a quick, nervous shake, and began what was clearly very rehearsed. MY NAME E-M-I-L-Y. She spelled out the letters slowly and carefully with her fingers, and unconsciously mouthed them at the same time. Josh couldn’t help smiling. Despite years of classes since his accident, he was still much better at reading lips than understanding sign language, but her slow, simple, fumbling signs were easy enough to follow.

Humoring her, Josh responded with HELLO E-M-I-L-Y MY NAME J-O-S-H. He spelled the letters slowly, but it took her three tries before she understood his name. Her cheeks were red, but the joy of success overpowered her embarrassment. When he signed NICE MEET YOU she knit her eyebrows together and bit her lip in consternation. Josh smiled and repeated the signs while saying aloud, in a voice he knew was glottal and oddly pitched, “Nice to meet you.” For his efforts, Josh was awarded another of Emily’s breathtaking smiles.

The conversation continued in the same vein for a few more sentences, HIS NAME E-V-A-N DOG, until Josh finally caved and told her that he could lip read better than he could sign. “Oh.” Emily looked embarrassed again, as she gave up her novice attempts to use sign language, and returned to normal speech. “I didn’t even think of that. I feel really foolish.”

Josh gave her a forgiving smile and asked, “What book are you reading?” That sent her into a frenzy of explanation. She told him not only about her book, but also about the series it was a part of, and backstory about the author, and how that backstory was reflected in particular scenes that may or may not be autobiographical, and recurring themes that might foreshadow future events. Her ideas cascaded over one another, each one tumbling over the end of the last as if nothing she said before would make sense until he understood this new bit of information.

Josh was glad for the excuse to sit silently and enjoy her effusions. He let himself get so absorbed in her chaotic way of speaking, he could almost hear her words. It was like he was back in Pennsylvania, before the accident, sitting next to Claire, laughing and talking over a movie they each cared about only to the extent that the other was there watching it. He loved the sound of her laugh.

“And in the *fourth* book, well actually more like the three and a halfth, since it was written after all the rest, and it’s a shorter, companion book, there are a few of those, but it’s still totally—” Emily cut off suddenly and it took Josh a second to realize why. She was still talking, but she had turned her head to look across the lake, and Josh couldn’t see her mouth. It felt just like it did when he woke up in the hospital, three years ago. There was Claire, babbling about how happy she was to see him awake, and telling him about the accident, and Josh was woozy from a combination of medications but he was just so happy to see her face and hear her voice, and then she had turned away and everything became frighteningly silent. At first, he didn’t believe he had become deaf. The drugs were affecting him, or Claire and the doctors were playing a cruel trick on him, anything but the terrifying truth. The doctors assured him his hearing might return, but as days turned to weeks, they gradually changed their minds.

Josh tapped Emily’s shoulder gently. As she turned to face him, her voice returned. “even though that technically contradicts—What’s wrong?”

Josh had to use his loathsome voice to explain, “I can’t read your lips when I can’t see them.”

“Oh.” Emily looked down, started to mumble something, then realized her mistake and snapped her head up again, to make sure Josh could see her lips. “I feel so stupid.”

“Don’t.” Josh tried to look reassuring. “Happens a lot. You were telling me about book three and a half.”

“Do I talk too fast?”

In truth, Josh didn’t really understand each word Emily said. He was watching the flow of her speech, more than the specific words. If he understood the idea of each sentence, that was enough to get by. He could fill in the gaps. “No. You’re fine.” was all the explanation he gave of that concept, and Emily plowed on. He liked that she was the one doing the talking.

When Emily finished her explanations, Josh didn’t know what to say. He wanted to be able to challenge her less founded declarations, and engage in a debate about these books he had yet to read, like he would have back in college. But that part of his life was far away now, and he didn’t know how. He decided to back out. “Are you cold?” Josh asked instead.

Emily looked down at her bare legs as if they would tell her. “I guess it is a little chilly for a skirt.” She decided, smoothing the fabric around her as she stood up. “I should head home.”

Josh debated his next question for a moment or two longer than he should have. “Do you want me to walk you home?”

Emily laughed. “No thanks. The trees and the wind will watch over me.” Then she skipped away before Josh could ask her what she meant.

On his way home, Josh consulted Evan about his encounter. *What do you think of her, boy?* Josh thought at his loyal puppy. Evan yipped in response. *Yes, she’s pretty.* Evan nuzzled his pocket. Josh reached in it and pulled out a small treat. *And funny. And smart. She’s way out of my league.* Evan chewed thoughtfully. *Think I’ll ever see her again?* Evan wagged his tail. *Well you’re an optimist.*

That night, Josh dreamed of Claire, which was perfectly unreasonable. He hadn’t seen Claire in almost two and a half years now, and his time would have been much better spent dreaming about Emily. Their last fight, an old favorite of his pernicious sub-conscious, played itself through his mind.

“Look. I get it.” His idiot past-self said. “You want a real life. A whole life. I’m not a whole person, anymore.” They had both been in sign languages classes for almost a year now—

since the doctors informed him that he would never hear again—but when he was upset, Josh preferred to yell in the language he knew best, throwing in a sign here or there only for emphasis.

“God Josh,” Claire looked exasperated. She also spoke out loud, careful to make sure he could see her lips at all times. “You’re not listening to me. I told you—” she placed her hand on her forehead, and let it slide down her face in frustration. “I’m sorry. Bad phrasing.”

“No, Claire, you’re right.” Josh spat back. “I’m not listening to you. That’s the problem. I can’t ever listen to you again.”

“How can you be so short-sighted? We can adapt. We have been adapting! She switched to sign language to say, WE LEARN TOGETHER. Then she went back to normal speech. This doesn’t have to break who you are. Who we are. What happened, happened, and it’s in the past now. Can’t you see that it really doesn’t matter in the—”

“It matters to me.” Josh hated not being able to hear his own words. He couldn’t tell if they were too loud, or too soft, or had all the wrong inflections. He couldn’t even tell if his voice was cracking over the tears he was trying so hard to not let past his eyelashes.

“Baby,” Claire had clearly noticed the unfallen tears anyway. She put her arms around him, and pulled him into a hug. She nuzzled up to the side of his face, so that he could feel her jawbone against his own. Then she started humming low and steady.

A touch of music filled his memory, but not his ears. He let himself imagine, for one last moment, a life and a happiness, of holding and being held. A life with laughter, and music. And then he imagined the truth. Silence, heavy and thick, bore down on him, suffocating him in its vastness and its permanence. He could not envision this world with Claire’s joy and light. In it, he was alone. He stepped backwards, away from the warmth and kindness he longed for, but could no longer justify being allowed. “Stop.” There was too much pain.

Claire stumbled, feeling small and insubstantial as smoke. She was the first to let a tear fall. Her voice was weak, but that didn’t matter now. “If you want me to leave, tell me so.”

“I want you to leave.”

He hadn’t meant forever. God, he hadn’t meant it at all. But he didn’t go after her. Instead, he curled up into himself, all rage and sadness and fear. It was months before he said another word.

The sun landed on Josh's face and woke him from the torment of sleep. He rubbed stale tears from his eyes and patted the bed to tell Evan, who always seemed to know when he was needed, that he was free to jump up next to him and cuddle. Evan obliged.

That evening, Josh stopped just before the entrance to the park. *What do you say, boy? Is this old route getting tired? Why don't we try something new? I don't think there's anything for us down this path.* Evan, bored with his master's indecision, started tugging him toward their usual daily trek with an insistence he usually reserved only for squirrels. *You know, for a highly trained guide dog, you're pretty darn self-willed.*

She was there, sitting on his bench reading book seven. Or six and a half, depending on how you counted. Evan yipped rather inelegantly, and Emily looked up with a smile. She reached into the messenger bag that was leaning against her leg, and pulled out a worn paperback with a slightly torn cover. "I brought you book one." She said, with a lilt in her shoulder that clearly indicated pride in her clever trick. Now he *had* to read it.

Josh let hesitation and reluctance flood his face. "I can't—" he started to say as she pressed the book into his hand.

"You can return it when you ask me out on our first date," she winked, and knelt to greet Evan while Josh turned red. After allowing a reasonable amount of time for him to recover, Emily stood, and launched into an account of her move to the suburbs of Baltimore from a city of coffee shops and crowds. At first, he spoke as little as possible, but as he settled into the conversation, and saw how Emily didn't seem to notice or care about the ugliness in his voice, Josh began to participate more. He decided that his inner turmoil would have to wait until Emily quit making him feel so comfortable. They talked until the sun set.

When he finally got home, Josh set the book on the kitchen table and poured himself a bowl of cereal. Then he sat down, and stared at the closed book until his Cheerios got soggy. He was letting himself develop false hope, and he needed to stop.

As he drifted off to sleep, he thought about Claire. Ever-constant she stood, dressed for business and ready to take on the world. Manager today, CEO tomorrow. That was where she was headed, and no one was going to stop her. He was standing next to her, and together they embodied the swagger of ambition. With a *clink*, their wine glasses declared their invincibility. Josh knew where this would lead. It had played through his head so many times before. To a car,

to a blur of lights and sounds and confusion, to the loss of hope in a well lit room, smelling of sanitation and sounding like nothing.

But this time, something about his wine glass caught his eye as he tilted it toward himself. A flash of light, darting down the length of the glass, curving to fit its shape, and vanishing as quickly as it appeared. A reflection of a ceiling light, perhaps. Fleeting and impossible to grasp. Like a smile, playful and enigmatic. A smile that reaches all the way to her eyes, and it was Emily's eyes he saw now. Emily, flitting here and there, never standing still long enough to be caught. Emily, inviting mischief with a grin, and dancing away from trouble with an easy grace. The wine and car and fear forgotten, Josh fell asleep to the sound of hope.

Requiem

Greg closed his eyes, and listened. He could hear his breath bouncing off the inside of his mask. Behind that steady whisper, he could hear yelling, feet running on pavement, and gunfire. It seemed so far away. With aching arms, Greg lifted his gun, checked the clip, and braced it on his shoulder. Then, slowly, he peered around the brick barrier that was his only shelter from the chaos of this hopeless war.

He saw Rick, his best friend, duck behind the wall of sandbags they had built together two days earlier. Rick turned and saw him too. With a wink, Rick raised his upper body above the line of sandbags, turned his back on Greg, and started firing. This was Greg's chance; he steeled his will, and tore across the short but treacherous open space, sliding into Rick like a baseball player racing a fastball to home plate. "Thanks!" Greg yelled, the echoes of a shot that had come a little too close to his ear still reverberating in his skull.

"I'll be your pillow any time, baby" Rick said, trying to untangle himself from Greg. Greg laughed, and lifted his head off of Rick's leg, careful to stay below the top of the sandbags. Suddenly, a volley of fire erupted to their right. They both immediately dropped flat in the dirt. "Damn! What was that?" Rick yelled.

"Back me up!" came a plea over the headsets imbedded in their helmets. The cry came from a firefight at a makeshift bunker about 100 meters away. There was an empty barracks between them and the chaos.

Rick and Greg exchanged glances, and without a word, Greg popped above the safety line to provide cover while Rick dashed to the next sandcastle. Then they switched. Closer to the cry for help, they could better see the situation. "Shit, we are losing this perimeter." Greg tried not to let the fear creep into his voice as he crawled across the expanse.

"I like the Brutes." Rick grinned through this darkened visor at a few hulky far-off hostiles. "Got a lot of area to shoot, know what I mean?"

Greg didn't respond-- Rick was always better at staring a grim situation in the face with a stupid grin. On the morning of the announcement that their company would be heading out to the front, the air had been heavy with despondency. Just before dinner, Rick disappeared. When he returned after dinner, he was carrying a bottle of 10 year old scotch. The men spent the evening laughing and drinking and singing, and every one slept soundly that night. The next morning, they woke to the sounds of furious yelling, and when they looked outside, they saw their drill

sergeant chasing a laughing and hooting Rick across the obstacle course, hollering obscenities, and something about theft and court marshaling. Greg would probably do well to learn from Rick.

They made it to the edge of the barrier, and peered over the barricade, rifles digging into their shoulders. "Let's move in!" Greg yelled, when he spotted an opening.

Rick was right behind. "Leave some for me!" He hollered, as they ran headlong into the storm of blasts, cries, and shrapnel.

Greg didn't have time to consider the horror he just stepped into. He was all instinct. Aim, shoot, aim again. Keep moving to avoid making yourself an easy target. The lessons of basic training were not conscious; they were reflex, ingrained into his muscles by countless drills he was never more thankful for. He didn't have time to wonder at how much explosive power was released by a mere centimeter of movement from his right index finger.

They were in a bad place. Their allies were on the far side of a cement barricade, and the hostile force was strong. It was too late to turn back though. They were right in the middle of the fight, and they had to keep going. A near miss shattered a piece of cement wall behind Greg. He ducked, braced his rifle on his knee, and let loose a volley of return fire, as pebbles clattered over his helmet, making the world shake briefly. A hostile came too close to Rick's flank, while he was engaged with another. Greg disabled the threat with two shots to the head.

"Hey, you stole my kill!" That would be Rick. Never did understand gratitude. Once, he found Rick on a winter air-drop soaking wet, shivering, and with a broken leg. Greg set the leg, gave Rick his own jacket and pants, and dragged Rick across the five miles of snow back to base camp wearing just shorts and a t-shirt. When they reached camp, Rick said only, "Enjoying your day at the beach, sexy?" Now Greg could barely hear him over the racket in the bunker, despite the high-quality radio set they were both using.

"Get your own! I saw it first!" Greg hollered back. They were close to friendly forces now. Just a few more meters, and they could join their brothers behind the low wall. Greg downed two more enemies, and lunged for the wall. Moments before hitting the ground, heard the two words he hated most, "Man down!" Rick! He was supposed to be right behind him. He looked wildly for his friend. Terror gripped his chest, and his hearing started to fade. This must be what shock feels like, he thought vaguely, as his vision darkened around the edges. He was halfway over the wall, trying to turn back, to find Rick and gather him in his arms, but he was being dragged by strong

arms down into safety. His strength was fading fast, as memories of Rick raced through his muddled thoughts. They were hiding in a tree, and the enemy decided to set up a mobile camp twenty meters from their hideout. Not daring to move, the two of them sat, huddled for warmth, on a strong branch. Greg had started to drift off, and his foot slipped. His eyes snapped open, and there was Rick, fully awake, and holding him safely against the tree. That smile.

There were noises. Shots were still being fired. The world was still going on, somehow. Greg couldn't bring himself to care. All he wanted was to see Rick, one last time. Clean the blood off his face, tell him everything would be ok. Tell him...

Greg was lying on his back, a cement wall at his side. Why was he there again? The soldier who dragged him across the barrier was leaning over him. Saying something. In the reflection of his visor, Greg could see the hostile forces, approaching en masse. It seemed that for every baddie his friends shot, two more appeared. Greg thought he could see Rick's face in that reflection. An enemy crouched behind a rock was his left eye. A jagged hole blasted in the side of the bunker was his right. Two enemies carrying one of their wounded formed his mouth. The soldier lifted his visor, and the reflections disappeared, revealing... Rick! How could that be? Greg started to feel his head clearing again. Rick was alive! Elation tore apart the twisting pain in his chest that had been Rick's death. "He's hyperventilating," someone faraway said. Rick's hands were on his shoulders. Everything would be okay. He tried to tell Rick that. Everything will be okay, Rick. But something was wrong with his voice.

A tear fell from Rick's eye and landed on Greg's cheek.

Who was shot? Greg wondered, as his vision faded entirely to black.

"Take care, brother." Rick whispered into Greg's headset.

Greg respawned behind a brick wall, holding a gun with a full clip. He closed his eyes, and listened. He could hear his breath.

Bushido

“Dave, are you motivated?”

“What?” I pause, my fingers poised over the keyboard, and look up.

“Do you have a drive to succeed, a passion for perfection, an internal critic who challenges you to give everything a hundred and ten percent effort?”

Oh god. It takes a hundred and ten percent of my effort to keep my voice level and my face straight as I carefully compose my response. “Sir,” my boss is a year younger than me, but while I was working, he was getting a Masters, so I have to call him ‘sir’ while he calls me by my first name. “I like to think of myself as an explorer, traversing through forests of data trees, finding meaning in the patterns I discern. I don’t settle for pyrite when I know, hidden somewhere in these numbers, I can find gold.” This shit is almost second-nature to me now. If I ever start believing it, I might just shoot myself.

“I admire your attitude, Dave. You show a lot of potential.” A high complement coming from ‘Sir’ Andrew the Great.

“Thank you, sir.” And by the way, my liege, my name is David.

“How do you feel about the client reports, Dave? Do you enjoy writing them?”

No. “Creating these reports combines artistry with clarity of expression. They are the badge of success after a mission well accomplished. I relish nothing about my job more than putting my hard-won findings together in a comprehensive and cohesive presentation.”

“Ah, Dave, you bring up a notable point. It’s the presentation I want to talk to you about.” Here it comes. “You’re analysis is thorough, I’m sure, but your reports lack the... flare we’re looking for.”

Flare? Shall I set them on fire? I have nothing to say. “Flare, sir?”

“Yes, Dave.” He does that just to annoy me, I know it. There is no one else he could possibly be talking to, so why does he need to keep saying my name in that condescending tone as if I’ll forget it? “The salient points need to really, jump out at the reader, so they don’t have to read the whole report to find out what’s going on.” Our customers pay us for thorough reports. Why wouldn’t they want to read them? “More color might help.”

More color. That is the wisdom masters school bestowed upon Sir Andrew. And here I had thought more school wouldn’t be worth my time. “I’ll try that, sir.”

“Good. You have until tomorrow to fix these.” He places my last three reports on my desk. The corners where they are stapled are not creased. The edges of the pages are sharp and clean. I like to imagine that Sir Andrew reads these reports in a clean-room, wearing bright

purple gloves, and lifting each page just high enough to read the next one. It's the only way I can pretend he actually read them, and didn't take less than ten seconds to flip through looking at nothing more than formatting and color. His job done, Andrew started to walk away.

"Sir, have any of the clients complained about my work?"

"Dave, Dave, Dave..." I take a slow, deep breath as he says this. My face does not cringe. "Dave, I want you to look around you." I knew what I'd see, but I looked anyway. Rows and rows of cubicles in all directions, as far as the wall could reach. "We don't need to wait for complaints. Our goal is to wow our customers, not just satisfy them. You, my friend, are quite replaceable, and if you are having difficulty achieving the high standard we expect all our employees to strive for, then perhaps you should look for work more suitable to your interests."

I couldn't believe this pretentious worm has the audac-

"And education."

I close my eyes and focus on the words my *Sensei*, teacher, told me a few days before, when I lost miserably in a sparring match to a first-level blackbelt. "There is no shame in losing well." In a few weeks, I would take the test to see if I could become a third-dan, and I was beaten by a first-dan. There was shame in that. I felt it. "Don't let humiliation or anger take control of you. Remember the fifth tenet of *Bushido*. Remember to show respect and courtesy." I was able to bow to my opponent, but I wasn't able to meet his eye.

"I understand."

"Good. And don't forget about the McLauren report I need by tomorrow." He smiles.

I will be up all night working on all that report. I can't bring myself to say anything.

He starts to turn away, and rethinks. "Dave," he draws. "You do want to work here, don't you?"

"Yes sir." I bow my head. Thankfully, Andrew accepts this as the end of our conversation, and moves on to torture some other employee. At exactly 4:59 and thirty seconds, the door to the office building closes behind me.

I decide to stop at the ATM on the way back to my one-bedroom, one-bath, and a pathetic-excuse-for-a-kitchen apartment. I try to stay away from the more crowded streets, but sometimes that's impossible in New York. Thankfully, the streets near my apartment are never crowded. The ATM is about twelve blocks from my place, but it's not far from my normal path home, so stopping there never adds much time to my walk. I don't make it all the way to the kiosk before I round a corner and nearly run into a man clearly heading the same way. The black

and red patch attached to the back of his coat sends a surge of adrenaline through my veins. I freeze. Then I chide myself for showing an outward reaction, and try to act normal. I watch him for a while, careful to keep out of his line of sight. After he gets his money, he heads down Brook Street toward Washington. I slip back around the corner and head in the opposite direction. A few blocks down, I find a suitably dank and secluded alleyway.

Safe in the shadows behind a large blue dumpster, I empty my pockets. I have to work hard to control my breathing. Silence is essential, but so is speed. Keys, loose change, wallet, pen—all go inside my briefcase, which I stash under my coat, behind a forgotten wooden crate nestled in a garbage filled corner. I make sure to place everything on top of an unbroken garbage bag to keep it off the wet ground. I take three steps back, check that nothing valuable is visible, and slip from the dark alley. Now I need to make up for lost time. I estimate I have about five minutes before my search radius expands too far, and I really don't want to lose this guy.

I head toward the bank, where I first saw my target. I go over his appearance in my head. Hands in his pockets, leather bag slung across one shoulder, he walks and talks and acts like any normal, upstanding citizen. But the feather dagger symbol sitting unobtrusively on the back of his left shoulder tells me otherwise. He has some nerve, wearing that symbol on his back, where anyone can discover it without being seen by him.

As I run in the soft-soled shoes I always wear, I focus on making my footsteps silent. Reaching the spot where we last parted ways, I scan every direction, and choose the most likely one—straight. Three more blocks, and when I swing my head left at the cross street, sure enough, there he is, strolling casually, head held high. My hands clench into fists, and I deliberately relax them. No need to waste energy and give myself cramps. He isn't walking quickly, so I take some time to study him. He is tall, broad shouldered, and clean-cut. He walks with a strength and solidness that frighten me somewhat. I can tell he is muscular by the way he moves, and the way his long coat, tailored to his trim waistline, hangs on his arms. His clothes and bag are expensive, but not showy; functional, but still stylish. He wears no hat, though the day is cold and his hair is thinning. I decide he's probably in his late thirties or early forties. I, at only twenty-seven, have a slight advantage. I will be quicker and have more endurance, even if he is stronger. And I will have the element of surprise. It's so rare to find an opportunity like this. A fight I might be able to win.

There are no pedestrians in sight. I can hear the distinct swoosh of cars a few blocks away, driving over the muddy remnants of what was so recently pristine rain. Now is my chance. Conditions won't get much better. I smile in grim determination. When he turns a

corner, I hang back, and keep silent. He hasn't seen me yet, and I want to keep it that way. Since his pace is fairly regular, I decide my best option is to head him off. I tear around the next block over, sprint two down, and find a nook that was clearly once a doorway in the cement wall, to lie in wait.

His footsteps draw nearer, and my adrenaline rises. His step is light and purposeful, but not hurried or wary. I can hear his breathing. My trap works perfectly; a fraction of a second after his right foot passes the corner of the building, I lash out. I aim my first punch at his right shoulder—a warning shot I'm bound by honor to give—and immediately follow with a roundhouse kick to his ribcage. His response is instant. He tosses his satchel, which flies across the street, bounces off a chain-link fence with a crash that ripples down the length of the empty lot it surrounds, and lands under some scaffolding as his right forearm connects solidly with my shin to block my kick. I recoil, and front-kick. He pushes my outstretched leg, spinning me and leaving my back open to attack, which he takes full advantage of with a side-kick that sends me sprawling. So much for my upper hand. I groan in pain as he approaches, and as soon as he is within reach, launch my foot up between his legs. He jumps back, and connects his knee with my ankle, making my foot ring with the shock. I sweep my foot at both of his as he lands, which throws him off balance. I use the time I gain to stand and remind myself to breathe. I launch a front-kick that barely touches him, snap my heel back, and turn my hips to throw power into a roundhouse which connects solidly with his side. He catches my foot and drives me backwards. I hop on my other leg to stay upright and my back and head smash into the chain-link fence with a crash that echoes down the street. I try to use the fence as a support to counter his momentum, but the metal just bends under my weight, stealing from me what little balance I had maintained. I twist, bend my knee, and jam my opposite elbow into his sternum. That makes him release my leg at least. I sidestep to get away from the fence. I can't believe I'm on defense already. What have I gotten myself into?

“It is dishonorable to initiate a fight unprovoked and unannounced,” my *Sensei* had told my fellow students and me, weeks ago. We were sitting in a large training center, and many students I'd never met, from other dojos, were there. “But it might happen to you.”

Jab. Jab. I just barely dodge the two quick punches aimed at my face. I kick, and my foot connects with his stomach, then his palm with my knee. A sharp pain shoots up my leg and into my core, shortening my breaths. I'm getting desperate. My lungs feel like they are filling with acid. I no longer have the ability to throw power into large kicks and distance fighting. I fly in with some close-range attacks. A palm to the nose, a fist to the ear, a forearm to the neck. How

he got his foot to connect with my left ear I may never know, but the blow makes me dizzy. I can sense my responses getting slower, as I try to fend off his unceasing attacks. I am purely on defense now, unable to gain any sort of upper ground. The flurry of kicks and punches feels endless, and air feels scarce. I struggle merely to maintain my footing and protect myself from serious injury. Rage starts to build up in me. Why should I submit? Why should I let him beat on me until he decides to stop? My head throbs and my blood feels like it is going to scald my veins. With a burst of energy, I smash his knee with a well-aimed striking block, and counter with a few attacks of my own. With a fluidity of motion I have to admire, even in my dizzy state of exhaustion and adrenaline induced intoxication, he defends, maneuvers himself to a safe position, and transfers his efforts right back into offence again. I cringe as a blow to the stomach knocks what little air was left in my lungs out onto the street. I gasp and stumble backwards. Scalding hot claws grip my insides and give them a sharp twist at unpredictable intervals. Fear enters the flood of chemicals competing for dominance in my brain. My mind, separate from myself which is focused entirely on reacting to the perpetual attacks, drifts to the one item I did not leave behind back in the alley by the dumpster: my butterfly knife. Long and silver, with a shiny black handle, it sits in a homemade sheathe on my inner left forearm. It would be so easy to slip out and turn the tide of this war. I imagine what success would feel like, taste like. Finally winning a battle, finally coming out victorious instead of always being crushed and defeated.

“*Yame!*” he yells, and I freeze. Stop. I have no idea if my hand had been reaching for my knife. “*Yoi!*” I snap my arms to my side, stand at attention, “*Rei!*” and bow to him, as he mirrors my actions. I realize that I am just now hearing his voice for the first time. Somewhere in my foggy mind, I hear a crackling sound. Or perhaps popping. It takes me a second to realize what it is—clapping. There must be people behind me. I guess a bit of a crowd formed while we were fighting. They wanted to watch the show. I don’t know how many people are there, and I can’t turn to look, but it sounds like perhaps five to seven people clapping. I try to force myself to ignore them, even as a hot shame flushes across my face. I don’t want spectators for this next part. I never want spectators at all. I notice a cut on my arm that is starting to drip, but I make no movements yet. I must wait.

“Someone may attack you without warning,” my sensei had continued. “which is why we are going to try a this new program. For the next ten weeks, you all have the chance to try your hands at being assassins... and targets.” The idea had seemed strange all those weeks ago, but now, I hate the idea that the program will end in just a few short weeks. “Each dojo has a symbol,” Sensei continued, “and when you are wearing your symbol, which should be constantly

for the course of the experiment, you are in danger of being attacked, and you are also allowed to attack.” The rules were pretty simple, “The first shot must be a shoulder punch, no kicks or headshots until the victim has responded. At any time, either contestant may call *yame*.” but the emotions were not.

“*Yasume*.” Says feather-dagger calmly, and with his permission to relax, I sink to the ground, quickly wiping the blood from my arm with my hand, and sit on my feet. The damp pavement immediately starts creating dark splotches on my knees which expand ever so slowly. For some reason, it bothers me, even though I am covered in sweat, dirt, and blood. I bow my head and stare at a small pebble, which is casting an even smaller shadow on the grey ground, and wait for him to begin berating me.

“Your strength and speed of attack are good, but you always try to be on offense. You defend weakly, and then you are vulnerable to more attacks. You must watch me to see where I attack. My shoulders and hips are not the only sources of information. Did you watch my footing? Did you look into my eyes even once?” I hadn’t. I look now. His eyes are green, which surprises me. I shake my head weakly in response, and he continues. “Your *mawashi-geri*,” roundhouse kick, “is strong, but your *yoko-geri*,” side kick, “is weak. You fear to turn your back on me. No *ushiro-geri*,” back kick, “at all. Turning your back is a danger, requires courage. You must be aware of your whole self and know how your enemy is going to...”

He continues, and I listen—I really do. I make mental note of his criticisms and file away his compliments to comfort and encourage myself later. I ignore the way his head bobs up and down as he talks, just like sir Andrew’s does when he is enjoying a particularly scathing reprimand. “Are you motivated?”

“What?” Clearly, I’m not paying enough attention.

“Are you motivated to cast aside fear and shame, and to always remember your code of conduct even when your emotions tell you otherwise?”

I remain silent and listen to the spectators. Some of them leave—others stick around and whisper to each other. Some think the whole thing was choreographed. Some wonder if they should leave money. I cough, and I see blood mixed with my spit on the ground. I think I give him a nod; he goes on talking anyway. There is a throbbing pressure in my ears, and the world feels like it is spinning.

“... and I hope to spar again with you in the near future, perhaps you will visit my dojo sometime.” He starts to turn, then reconsiders and adds, with a hint of reprimand in his voice that

might be only in my imagination, “*Bushido* is most important.” Then he picks up his satchel, and continues his afternoon stroll.

I sit on my knees for almost a half hour. Some of my viewers step up to me and consider speaking, but all of them think better of it, and I am soon alone with my thoughts. I run through the whole exercise multiple times. I see mistakes and missed openings, misjudgments and weak responses. I see how my technique disintegrates as I let emotions dominate my actions, and I renew my long standing vow to continue training myself to control them. I also see strength, and improvement. Feather-dagger—I would learn his name if I ever decided to visit his dojo—clearly has the advantage in training, but I can feel my attacks growing sharper; my defenses, more stable, and I can feel proud of that. I let myself enjoy the satisfying ache of muscles after a particularly productive work-out. I will need to tape my left hand, right knee, and both ankles when I get home. Still, I find myself looking forward to my next class at my dojo, split-rock, the symbol of which sits just below my right collarbone, a patch held to my shirt with small, though powerful, magnets. I think back to the end of our fight. After his last kick, the one that sent me staggering backward a few steps and turned my thoughts to my knife, I should have realized the fight was over. I should have been the one to shout “*Yame.*” That was the point to stand tall and thank my opponent for a good match. I’d recognized that point in many previous fights without trouble. I wonder how much he recognized what was happening in my head, and perhaps in my hands. Had I reached for my knife? I can’t remember. I never should have had that knife to begin with. Shame wells up in me again. Did I even remember to thank him? I review the things he said to me, and my mind repeats his last sentence. *Bushido* is most important. *Bushido*. Way of the warrior. The code of honorable conduct expected of all. Being true to *Bushido* means fighting fair, treating opponents with respect, and turning failures into lessons.

I stand and begin my slow journey home. My knife, still in its sheath, presses on my arm, a hidden badge of shame.

Wish Ravine

Kev sank down into the cushion of his old chair. Although the fabric was once delightfully plush and elegant, it was now so worn and moth-eaten, it enveloped Kev's lower half almost entirely. The single light in the room was too dark to read without straining his eyes, but Kev didn't mind. He looked down at the photo album in his lap, and carefully turned the page. The next picture was of himself and Timmy, of course. Most of them were. He was sitting at a table, next to Timmy, their faces lit from below by tiny flames. Kev tried not to let any tears fall as the memories came rushing at him.

Timmy was laughing as Kev tried and tried to blow out his birthday candles. Timmy had bought the candles himself, and they were worth every penny of the \$2.53 he paid. Kev would extinguish each of the candles with a burst of air, and by the time the last one was out, the first was rekindling. Timmy, who had already been nine for a full three months, and was therefore much more experienced in matters of the world, was full to bursting with the hilarity of the scene. With a frustrated yell, Kev pulled out all nine candles—all still proudly displaying their resilient little flames—and threw them into the sink. Then he turned on Timmy. “How did you do that?” he demanded. Timmy, instead of answering, stuck out his tongue, and so began yet another of the boys' wrestling matches.

Kev tore his gaze from the picture, and the memory vanished. He took a deep breath, and stared at the wall for a while. He closed the album, rested the spine on his knee, and let it fall open on its own. He knew which page he would see, because it was the one he spent the most time staring at, but he couldn't look down yet. He let his hand run over the page, listening to the soft crinkle of the plastic covering that kept the photos in good condition. A few slow breaths later, Kev had mustered the courage to look down. There they were, he and Timmy, wearing backpacks half their weight. They both had these ridiculous smiles on, like nothing in the world could ever be wrong. There were no more pictures after that one.

They were on their own, venturing out into the wild outdoors, and nothing could bring them down. The mountains called to them with the voices of sirens, or perhaps those were the birds. Regardless, with their backs to civilization, they marched side-by-side into the relatively unknown and only mildly dangerous forest. In a few days, the boys would be immersed in the absolute perfection of the landscape. They had planned their route such that for the majority of the trip, their surroundings would be literally untouched by humans. They were the first, so they

were very careful to leave no trace of themselves behind, wanting to preserve the pristine wilderness for the next lucky hikers.

Kev closed his eyes and allowed the memory to skip ahead four days.

Timmy was ahead of Kev, yammering excitedly about all the different ways he'd learned to start a fire. Kev was listening intently, but also trying fiercely to hide how difficult it was becoming for him to keep up. "Of course, you can't really do that one without some sort of string, but a vine, or even a sinew from an animal could—Holy crap." He had just reached the top of the little hill they were climbing, and was standing motionless, staring at something Kev could not yet see. "You gotta see this." There was trill in his voice, probably brought on by the adrenaline rush they usually experienced when summiting a peak. Kev picked up the pace, and when he finally reached the top, he could do no more than utter a faint, "wow." The ground in front of them dropped steeply into a lush valley, across a fast moving river, and then climbed, just as quickly, up to an even taller peak to their right. To the left, they could see more mountains than they could count, some crowned with snow, others with more forest. The longer they looked, the more they could see, as their eyes recalibrated to the fog in the distance, and revealed the faint outlines of more, and still more mountains.

Suddenly, Timmy turned to Kev and grinned. "Race you to the top!" He said, and before Kev could protest that they were already at the top, began to climb a nearby boulder. Kev clambered after him, and when he finally made it to the top, laid his enormous backpack down, sat on the rock, and leaned against his pack. He took out his map and compass to see if he could recognize some of the nearby mountains. Timmy, meanwhile, was exploring the edges of their home-for-the-night. "We'll set up the tent here." He called over his shoulder, and Kev mumbled ascent without looking up. "We can probably get a bear-bag up over here..." Timmy continued his nesting ritual while Kev rested and studied his map.

"Look at me!" Timmy laughed a few minutes later. "It's like walking on a cloud."

Kev looked up. "God Timmy! You're going to get yourself killed, and then where will I be?" Timmy was walking across a moss-covered log that reached out over the valley, and disappeared somewhere in the thick fog that clung to the side of the mountain. "You have no idea if that is stable!" Timmy just grinned at Kev's concerned exclamations. "At least leave your backpack over here, so if you die, I'll have a tent."

Those were the last words Kev ever said to Timmy.

No. "You worry too much." Timmy teased. "Fine. Take your precious backpack." Still standing on the log, he began to unclip his pack. Kev saw the branch behind Timmy catch on Timmy's backpack. Saw it, as if in slow motion, and yet somehow he still didn't have enough time to warn him. Timmy swung his pack with what should have been enough force to toss it onto the safe boulder, mere feet away. Instead, Timmy toppled backwards, and his pack followed him down. Kev screamed.

Maybe.

It's hard to remember. No one was there to hear it.

Kev pressed the tears away from his eyes. He had relived this memory so many times. He'd also run through all its permutations. What if he had remembered his own backpack, instead of scrambling wildly after Timmy. What if he had gone straight home to call the search party, instead of wasting the first three precious days exhausting himself searching alone. What if he had made Timmy put his backpack down earlier. Or if he had stopped Timmy from walking out on that log in the first place. What if all Timmy had really needed to survive was the map and compass that Kev was holding.

But Timmy didn't die.

Kev knew running through the permutations was useless. It was ten years ago, and nothing could be done. Timmy was gone, and Kev should focus on remembering him, and moving on.

Didn't you hear? Timmy's not dead.

Kev set the book down and—what? Timmy is dead. He never made it back.

That doesn't mean he's dead.

The search parties looked for weeks, and never found him. It was so close to winter, and he had less than a week's supply of food. There's no way he made it. Kev put the book down and stood to—

That mountain range was already barely passable on foot, and not at all passable by car or helicopter. The search parties didn't make it very far in to the center, and that's where Timmy headed.

What?

He didn't have a map. You already knew that. He was disoriented. He picked a direction, and headed in it. He chose the wrong one. It took him until spring to find civilization again. And by then, he had no idea who he was.

How did he survive the fall?

That hill is less steep than you remember it. Brush slowed his fall, and he landed on his pack at the bottom.

This is ridiculous. If he is still alive, he would have come back. Even if he went insane or had amnesia or something, he still would have been in the papers. I want him to be alive just as much as you, but we need to remain in reality here. Kev put the book down—

If he were gone, I wouldn't be here.

Huh?

I'm his story. Timmy forgot about Kev, for years. It seems impossible, since their stories were so closely tied together that they often found themselves sharing thoughts, but that's what happened.

No. I don't know what's going on, but this false hope is not productive. Kev put down the book and stood to make himself a cup of tea.

Our stories can converge again.

How?

Let him come back.

I don't understand. Kev had learned to use routine to dull painful emotions. He did this now, methodically measuring, heating, stirring, sipping.

Just give him the chance.

He let the warmth of the tea fill him, and focused on the physical sensations. He always drank Earl Grey. His pattern had not changed in—oh. I see. Um... Can I really?

You can do this.

Um, Ok. Here goes... The sound of the doorbell startled Kev out of his reverie.

I can work with that.

Videography

Matias heaved on the enormous metal door. It must have weighed 300 pounds. Rusty hinges, dirt and debris on the ground made it even harder to open than it should have been. After moving it almost two inches, Matias gave up. There had to be another way in. He wandered around the side of the building, holding the top of his coat tightly against his neck to keep out the biting winter air. The idea of going outside in this weather for any reason was unheard of. His eyes darted quickly around every few seconds, though he was very much alone. He started to look for a window.

**

“Alright class. This project is going to take most of you a year and a half, so in order to complete it on time, you need to start six months ago.”

There were a few nervous chuckles. That was a joke, right?

“I have been very lenient these past two years.”

An outright lie.

“But this project is the important one. It is the comprehensive culmination of your years in video school. Think of it as your master’s thesis, your final exam, and your ticket to the real world.”

Well, at least Professor Lorn had the students’ attention. The world of video was cutthroat, and the professor saw no reason the preparation for it shouldn’t be as well. After five years of general ed. with a focus in visual art, and two more concentrated entirely on video, these students ought to be ready for a challenge. Besides, if he graduated all of them, where would that leave things? The industry would have too many competitors, the reputation of the school would be tarnished, and the students would not be taken seriously. At this point, Professor Lorn had a pretty good idea of which students would pass, and which wouldn’t, but he had been surprised before.

**

Matias didn’t even know why he was here. He should be inside working, not fighting the freezing wind out in some deserted old town. Just over two months of his final video project had gone by, and he was behind schedule. He was looking for inspiration, and he wasn’t going to find it. Jutting out from the back of the large building, Matias saw two rusty railings, each about five feet long, on either side of a flat sheet of metal with a slight ramp on the end farthest from the building. A loading dock. To the upper-right, just above eye-level, there was a panel of four windows. One of the lower windows had clearly lost a fight with a rock. Matias decided to finish

the job. He wrapped his fist in his sleeve, and punched the remaining shards of glass. Matias's fingers screamed in pain, and a very small piece of glass broke off, clanging to the ground inside the dark building. Well that was a bad plan. He tried throwing a few small rocks, but his aim wasn't very good, so most of them went sailing through the hole already in the window, or hitting the brick wall next to it. He couldn't find any rocks large enough to do real damage anyway. And still, the hole was too small, and too sharp for Matias to fit through. He decided to continue his trek around the building, and when he rounded the corner, he found some old two-by-fours. Perfect. He used one of those to smash the rest of the window. Matias counted to three to prepare himself for the shock of cold, and as quickly as he could, he took off his jacket, laid it over the shard-studded windowsill, and with a running jump, hoisted himself onto the ledge and clambered into the building. As soon as he landed, he snatched his slightly torn coat and wrapped himself in it, shivering violently. It took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting, and when they did, Matias found himself in a giant room, one that could easily fit a jumbo jet, almost two. The ceiling was covered in metal beams, and the walls were a mix of concrete and steel reinforcements. So this was a warehouse—or perhaps a factory. Matias had never been inside a building like this. Piles of boxes, equipment, and a bunch of things Matias had never seen lined two of the four walls, and one wall had a staircase leading to a small room, with one wall made entirely of glass, looking out over the large floor.

The first, entirely obligatory action Matias took was to run to the top of the stairs, survey his vast new terrain, and test the echo-quality of the room. After finding it sufficient, he began to explore the room in earnest. The piles along the walls were mostly filled with the most ridiculous assortment of junk Matias had ever seen. There were large, heavy, black lights, and far more ladders than should ever be necessary for one building. There were boxes and boxes of toys and clothing that didn't make any sense. There was nothing consistent about it. He pulled out a woman's dress that looked like something from the late 2000s. Beneath it was a suit that looked like pictures Matias remembered from history class of the ancient Victorians. Most of the boxes had no lid, and were overflowing with an eclectic assortment of odd objects. It was as if the people who did this attempted to maintain some semblance of organization at first, but gave up half-way through and started throwing things haphazardly onto the pile. There were hats and umbrellas and the most ridiculous looking shoes Matias had ever seen. There were desks with drawers that didn't open, and clocks that didn't tick, a magazine with blank pages inside, and a door with only one side painted. Everything was moth-eaten, dust-covered, and broken or torn. Matias spent hours sifting through these exciting new treasures, completely enthralled with their

chaos. He had climbed completely inside one of the larger boxes, which had a “This end up” symbol pointing resolutely toward the floor, and now had most of its contents strewn on the floor around it. He picked up an odd contraption that was nothing more than a flat wooden rectangle about the size of a piece of paper, but as thick as a piece of bread. It had a hinge at the top corner that held a smaller wooden stick, and when he lifted it and let it snap down onto the larger block, it made a satisfying clapping sound. He smiled at the sheer uselessness of such a device, and tossed it out of the box. As it hit the ground, his eyes caught sight of a medium-sized black box with a silver lining.

**

Lorn leaned back in his chair and looked around the classroom. It was toward the end of month two now. Months two through six were always the most comfortable. The students were still excited about their projects, and no one was irreparably behind. Everyone was leaning too close to their consoles, engrossed in their work. Their chairs, suspended from the ceiling, and curved toward the bottom to provide perfect back support were unsuccessful at preventing his students from slouching. He glanced over at his stat-scanner, ClassroomIntent, which was calibrated to each of his students’ baseline measurements. Only one set of stats stood out. Matias had an increased temperature, more frequent fidgeting, and low concentration. His emoti-readings were indicative of frustration. All signs of a student struggling to keep up in class. The problem was, Matias was not struggling. In fact, he was one of the more decent students. Nothing particularly noteworthy, but he turned in his progress reports on time, and they were more than adequate. But this wasn’t the first time his stat readings were notably negative.

Lorn stood and walked over to the boy. “What’s bothering you, Matias?”

Matias looked up, meeting Lorn’s eyes with a distant expression. “Nothing in particular, sir. I just... nothing here seems...” he trailed off.

Lorn had seen this before. The solution was easier than one might expect. “What you need is inspiration. Try taking a day to do something you’ve never done before.”

Matias blinked. “Like what, sir?”

Lorn didn’t care, and he said as much. Matias would think of something.

**

Lissia sat quietly, two seats down, and quietly noted Professor Lorn’s comment about inspiration. Perhaps inspiration could benefit her as well. Why did no one but Matias need it? Or did only Matias earn it? What made him different?

**

The box was latched shut, but not locked. Even after unlatching it, Matias had to use a bit of force to get the box open. Dust and filth had strengthened the seal, so the snap and accompanying dust cloud was satisfying when Matias finally pried the box open. Inside was quite possibly the only clean thing in the room, including the now filthy young man reverently holding the box. Black foam, which sparkled ever so subtly in the dim light Matias' eyes had long since grown accustomed to, snugly enveloped a strange device, preserved in time by the air-tight seal of its carrying case. It was almost a cube, or a rectangular cube anyway, but it had a round eye on one end. A cloth handle clipped to the side of the box begged Matias to lift it from its cradle. Matias was entirely unable to resist. The box was heavier than Matias expected, but still easy to lift.

The first thing Matias did with it, was point the eye at the wall, and press a random button. He half expected a laser beam to blast a hole in the wall. Nothing of the sort happened. He pressed a few more buttons, again with no result. Confused, he inspected the device more closely. A slide on the top allowed him to choose between W and T, whatever they meant, but every time he let go, the dial just snapped back to the middle. Poor design. A flap on the side opened to reveal another panel of buttons and an even smaller flap which hid a slot with a card in it. Most of the words on the card were small and faded, but the script-like letters "SD" were easy to make out on the front. The initials of the owner, perhaps? The inside of the larger flap also seemed significant. A screen perhaps? That didn't make much sense. This couldn't be a computer. Everything was sideways or backwards or disproportioned, even for the old desktop or laptop PCs he read about once online. A hole near the back of the box gave him the clue he needed though. It was clearly a power port. This device was built before wireless power. Matias, upon realizing this, held the device reverently for a few moments before continuing his investigation.

**

"Alright, class. Let's get a status report on your projects." Professor Lorn announced at the start of the day. "We're three months in, so you should all have a good solid plot worked out, and at least four cines in the final draft stages. If I don't get around to you today, expect me to tomorrow." The professor circled around the tables, pausing at desks in a random order so that the students couldn't predict when he would get to them. Matias worked feverishly in the back corner, his mind sprinting a marathon. Three months of doing what was expected of him, and what did he have to show for it. A boring, cookie-cutter plot and a few cines that were virtually

indistinguishable from those of the two students on either side of him. He hadn't really changed anything in the past few weeks anyway. He'd been busy with other things.

"What other things could you possibly have been doing?" Matias jumped and smashed his knee into the table. The professor was yelling at a student four desks down. The student whimpered something unintelligible, and Matias snapped his concentration back to his own work. He was adding cines, elements of cines, details, fine-tuning the lighting—basically, he was trying to make it look like he'd done work over the past three weeks. The professor skipped two students and started talking to the girl next to him. Now that the professor could easily see Matias's screen, Matias couldn't work so quickly. It would look desperate. Instead, he organized his thoughts and windows in preparation for the possible conversation he was about to have.

"Alright Matias. Let's see what you've got."

Matias gulped. "Four cines, ready for final revision, and a fifth about half-way done." Matias flipped through the different windows, showing enough of each to prove he was telling the truth.

"That's it?" the professor asked, surprised.

"Um..." Matias racked his brain. "Oh! I also have the script of course." Matias pulled up the document he hadn't so much as glanced at in two weeks.

The professor took control of the console and skimmed through the work at his own pace. "Well, it's decent. Better than some in this class. I was expecting more from you though. You're usually such a fast worker."

"Well, sir, I've been thinking a lot about how to put meaning behind entertainment, and I've been developing an id—"

"No need to make excuses, Matias. Your work is passable, and your progress is sufficient. I'd recommend picking up the pace from here on out, but I'm not worried about you." The professor skipped the next student and began speaking to the one after. Matias wasn't sure whether to be relieved or taken aback.

**

"Ok Lissia. Show me what you have so far." Lissia did, and her work was passable as well. As well. Lissia wondered when she'd started automatically thinking of her work in comparison to Matias'. She was ready for her progress update the moment she stepped into class, so she didn't need the time. Matias clearly had needed it. She spent the first half-hour of class glancing at Matias' console more often than at her own. He worked so quickly, she could hardly follow his motions. In that half hour, he did what would have taken her a week. And yet he was

not ahead of her in the class. She had wondered why, but it became clear after he finished talking to Professor Lorn. He suddenly changed from the quickest student in the class to the slowest. He spent most of the rest of class staring blankly at his console. She resolved to take more than a passing notice in this boy.

**

Where most people saw the use of a piece of technology, and didn't care how it worked, as long as it did, Matias was the opposite. He couldn't see the use of many of the objects in his own home, but he could probably rebuild them from scrap parts if given enough time. So once he got home, it wasn't difficult for him to discretely construct a makeshift power adapter—by splicing a regular power receiver with a jack he found in the silver case—for his newly acquired camera. That's what it was, according to his internet research. Not a static camera for photographs, but a moving camera, sometimes called "movie" which Matias thought was an adorable nickname. Moving cameras died out in the art industry about a hundred years ago. Around twenty-five years later, they disappeared from security systems as well, as protections got better, and the invention of Intent made them obsolete. Intent could monitor your breathing, blood pressure, adrenaline level, sweat rate, and gait consistency, so after-the-fact crime footage was not useful. Footage was a strange word. Matias wondered what length that word could possibly be referring to. Perhaps the distance the camera's eye could see? That made sense.

Matias often wished he hadn't been chosen for video school. The choosing was supposed to be random, but children in wealthy families tended to land cushy jobs, and Matias couldn't help but wonder if his parents had something to do with his placement. He couldn't blame them. The decision was made hours after his birth, and they were probably just trying to protect him from the dangerous or dirty jobs. Still, when adults chided him for spending hours on his own dismantling window shade control boxes or stealing the climate system from the fridge, he couldn't help but wonder if there was something inside him that didn't belong in the track of schooling chosen by chance. He didn't have words for it at the time, but now he would probably argue that perhaps there was some inherent nature that superseded nurture—though if he had been chosen for biology, he would probably know the exact scientific reasons why that wasn't true, and why the random assigning of children to life tracks was the best solution to what would otherwise be a lopsided society.

**

"Did you know you unfocus your eyes when you're thinking?"

"What?" Matias blinked a few times to help him adjust to consciousness.

“Only when you’re really lost in thought. It’s like you’re trying to see... I don’t know, something hanging in the empty air above the consoles. I used to think you were looking at the clock, but you’re vision never gets that far, does it?”

Matias didn’t know what to say. “Am I short-sighted then?”

The girl smiled and gently bit the right side of her lower lip. “No. I think you must see something the rest of us don’t.” then, when Matias didn’t answer, she added, “I’m Lissia.”

“Matias.” Matias said reflexively.

“I know.” Said Lissia. “What’s the theme of your final video going to be?”

“Reality.” Lissia gave him a puzzled look, so he continued. “I want to show people how far they’ve drifted from reality, and how that separation between ideal and realism has created a wall between people.”

“I think people would notice a wall between them, don’t you?”

Matias frowned. “Not if it happened gradually. It began with a curtain, so thin, no one could see it at all. And as the curtain got thicker, people stopped seeing each other. But it happened so gradually, no one noticed.”

“So you want to teach people to see each other again?” Lissia asked, genuinely interested.

“Yeah. Get them to really notice and appreciate each other.” Matias’s eyes drifted upwards as he put his goal into words for the first time.

“That’s a really noble goal.” Lissia said. “Makes my project seem childish and useless.”

After the silence stretched on for a little bit, Matias asked, “How did you know I wasn’t looking at the clock?”

Lissia grinned. “Class ended an hour ago.”

“Oh.” said Matias sheepishly, looking around at all the empty chairs in the room.

Lissia raised her eyebrows, letting a close-lipped smile spread slowly across her face.

Matias studied her for a moment. “How would you like to be in my video?” He asked.

Lissia laughed. “What do you mean? You want to base a character off of me?”

“No.” Said Matias plainly. “I want you to be in it.”

Lissia’s smile faltered. Then she held out her hand. “Why don’t you come get dinner with me?”

“Perfect!” Matias grinned, handing her a digisync so she could access his protected script files. “I’ll explain while we eat.”

The power adapter worked. After bringing home his new prize it only took Matias a few hours to get the device working. When plugged in, a small red light blinked, indicating the machine was charging. Matias could hardly contain his excitement. He let it charge for ten minutes—that should be all it needed—and pushed the power button. The camera made a ringing noise like an alarm, and Matias almost dropped it. He opened the side flap, and started pushing buttons. The screen was clearly LCD. Matias had never seen a liquid crystal display except in a museum many years ago. It was completely dark. He pushed a few more buttons, and stared at it quizzically. Then, in a burst of inspiration, he removed a circular piece of plastic from the eye of the camera. Suddenly, the screen came to life, showing him the doorway across from him. He tapped it, and the material deformed a little under his touch, distorting the colors. He drew in a sharp breath and quickly pulled his finger away from the screen. It looked unbroken, and the colors were back to normal. He decided he wouldn't try that again, just to be sure. He pushed a button with a dark circle on it, and a red word popped up on the upper-right of the screen. It said, "recording." It was storing data! Matias almost squealed with excitement, but he was more composed than that. Instead, he put the camera down, and danced around the empty room until he was dizzy. Then he stopped the recording. After pushing many more buttons, he figured out how to rewind and watch his data. He rewound a few seconds, and hit play. He saw just the floor and part of one wall. He heard muffled pounding, which must have been his footsteps, and occasionally he would see his foot stomp in front of the wall before disappearing again. Of course. The eye. That was the trick. It could only see a narrow range of objects in the room. Matias tried lifting the camera to get a different perspective, but as he suspected, the recording was only in one direction, so he couldn't change the angle of the shot once it was done being recorded.

Matias tried to rewind to the very beginning of his recording, and realized that his wasn't the only data on the memory card. He rewound all the way to the beginning, hands shaking in anticipation.

The recordings already on the camera were amazing. They were bright and energetic, full of life and truth. People ran and jumped and sang and laughed, and seemed to be having such a wonderful time. There was chaos and coordination at the same time. Matias watched it twelve times before he was able to bring himself back to reality and continue learning how to use the device. He figured out that the mysterious W and T slider was the zoom function, and there was a place to attach a microphone, if he could find one. The camera already recorded sound though, so Matias figured the extra microphone was unnecessary.

Matias probably should have taken the data to a museum. And he probably would, once his project was over. But for now, the data was his to use and emulate.

**

Lissia woke up early on Saturday to meet Matias by the South window of Complex D. She had brought a coat, as he had requested. It had taken her a while to find one.

“Ready to go?” he asked, when he saw her.

“Go where?” Lissia wondered.

“Outside.” Matias said with a grin.

For the first time in a long while, Lissia looked out the window. Everything was grey; the road, the old rundown buildings, the abandoned ground transports, the poles sticking out of the ground every hundred meters or so. She had always thought of the outside as a huge, intricate preserved landscape, like in a museum. She never imagined entering it. It wasn't as scary as she expected.

Matias led her to a huge building. He had clearly been here many times before, because he strode confidently in, and started digging through piles of odd looking stuff, while Lissia took a moment to admire the sheer impressiveness of the room.

“Ok. Let's start with some practice stuff.” He was aiming an object that looked rather weapon-like at her. “Just talk at me.”

Lissia suddenly had no words. “I don't know what to say. What is that?” She pointed to the device.

Matias held it up for her to see. “It records cines that are real life, instead of made on a console.”

Lissia didn't quite understand, but she just said, “Oh.”

Matias seemed surprised, but not unpleasantly so, at her willingness to just accept that. “Ok!” He declared. “Let's make a movie!”

It took Lissia a while to be even remotely comfortable talking to, or at, the cine-gun Matias carried. He called it a “camera” but that name made no sense. He really understood it to be a cine-gun too, or he wouldn't keep saying things like, “let's shoot a different cine now.”

They spent the most time on a cine Matias called reading. Once they got the background formed—a complicated task involving carrying free-standing walls, a door, and a couple of fake book shelves. All Lissia had to do was walk in, pick up a book, (a real book!) open to a random page, and read until Matias said to stop. It was odd holding a book made of paper, and the first few times they tried it, she couldn't keep herself from grinning or giggling in wonder.

By the end of the day, they were both exhausted, and happy. Lissia was proud of role in this odd, secret-feeling project, and glad to have a real friend in her Videography class. “Thanks for letting me be in your video, Matias.” Lissia said with a huge smile.

Matias made a dismissive noise. “Thanks for spending all day helping me. I owe you one.”

**

“Sir!” Matias called to Professor Lorn after class. Lorn paused on his way out the door, realizing that, for the middle of month five, he knew very little about Matias’ progress. Then again, he did want to get home early tonight, to supervise the installation of his new wall console. He looked at Matias for a few seconds, then sighed in resignation and walked back in the room. He leaned against the inner wall, to show that he was willing to listen to whatever Matias had to say. “Sir, I want to try something different with my project.”

“Oh, is that all?” Lorn was relieved. Matias was clearly just skeptical about the rules governing the plot development emotion algorithms, as most of students with any spark of creativity are at some point. “Matias, you can be as creative as you want with this project. Your script does not need to follow any of the patterns I taught you. Those are tried and true devices, proven through years of meticulous research to be the most reliable, but if you want to diverge, and you think you can keep the story engaging, then by all means, give it a shot. I should warn you, though. There are few success stories I can cite of attempts of this nature.” Feeling that perhaps that could be the end of their conversation, he turned again.

Matias seemed off balance as he sputtered, “No, sir. It’s not quite like that. Let me show you.” He tapped his console, and a cine began to play.

Mildly resenting the sense of obligation he suddenly felt to watch the cine, Lorn sighed and, with a flick of his hand, sent the image to the large projection on the far wall, and the sound to large speakers, instead of Matias’s small console ones. Thankfully, it was only three minutes long.

The cine was a short clip starting with a dark room containing a bookshelf, some cushy armchairs, and a piano. The room is not uncomfortably cluttered, but it isn’t exactly tidy either. A few socks lay scattered on the floor, a jacket has been thrown haphazardly over the back of a chair, books and trinkets lay on the various flat surfaces. A girl in her early twenties with light blond hair steps into the room and snaps on a light. The whole room goes out of focus for a second, and then returns with more clarity than before. The girl walks over to the bookshelf,

chooses a book, sits down and begins to read. Her emotions change a little as she reads. After almost a minute of her reading, the cine cuts to black.

When they finished, the professor spoke first. “There is something very unnerving about this whole cine. I’m surprised. I’ve never seen work this... amateur coming from you. It is, in a strange way, compelling though. You know, perhaps you should consider switching to horror, or at least suspense. I think it’s the only way you are going to get anyone to want to watch a video like this.”

“What, exactly, bothers you about it?”

That was such an odd question. The whole cine was dripping with a *wrongness* that made Lorn shiver. When he looked for them, though, he could see many specific factors that contributed to the creepiness of the cine. “The lighting is the most noticeable. See how it makes this edge of the shelf blurry and this one clear? And look at the way the light shines on this panel.” He pointed to one side of a bookshelf. “It doesn’t make sense at all. Why would these patches form? See how it’s darker here for no discernible reason? And there’s just simply no need for such careless errors. Your light source is here, with an unobstructed straight-line path to your non-polished, smooth surface. The absorption spectra of the light tan—oak, perhaps—wood grain is easy enough to find in the databases. These are kid’s calculations. It’s shameful for you to get them wrong. And what was with the delay in image loading when she turned the light on? This is a very high-speed processor. It shouldn’t have glitched.”

“You don’t think, maybe, the imperfections make it look more realistic? I mean, look around you. Our flat surfaces are not so perfectly flat.”

“Come on, Matias.” Lorn rolled his eyes. “That whole imperfections-are-more-realistic fad ended decades ago with the development of photon-following. We can know exactly where each photon emitted from your source is going to land and how it is going to get reflected or absorbed. ‘Realistic imperfection’ is just another way of saying amateur, or lazy.”

“Sir,” Matias replied, with that distant look that meant he was thinking deeply. “Something must be off about your calculations, because... I wish I took physics... I mean, flat things aren’t really flat, are they?” He ran his hand along the wall next to him. “And my light source. It wasn’t a circle... well, a not-flat circle, but more than that, it was like a drop of water, only hanging off an umbrella. Round like a ball at the bottom, but with that clingy stem...”

Lorn resolutely ignored Matias’ unintelligible ramblings, and continued his enumeration of the cine’s faults. “And don’t even get me started on your character. She makes all these little movements that are unnecessary, and don’t make sense.” Professor Lorn tapped the bottom of his

console to rewind. “See how she moves her knee here, and clenches her shoulder just a little? But then it doesn’t mean anything. I don’t get it. Also, her face doesn’t convey emotions right. How exactly did you manage to choose all the wrong emotions for her? Like this one.” The professor moved to a different spot in the cine. “What’s she supposed to be thinking? I don’t even recognize this expression. Did you find it in an old, obsolete database?”

“No.”

“Well, there is something creepy about her. She’s just not very realistic.”

“She’s real.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. She’s not even close yet. Her hair is far too light and thin, and look how it blends into the white wall behind her. You need a clear dividing line between character and background.” He moved to a different spot. “Your perspective is just a little off here. Making your foreground sharper will help convey depth. I mean, look at this. Sometimes, your background is much clearer and sharper than your foreground.” Professor Lorn paused to gather breath, and Matias took this opportunity to jump in.

“She’s real. A person. Alive. You can meet her. In fact, you have. She’s one of your students. Don’t you recognize Lissia?”

“That doesn’t make sense. How would you insert a real person into a cine?”

“It’s not a cine. It’s a film.”

“What are you talking about?” Lorn was starting to get a little frustrated with Matias, something he prided himself on not doing to any of his students.

“The bookshelf really exists. Look.” Matias reached into the bag that was slung over his shoulder. “I brought the book she was reading. Feel it. It’s real paper.”

Realization dawned on Lorn. “What exactly are you proposing?”

“A real film, with real people, filmed in real places. For a mountain cine, I will go to the mountains. For a city cine, I will go into the city. When I want sunlight, I will film during the day.”

Lorn was incredulous. “Why would you constrain yourself like that? Do you have any idea how much a project like that would cost? And what for? In the end, people will say it is not realistic.”

“But it will be real. Don’t you see? People have been watching computer generated videos for so long, everyone has forgotten what real people look like and act like. And what’s worse, they’ve let this distortion shape their view of each other. They can’t see that it’s killed all memory of the connections that make us human.”

“That’s ridiculous. We see real people every day. You are real. You look and act real. That girl you showed me, she does not look real.”

Matias reached over to the console and closed the video. Then he opened a folder from his upload key. As he did this, he explained, “I asked one of the other students to create an environment based on a picture I took. I have here a still-shot of the environment he built, and the original photograph.” The two images appeared next to each other on the screen. They were an almost identical image of the interior of a two story building, where the second floor had a balcony looking over a high-ceilinged lobby. The room, with its mishmash of light fixtures and decorations, looked chaotic and complicated from the angle of the pictures. “Tell me which one is real.”

Lorn looked carefully at the two images for a long time. Finally, he smiled. “I caught a mistake! I’m going to have a conversation with that student. Look.” He pointed to a diagonal beam which crossed behind a vertical column. See how the lines don’t connect? This side of the beam should be pushed downward. This image is the virtual one. Now that I see it, there are all sorts of errors. The shadow here doesn’t fit the shape of this chair, and the reflection on this painting is all wrong.” Lorn beamed with pride at his discovery.

“Wrong.” Matias said with some satisfaction in his voice. “You are talking about the real photograph. That reflection is distorted because the covering on the painting is warped. The beam is in fact straight. Your student ‘fixed’ it to be physically impossible, but aesthetically comfortable.”

Lorn was skeptical, but waited for Matias to continue.

“This is what I want to bring to the world. I want them to look into reality and actually see it. See it in the ambiguity of real human emotions, the mistakes and deformities in physical objects. I want them to see illogical patterns that grow in a field of real grass, the inconsistencies in a person’s natural gait, the many phantom shadows made by weak sources of light that you don’t notice, but are there. ”

Lorn did not understand why Matias wanted such things. “We can make all that. We have. It is uninteresting.”

Matias closed his eyes. “No, professor. What we made all those years ago was still only a simulation of reality, and as such, it was incomplete. We’ve measured, and modeled, and randomized, and projected, but we haven’t captured. We haven’t held reality accountable for itself, exactly the way it is, unedited, full of imperfections, human.”

“Unedited?” Lorn was feeling a twinge of anger. “You expect to be able to create an entire feature without any graphics, without any programming, without running any simulations or randomizers?”

“Precisely.”

Clearly, Lorn was wrong about Matias. The boy hadn’t understood any of his lectures. “How do you think you’ll do that?”

“Film. Pure and honest.”

“And you’re willing to pay for everything you need... sets, and costumes, and traveling, and—oh God—actors?”

“If I must.”

Lorn pinched the bridge of his nose. “Don’t be an idiot, Matias. You have done good work so far. You are on track to graduate. I can’t say that for many of my students. Don’t throw it away.”

Matias took a step backward. “You’ve never felt it, have you?” The disappointment he felt carved sadness, anger, and pity all at once into his face. “That longing, that need, to take an idea, an abstract, untouchable, consuming embodiment of a thought, fleeting and simultaneously ubiquitous, and pull from it a shadow of a reflection, a taste of its worth. You’ve never been drawn to risk everything just for the chance to pour all your time, concentration, and effort into a task doomed to fail. You’re not really an artist. You just fill the role that society built for you. Because that’s the way your dice landed.”

“You are out of line, Matias.” Lorn hesitated. He had never been this angry at a student before. He tried to calm himself before continuing. “People much smarter than you, with years of experimental results to back them up, have created this system, and you will simply fail if you try to break it for some pipe dream that is ultimately no more than a history lesson,” he finally concluded.

Matias smiled and left the room. At least the boy had passion. Lorn had to give him that.

**

“Matias?” came a whisper from behind him.

“Yes? Why are you whispering?” Matias said in his normal volume.

“Oh.” said Lissia, turning red. “I don’t know. It was just so quiet in here. It seemed wrong to make noise.”

Matias looked up. “What is it?”

“I just thought maybe you’d like to...” she hesitated, then continued with courage, “do something else for a while? You’ve been in here too long.”

Matias glanced at the time on the wall, and his eyes widened. Then he looked around the room, and realized that they were the only two in it. Class ended hours ago, and the light coming through the windows was fading. “I guess I was a bit caught up in my work.” he said. “I suppose I should go. Lemme just...” He started tapping his console, just completing a thought.

“Matias?” whispered Lissia, five full minutes later.

“Yes? Why are you whispering?” Matias said, looking up. Then he remembered her.

“Oh!”

“You’re getting faster at responding. For a while there, I thought that if I were quiet and patient enough, we could keep this up until our classmates started arriving tomorrow morning.” Lissia smiled.

Matias looked confused for a second. Then it dawned on him. “How many times have we had this conversation? Wait. Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know. I’m sorry.”

**

Matias worked almost non-stop from morning until nightfall every day. Weekends meant nothing. The bell marking the start and end of class meant nothing. Food meant nothing. He must have been getting enough somehow, because he never felt too hungry. Sleep was a wasteful necessity, partaken of sparingly. Matias soon found out that making a film took just as much computer time as generating a video, even without embellishments, and on top of that, he still had to film scenes outside of classtime. He found he often needed to film a scene multiple times to get it right. Then he had to pore through the footage to find the right one. Usually, the beginning and end had to be chopped off, because it was him saying, “ok go!” and then his actors responding with, “We should start now?” Then there was the sound. Anything filmed outdoors or from far away, or with background noise needed to be recorded separately so that the clean sound could be put on top of the video, or nothing could be heard. That meant Matias had to sync up the sound with the actions. It was tough work, but Matias was determined to see his idea through.

After months of painstaking effort, he was finally starting to form a cohesive work. The video was a series of short scenes, some pre-written and acted, some spontaneous and improvised, and some filmed without the knowledge of the actors. (But of course, with their ex post facto permission.) Matias liked these last ones the best. They were often plotless, but they were the truest reflection of reality he had ever seen. And sometimes, when he caught an

argument or a fight, they were a jarring shot of truth. Matias decided to include the original footage he found on the camera in with his own work, even though by comparison, Matias's scenes looked very amateur. Matias figured that footage from the Silicon age would give his work value beyond that of a school project. He wove the scenes together, so that individually, they did not make much sense, and didn't follow any clear chronology, but as the movie progressed, the various storylines started to join together, linked by common themes, into one dream-like canvass.

The work was never ending, but Matias didn't tire of it. For the first time, he had found a reason to be in video school. He felt like he finally belonged in the place which, for so long, had felt a bit like a prison.

**

The classroom was dark, save one lonely console. Lissia tiptoed through the shadows, traveling as quietly as she could. It wasn't necessarily that she wanted Matias not to notice her. Actually, she would love for Matias to notice her—actually notice her—even for a short time. But she let her insignificance be a game. This way, if...when... he completely failed to notice her existence, it could be an accomplishment. A sign of her ability, her prowess as a stealthy ninja, instead of just painful. She set down a bottle of Coke—the longest lasting trademark in history—two slices of pizza, and a small plastic carton of apple sauce on the desk next to him. As usual, no response. As she tiptoed back out of the room, Matias reached out and picked up a slice of pizza, without looking at it. Lissia smiled to keep her eyes free of tears. Yet another successful mission.

**

Professor Lorn forgave Matias his idiocy, and never gave up on him. Every step of the way, after reminding him sharply that he ought to quit the nonsense and start doing some real work, he would challenge Matias to be more careful with his camera work, write more realistic scenes, perfect the sound. If he wasn't going to get the correct work from Matias, he was at least going to get good, solid, videography. All the while, though, Professor Lorn never modified Matias's work himself. When the other students had problems, he would occasionally take over their console to fix something, but he never once touched Matias's console. At first, this annoyed Matias, when he was having technical issues with the new software he needed to convert ancient data storage into usable form, but after a while, Matias realized that he would have felt he lost

something if Professor Lorn had helped him. This way, Matias could be proud of his work, and it was entirely his own.

As the end of the project approached, Matias saw his collection of cines taking shape. They were coming together into a cohesive message. His movie—that's what he decided to call it—was not a story of love, or revenge. It did not fit into any of the 36 dramatic situations he studied in school, nor did it maintain consistency in view angle, lighting, location or volume. Any two cines, chosen at random, would be arguably unrelated, but together, they told a story. Not one with a climax, and a resolution, but a human story. Full of confusion, tentative confidence, anger, hope, and most importantly, personality. It showed people, just being people. Sometimes, they danced a particular dance, and other times, they just laughed at convention. And after watching it, one couldn't help but want to turn to a family member or close friend, and ask to know them—to really know them. To look into their eyes and ask earnestly, "how was your day?" and actually listen to the response. One also couldn't help but re-evaluate his own life, only to realize he didn't know himself.

Despite the fact that the cines were sometimes chaotic, and the camera work was sloppy, Matias's movie worked better than he ever expected. The characters looked like live people because they were. The places looked like places you could find walking down the street because you could. The situations felt real because they were. So when he finally turned his project, Matias felt that he had, for the first time in his life, really accomplished something.

**

Little by little, Lorn began to understand what Matias was doing. He saw how the characters did not so much stand alone as members of a fabricated world, able to be looked at from a distance. They instead represented, in a manner so simple it was elegant, himself, his wife, his estranged childhood best friend. The story of Matias' work was not a plot so much as a life. Almost everything that happened in this movie had happened to Lorn at some point or another, and watching from the outside, he could recognize with new eyes when he had handled the situations correctly, and when he had been foolish. It was beautiful. It was heart-wrenching. It made him bite his lip until tears welled in his eyes. It made him bubble over with bittersweet hope until he had to look away. No one could watch this without learning something profound about their life. No publisher would ever accept it. It broke too many rules, hurt too many prides, told the truth with too much strength. And there was the true tragedy of the best students Lorn ever taught.

Grading Rubric

Realism	45/50
Attention to detail	40/50
Mastery of graphic mechanics	10/50
Photon integration	0/50
Script (includes plot cogency, dialogue, and flow)	25/50
Total	120/250

Additional notes:

Matias— This is the singular most creative and impressive piece of videography I've ever seen.

Final grade: 48% F

Author's Note

For my capstone project, I have created a compilation of six short stories of various lengths. In this author's note, I discuss each of them, in the order they are meant to be read, and make note of sources of inspiration for them. [RIFE WITH SPOIERS!]

NarratorTrust – Inspiration from Orson Scott Card

Different authors, or different books, tend to establish in the readers a certain level of narrator trustworthiness or reliability. When a third-person narrator makes a statement, the reader must decide if this is true foreshadowing, supposition that can easily be proved wrong at a later point, or the mere musings of a character, strengthened by the power of the narrator's voice. The author's choice of point of view often lends assistance to the reader in this decision, but when the point of view takes on a fluidity, as it does in Orson Scott Card's writing, the choice is not always clear.

The trustworthiness of Card's narrators changes from book to book, and usually, from character to character as well, because the (usually third person subjective) point of view often switches to whichever character is most prominent at the time. Even when the book is narrated in third person, the voice of the narrator clearly and distinctly changes between characters. It reveals the inner thoughts and beliefs of a single character for a while, stating his/her thoughts as truth, and after a period of time, switches to a new character. When the character being followed switches, so does the tone of the narrator. When following Ender in the opening pages of *Ender's Game* [7], the narrator, not Ender, responds to a nurse's declaration that an operation (the removal of his "monitor") won't hurt. "Ender nodded. It was a lie of course, that it wouldn't hurt a bit. But since adults always said it when it was going to hurt, he could count on that statement as an accurate prediction of the future." The stabbing pain Ender experiences a few paragraphs later validates the narrator's prediction. Because the narrator is clearly relaying Ender's thoughts, Ender is, by extension, trustworthy. Much more so than the lying doctors and other adults Ender encounters. I say *Ender's Game* is written in third person, and I imagine most would agree, but this is not entirely the case. When deep in a character's thoughts, the narrator often sinks into first person with no indication (such as quotation marks or italics) that a switch has occurred. "The monitor gone. Ender tried to imagine the little device missing from the back of his neck. I'll roll over on my back in bed and it won't be pressing there... And Peter won't hate me anymore." These lapses into personal pronouns often occur during periods of strong

emotion, as if the feelings of the character are strong enough to overpower the detachment / aloofness of the narrator. Surprisingly, these ventures into a character's innermost thoughts do not inspire trust. The characters often meander, contradict themselves, or make false predictions in their thoughts. Furthermore, the grammar weakens - the narrator slips into a pattern of using run-on sentences, fragments, or interjections. Still speaking of Peter, Ender's narrator says, "He won't hate me, he'll just leave me alone. And when he wants to play buggers and astronauts, maybe I won't have to play, maybe I can just go read a book. But Ender knew, even as he thought it, that Peter wouldn't leave him alone." Here, Ender repeats multiple times that everything will be alright between him and Peter when he returns home, but only when the narrator distances himself from the first-person conveyance of Ender's thoughts do the readers get the truth.

Lingerie Theory—Inspiration from Creating Fiction and How To Write

Julie Checkoway, in *Creating Fiction* [3], likens the art of explanation in stories to the art of seduction in a Victoria's Secret catalogue. "The secret of the effective lingerie ad is the secret of effective storytelling—to provide, moment by moment, the *illusion* of imminent expose, to give the viewer (read: reader) the uncanny sense that something fundamentally compelling is always *just about to be revealed*" (Checkoway, 165). Checkoway advocates teasing and seducing readers, giving them enough information to hold their interest, but not so much that they feel completely satisfied in their understanding of the story, and are therefore bored. Orson Scott Card, in his *How To* book [5], similarly likens this expositional technique to "watering a plant. Too little water and it dries up and dies; too much water and it rots and drowns. Information is to your audience as water is to a plant—it's the life of the story, and yet you have to keep it in balance" (Card, 88). Both authors call for a delicate balance between revealing information and keeping readers mystified. I refer to my attempts to maintain this balance as the lingerie technique, because the name amuses me.

Character Development

In his short story "Hills Like White Elephants," [1] Hemingway uses an objective point of view and sparse description, choosing to push the story forward almost entirely through dialogue. His characters, instead of having names and identities of their own, are referred to as "the girl" "The man," or "the woman." The conversation is very repetitive, which is frustratingly realistic. Instead of mentioning abortion directly, the characters skirt around the issue, talking

about choice, love, and worry. In “Good People,” [1] on the other hand, the main character has more than enough names, “Lane A. Dean Jr.,” but his girlfriend doesn’t. Wallace has no dialogue in his story – even when the characters talk, their words are really just being relayed by the narrator – and instead looks very closely at the thoughts and calculations happening in Lane’s head. In fact, the narrator becomes so closely tied with Lane’s emotions, it begins to feel subjective, taking on some of that emotion into the language used to describe the story. Wallace does not specifically mention abortion either. Both authors skirt around a direct discussion of the topic by using euphemism or talking about related issues.

Setting

“The Rememberer” [1] takes place entirely in the home of the first person narrator. We are told very little about this home. It has a kitchen, a bedroom, and a porch. It is near the ocean. This minimal data allows readers to see the scenes without distraction, in a setting that is comfortable for them. I found myself picturing them standing in a beach house kitchen I’d seen in a movie, but even more simple. Empty, clean counters, good lighting, all attention focused on the woman and her cookie pan lover. Similarly, by not describing the porch or the yard, Bender focuses readers’ attention on the characters, and the vast sky. Somehow, by not describing the background, the foreground is intensified. We also get fleeting mentions of outside places. Work, where people wonder where Ben is, and then stop wondering and the beach, where Ben is set free, and perhaps someday will return. These mini-settings provide context, and place the story in “real life” (despite the fantastic un-science on which the story is based).

The Stars, They Spin

My shortest piece of the six, The Stars, They Spin really exercised my exposition and lingerie technique. Almost a poem, due to its rhythmic imagery, this piece takes place entirely in the mind of the main character, John, an astronaut stranded in space, drifting slowly away from the wreckage caused by a collision between his ship and an asteroid. Each sentence (except the short, rhythmic breathing sentences, which dictate pace and delineate patterns of thought) reveals something new about his situation. Ideally, just enough to keep the reader curious. The tense shifts indicate a change in perspective. Present tense is descriptive narration: a close and immediate tense, for a faraway viewpoint. Past tense is thought: chaotic-close memories and bouts of self-denial barraging John’s attempts to use distance to induce a sense of calm.

Reverberations

Over the past few years, I have had a fair amount of exposure to the deaf community. Almost every scene in this story is based off of personal experiences I've had with deaf people, or stories that were told to me by deaf people. Evan, the playful, well behaved, but still sometimes over-exuberant (for a guide dog) black lab, is based directly on the guide dog of a deaf-blind friend of mine.

In my descriptions of scenes in *Reverberations*, I use the methods I learned from *The Rememberer* [1], replacing potential explanations of the background with more detailed foreground descriptions. I do this to highlight the importance of physical proximity to my characters.

Requiem

When I think of a generic short story, I usually imagine a story that is almost-normal, and then has a twist at the end. *Requiem* best exemplifies that pattern. I got the idea from reading *Halo: Fall of Reach* [10], and I borrow some of the phrases from common callouts in the game *Halo: Combat Evolved* [11]. The plot follows a video game character from a respawn point until his death, and ends at his next respawn. While reading, the N00B reader should gradually begin to recognize something is odd about the characters and war, and the end should bring a relieved sense of understanding. The experienced gamer should recognize fairly quickly what is going on.

Bushido

Bushido was a contentious piece among my test readers. The cult-like license to attack strangers who belong to certain dojos and wear certain symbols is a modification of Peter Urban's description of "The Aikido man" in his historical nonfiction *The Karate Dojo* [9] (Urban, 104). Despite the concept being based in true history, the adapted traditions I use in my story directly conflict with the tenets and interpretations of *Bushido* today. This enrages most martial artists who read my story, and goes flying over the heads of those not involved in martial arts.

My most flawed character is probably Dave in *Bushido*. He hates his life, and takes it out on himself, chastising himself about his failures until he reaches his breaking point and tries to

cheat to win. Unfortunately, Dave is not very rational in his decision making process. In a later revision, or perhaps rewrite, I would love to write a character who is rational, but still has plenty of flaws. My goal is not to create characters who are brilliant or ultra-rational as Card [7] and Yudkowsky [8] do, but to create characters who are reasonable. Ideally, I would be able to write characters whose actions are not second-guessed by readers, (I want to eliminate the “I wouldn’t do that if I were you” thoughts from readers.) but who still have flaws. Flaws make readers better able to empathize with characters, but the flaws must be deeper than poor decision making skills.

Wish Ravine

I spent a lot of time this semester thinking about narrators, and point of view, (see NarratorTrust) and this story grew out of pondering what it would mean, in an extreme case, to give a narrator a personality. The story starts out dark, and gradually grows lighter as the two narrators gain strength in their own personalities. By the end, they are referring to themselves with personal pronouns, and arguing entirely outside the realm of their subjects.

Videography

Videography is my longest, most intricate story, and it really feels like the culmination of my capstone work. It is formed by interweaving smaller stories, each internally chronologic, but externally offset from each other. There are two main stories: One is Matias’ exploration of an abandoned warehouse, which leads him to forsake all the accepted standards which outline “success” in his society, and incites him to brazenly attempt to use his art as a commentary on interpersonal communication and empathy (or lack thereof) in his broken society. The second, is the story of how his abnormal actions affect his professor, Lorn, and another student in his class, Lissia. Through Lorn, we see how the constructs of working life in this futuristic society necessarily conflict with artistic ideals such as creativity and vision. Through Lissia, we see that Matias—though (or perhaps because) he is dedicated to showing his audience the crucial need to start noticing, truly noticing, the people around them—does not follow his own advice, neglecting to notice Lissia past her use in his project. Chronologically, the first story happens almost entirely before the second one begins, but I break it up, and interweave it within the second story, for a few reasons. I want to show the contrast between what Matias is doing, and

what is considered normal behavior for the rest of the students. I also want the structure of the story to parallel the structure of Matias' final product: a compilation of short scenes, which interweave a few stories together to reveal one continuous message. The idea for this threaded structure was inspired by Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine show, where he interweaves stories by other authors, with short stories from his EnderVerse. [4]

The point of view of Videography is 3rd person limited omniscient. Throughout the scenes from the warehouse sub-story, the narrator generally adopts the voice of Matias' inner thoughts. When other characters take the spotlight in the interactions sub-story, the narrator switches to their internal thoughts, similar to the way Orson Scott Card has his narrator jump focuses. The narrator is not a character, but almost has a personality, which matches its character's personality.

Lorn's narrator is aloof, playful, and a bit conceited. "Well, at least Professor Lorn had the students' attention. The world of video was cutthroat, and the professor saw no reason the preparation for it shouldn't be as well. After five years of general ed. with a focus in visual art, and two more concentrated entirely on video, these students ought to be ready for a challenge. Besides, if he graduated all of them, where would that leave things?" In this first passage, the narrator takes on Lorn's attitude—playfully strict, and a bit aloof. Beginning a thought with "well," makes the narration feel casual, and the narrator seem character-like, even though he is mostly relaying Lorn's opinions. When the narrator poses a question, it is not really to the reader, but to the world in which Lorn lives.

Matias' narrator is harsh, pessimistic, and judgmental of Matias, reflecting his own insecurities. "Matias didn't even know why he was here. He should be inside working, not fighting the freezing wind out in some deserted old town. Two months of his final video project had gone by, and he was behind schedule. He was looking for inspiration, and he wasn't going to find it." Here, the narrator has become a bit more pessimistic, less playful, and more direct, talking more to the reader than the internal world. "He should be inside working" is a portrayal of Matias's thoughts, but putting them in the voice of the narrator eases the reader into the understanding of the subjectivity, and therefore fallibility, of Matias' internal voice narrations, and readies the reader to be wary of the next seemingly-omniscient prediction "he wasn't going to find [inspiration]." This prediction is, in fact, false, which the reader should feel hints of quickly, and find out for sure within a page or so. The above two passages both happen on the first page, because I want to immediately establish the character of the narrator as empathetic to

the feelings of whichever character he is narrating, but limited in his predictive powers.

Further Notes

To keep my writing style varied and interesting, I made use of the tools in Clark's strategy book [2], especially tools 8, 14, 16, 21, 34, and 45. Asimov's dialogue style in *I, Robot* [6], as well as other stories caught my attention and inspired some of the speech patterns of my characters. Also, his style of introducing a concept without immediate explanation, also discussed in Card's *How to* [5], "Science fiction and fantasy writers handle exposition this way, by dropping in occasional terms as the viewpoint character thinks them, and explaining them only later" (Card 91) directly influenced the way I introduced some concepts in *Videography*.

Sources

1. Charters, Ann. *The Story and Its Writer, An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Ed. 8, Bedford, 1999.

A compendium of short stories and author notes by various famous authors. This book will give me a wide variety of styles to emulate or avoid.

2. Clark, Roy Peter. *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. Little Brown and Company; NY, NY. 2008.

Tips, tricks, and tools for writing clearly. This book will help me with the technical aspects of my writing.

3. Checkoway, Julie. *Creating Fiction: Instruction and Insights From Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*. Story Press; Cincinnati, Ohio. 1999

A collection of craft essays designed to be instructional and inspiring. I read some of these already in my Creative Writing course. I will probably choose one of these as one of my two craft elements to focus on.

4. Orson Scott Card's *Intergalactic Medicine Show*.

I already know that Scott Card is an author I appreciate and would like to learn from. His *Intergalactic Medicine Show* is a compilation of short stories written by him and other authors he approves of, all in the science fiction genre, which is my favorite. I hope to find a lot of inspiration from this set of literary works.

5. Card, Orson Scott. *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*. Writer's Digest Books; Cincinnati, Ohio. 1990.

This book was recommended by Rob Martello and Dianna Magnoni, and was also written by an author I already respect a lot. I expect to base one of my craft techniques on something I learn from this book.

6. Asimov, Isaac. *I, Robot*. Bantam Books; New York, NY. 1991.

I have heard a lot of great things about Asimov, and I have liked the few things I've already read, so I expect to gather inspiration from the stories in *I, Robot* and other Asimov shorts I find online.

7. Card, Orson Scott. *Ender's Game*. New York: Tor, 1991.

8. Yudkowsky, Eliezer. Rationality and Fiction. < <http://yudkowsky.net/>>. 2013.

9. Urban, Peter. *The Karate Dojo. Traditions and Tales of a Martial Art*. Tuttle Publishing; Boston, MA. 1967.

10. Nylund, Eric. *Halo: The Fall of Reach*. Del Rey; New York, NY. 2001.

11. Bungie. *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Microsoft Game Studios. 2001.