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# ABSYNTH

Trent's Alternative Press

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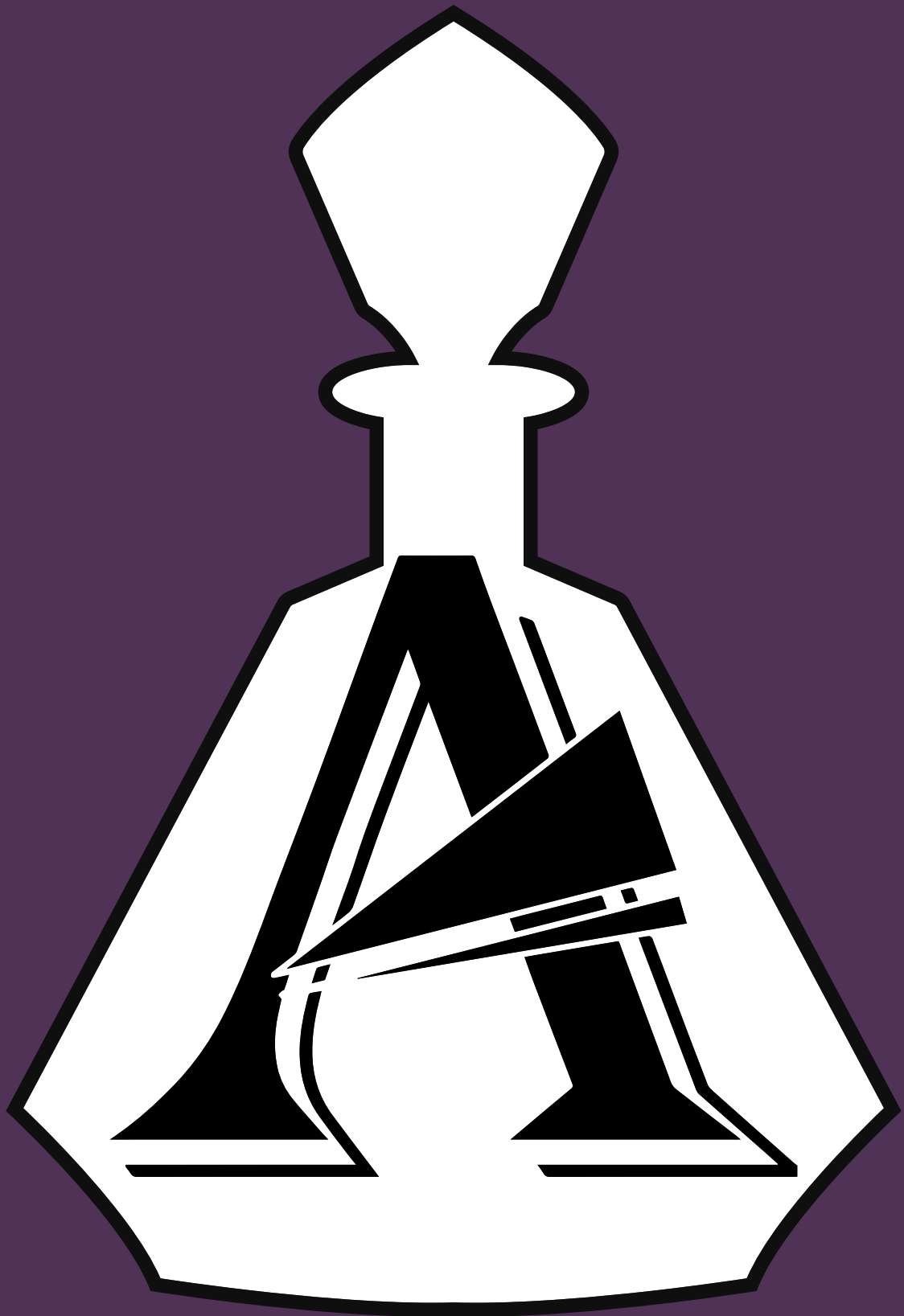
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# A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

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To fans and readers of Absynthe,

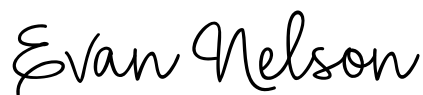
Well, here we stand at the end of another year. For those of you who are continuing your studies over the summer; the promise of that sweet, succulent summer OSAP swirling in your minds, I apologize; while this is not an end for you, it represents at least a brief reprieve before you're sent back into the academic slog once more.

This year has been a complicated and difficult one for many people, and at times it may seem as though the state of education in our province is perilous at best. Even the future of student lead publications such as Absynthe seem to be on the brink of great change, though whether that change will be positive remains to be seen. Despite the tumultuous nature of our future, and the future of other valuable student groups, rest assured that Absynthe will continue publishing our regular silly, absurd, surreal, and entertaining content for as long as we are able.

Though we cannot be sure where the future will bring us, I can at least speak to this past year. As the editor of Absynthe Magazine, I have been able to see first hand the incredible talent that Trent University writers have to offer. Editing the stories you've been reading this past academic year has been an incredibly rewarding and humbling experience, and I know that the writers I've been working with will go on to do great things.

To keep this short and sweet, I will give one final thanks to everyone who has made this publication the amazing collective arts experience it has become; to all of our staff, to the volunteers who submitted their fantastic work, and to every single person who has glanced within our pages, interacted on our social media profiles, or visited our website: thank you. Whether you've known it or not, you've contributed to the continuation of a fantastic tradition at Trent University. You've ensured that Trent has continued to be artistic, creative, weird, interesting, and entertaining. And it's been an absolute blast to be a part of that.

Kindest Regards,




Evan Nelson  
Editor - In - Chief

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# CIRCLES, OR THE OLD PEOPLE'S HOME

Melchior Dudley



It had been a lovely evening with my grandmother, Lucy. The dinner was a small radish salad, grilled haddock with vegetables, and a soft caramel flan for dessert. With the clinking of silverware, Lucy recounted how she had seen a woman in her nursing home whom she recognized -- but Lucy didn't know her name. After weeks of slowly becoming acquainted with the woman, she remembered who the face belonged to.

Years ago, Lucy used to buy all her fruit from the Dalbatha Street Market. The mysterious woman had been the owner of the fruit stand at the market.

"Who would have thought we would both end up in the same place?" Smiling, Lucy resumed eating her portion of haddock and collard greens, while the rest of us leaned back in our chairs.

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Glowing with the warm contentment of a satisfying dinner, my brother, father, and I accompanied Lucy to a few couches in a quiet lounge. All of us sat rather contentedly, making small talk. I could not resist grabbing a pillow and resting my arms on it. The yellows of the wall blurred, and the conversation ebbed and flowed like I was lying in sand while a warm, gentle tide washed over me. I nodded when I was supposed to, and my mind drifted away. I could almost hear seagulls calling. I was far, far away, smiling dreamily.

Along came another old woman, who introduced herself as Gladys. Through my half-shut eyes, I noticed Gladys' square face, small eyes, and thin dark hair that rippled back over her head. I smiled at her as she sat down, then leaned my head back, blinking slowly. I looked over to my brother,

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## Circles, Or The Old People's Home

Willis, and saw that he was just as relaxed as I was.

"She's the one I was telling you about," Lucy told us. Gladys smiled toothily.

Lucy told us the story again about how she and Gladys met. Smiling, we nodded and chuckled at the appropriate times, as if it were the first time we had heard the tale.

"So, what grade are you boys in?" Gladys asked. Willis and I exchanged glances to see who would speak first.

"I'm in grade 12," I said.

"And I'm in grade 10," my brother finished.

"Do you know what you want to be?" Gladys asked, flashing her big teeth again.

I smiled sleepily. "A teacher."

Willis answered less directly. "I have a couple more years to figure that out," he said, shrugging, with a droopy smile on his face. I guess he was tired, too.

Our father and grandmother were quiet, sometimes staring off into the vague distance. Father had brought an extra serving of flan with him to the couches, and he picked at it from time to time in little bites. Gladys seemed to be thinking about something.

Suddenly, Gladys broke the silence: "My daughters are both teachers -- retired now. And my son owns two supermarkets." She stopped and grinned, squinting and flashing her teeth once more.

I shifted back in my seat. Those teeth made me feel nauseous. Nevertheless, I answered as nicely as I could, "Your kids are very successful."

Gladys shrugged and blinked. Wrinkles rippled her face. There was a comfortable silence, and I wondered for a moment what it was like to be old.

Then she asked what grades my brother and I were in. Frowning for a brief second, I turned to my brother. He

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## Circles, Or The Old People's Home

said he was in grade 10, and I said I was in grade 12. Off to university next year.

"And what do you want to do when you're older?" Gladys asked, while her big, unnatural teeth gleamed at me.

Although my brain was groggy, I noticed that something was amiss. Confused, I stammered, "I want to be a teacher," before dropping off awkwardly. Gladys didn't seem to notice. She carried on, explaining that her daughters were both teachers.

"They're retired," I mouthed, as she said it. Her son still owned two supermarkets.

"Uhh...very successful," I said. I tried to change the topic: "Do you like it here?"

Gladys smiled. "Oh, it's nice, but for young gentlemen like you, I suppose it must be a little boring."

"But we get to meet wonderful people like you," I exclaimed. Immediately, I felt pride coursing through my body; it was great to have thought of a line like that. It made me sound...older.

There was another silence, and Gladys smiled in an unsettling way.

"So, what grade are you guys in?"

I smiled, looking at my brother. He was grinning and sitting upright in his chair, captivated by the conversational developments.

"I'm in grade 12," I said. I was looking at my father. He noticed, smiled very quickly, then turned his attention back to Gladys. He sipped a glass of water, nodding at Gladys and relaxing into his chair.

I think Gladys noticed us looking at each other and not at her, because she said, "For you guys, this place must be very boring."

"But we get to meet wonderful people like you," my father said, his lips pursed together.



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## Circles, Or The Old People's Home

I stared in amazement. No way, I thought, as my brother whispered to me, "He just stole your line."

I shook my head at my father, hoping he would look over and see how disappointed I was in him. I think he saw me out of the corner of his eye.

"My daughter... two supermarkets..."

Suddenly I had the idea to look at my grandmother. This whole time, she had been sitting quietly with a slight smile on her lips. But with her condition, with that face, I didn't know whether she understood what was happening. I really wanted to know whether she was stuck in the game, or playing it.

The conversation dipped into silence again. Suddenly, my grandmother opened her mouth to speak. I leaned forward in anticipation.

"It's remarkable, but I knew Gladys even before I came here," Lucy said.

I was terribly disappointed, but at the same time, pleased. I wanted Grandma to be in on the joke, but this alternative was probably better for Grandma's sanity. It wouldn't be as much fun for her if she were the sharpest knife in the nursing home.

Gladys repeated her routine at least 20 times in the next hour. We waited patiently, relaxed, with a feeling that there was nowhere we needed to go, or be. Time flowed by while the conversation gently circled. Sometimes the conversation ran its course, and sometimes I switched up what I said, but it always ended up the same. Over, and over, and over again, Gladys and Lucy recounted their stories with the same enthusiasm as the first time they told us.

When it was almost time to leave, Lucy repeated the story of how she recognized Gladys.

"You said that already," Gladys informed her.

My father started to choke on his flan.

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# DUCK THE SYSTEM

Dylan Curran

If ducks could quack then so would I.

They met outside on my back porch every morning, and each time I greeted them with offerings of bread and leftover seeds from my garden. They were always so kind and patient. Their teaching methods may have seemed unorthodox to some (I agree, the biting was a bit much), but I must admit, it was quite effective. I tried my best to learn quickly, but as you know, these things take time. I didn't earn a certificate for my troubles, but at least I can tell myself that I tried my hardest and never gave up. No ribbon or piece of paper is more worthwhile than that. Even my kids cheered as I sang to them in the mornings, boasting of my new craft. Maybe when they are older I'll teach them. But for now, I think I'll just keep this trick to myself.

It started that afternoon at the park. My youngest had just learned to ride a bike without training wheels and my family and I had celebrated with a picnic by the lakeshore. Our scrapbooks are full of pictures taken over the years. The same picnic basket perched on the same tattered blanket my mother had made for us when we had announced the pregnancy. Never once had we considered leaving her gift at home. We lived for days like these. The children would rush back from the shore- soaked- and plant themselves on the checkered cloth to pick through the grapes, Oreo cookies, or whatever else we'd packed for the day. We were at ease by the waterfront. Charmed.

In the summer months the heat was less harsh than it was in the city. Always a light breeze. We breathed easier once we saw the squirrels gathering nuts or the fish swimming alongside us. The smell of greenery and the perfumes of young flowers lusting for admiration from their suitors; the buzzing bees. Not to mention it was much cleaner than the city. Dispelling ourselves from the hustle and bustle of downtown was an easy win. Nobody wanted to listen to sirens anymore.

That day, like we had so many times before, we ventured off with our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, crisp red apples, and sliced rhubarb pie. The view was as breathtaking as ever: a blue sky with promises of sunshine for hours to come. We watched branches sway in such a delicate choreography that I hesitated to look away for even a second. I felt a dull ache in my chest. They were so empty. How could something so beautiful be so barren?

I missed the birds. The ones that used to sing before the governor demanded their tongues be cut out. I missed their songs. They would have gone nicely with the trees. My children had never even heard a chirp within their lifetime. I may have heard a caw once or twice from when I lived out in the countryside as a little girl, but those

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## Duck The System

days are long, long gone. As a little rebellion, I sometimes found books for the children where the sounds remained uncensored.

Onomatopoeia doesn't qualify as noise, I remember my partner explaining.

We're the ones reading, I reasoned. Onomatopoeia isn't a crime.

The children never asked questions. I sometimes feared that one day I'd be called down to the school to answer for the sounds they taught their classmates.

In that moment, as we sat by the water and I watched as the swans, geese, and ducks swim with that lost look in their eyes I couldn't help it.

I was so ready to hear their song for real.

Oh, what marvellous melodies they must have if only they could muster the courage (or the tongue) to sing again! I was determined. I marched to the shoreline.

"What are you doing?" said one of my daughters. I'm only doing my duty, I reasoned. What good am I if I can't help inspire my children to do good? To bring out the goodness of the world in a time where voices are, quite literally, being cut out.

And so, I quacked.

Loud and proud - I quacked and quacked until all the birds in the pond had no choice but to stare, dumbfounded at me. I saw the look in their eyes, and then the fear in my partner's eyes, but I wouldn't stop. I couldn't. How could I? The other families were quick to make their concerns known.

"That's enough!"

It was not.

"You can't do this!"

But I was.

"You are not allowed."

But why?

"I'll teach you."

I stopped.

From behind the lip of the shore came a small voice. I recall it so vividly, even

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## Duck The System

now; it was like listening to the blades of grass rustling underfoot; careful and delicate. I feared more than anything that the voice would shy away before I neared.

“You’ll teach me?” I asked the stranger.

“We don’t like you swearing,” a whisper this time, but I managed to follow it to the banks of the water. I crouched before the rock that shielded it from my view.

“Who are you?”

From behind the rocks came a duckling. No bigger than the palm of my hand. But oh, what beautiful plumes! What a magnificent beak! Such power behind those tiny wings of theirs. I stared wide-eyed, jaw dropped. The duckling migrated to shore, it’s little webbed-feet barely heavy enough to leave a print in the ground. What little prints it did manage were aimed at me, I watched as it carried itself towards me. In slow, steady steps the duckling neared me only to stop a mere foot away.

“Did your mother teach you to talk like that?” the eyes of the ducks remained fixed on mine. Even crouched, I was barely level and yet I felt the smallest I have ever felt in my whole life. “You should know better.” The words made my tongue turn to putty. “We’ll show you.”

And so it began. Eventually, the neighbours learned to ignore the droppings - it’s fertilizer! - and the kids caught on pretty quickly that ducks don’t like their feathers being yanked. All in all, we’ve gotten a whole lot more out of what we bargained for, but that’s alright. Never have I regretted my decision, not even for a second. Of course, there are still issues with the police now and again. My little Noah tends to quack every once in a while when the other kids push him around, but it is nothing a few worms can’t fix.

I’ve learned a whole new language and gained new friends from around the world. Ducks from out of town come to visit me, in secret; ones that I’ve never even met before! We sit around the backyard, me and my little renegades, and chat about our lives. I had to have a koi pond installed (minus a few koi); it was only fair. I couldn’t have them standing the whole time.

My teachers have changed a lot over the years - they’re all experts in their own fields, so it just makes sense. But, one has always remained by my side when the going gets tough. The one that no matter how old they’ve gotten, or how long ago they shed their down, will always be my favourite duckling.

Oh Duck, it was about time I quacked. I am thankful for you every day.



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# WALKS IN NATURE

Keira Purdon

Part VI: Trent Wildlife Sanctuary

## SUMMARY

**Cost:** Free (I think, I didn't see anywhere to pay for parking!)

**Location:** About 10 minutes from downtown, on University Road

**Naturality:** 3.5 out of 5

**Gear:** Nothing special!

**Watch out for:** Canines, skiers, snow-covered and thinly frozen ponds, and DOG POOP.

I finally decided to check out the trails at Trent Wildlife Sanctuary. A part of me regrets leaving this location until so late in the year because it was absolutely amazing!

The trails are fairly close to town and the university. There are two ways to get there: go east on Parkhill and turn left onto University Road or go east on Nassau Mills Road, turning right onto University Road. It would be a good walk from campus, so you'd likely need a car to get there.

The parking lot was very full when I arrived. I luckily scooped the last spot just as someone was leaving. A whole slew of people were entering the trails just as I was about to so I opted to do the trails in reverse. Now, either the trails are very confusingly marked or I completely didn't account for going backwards. The blue and yellow trails were especially confusing to me.

Usually trails loop so you never have the back track, but the way the Trent trails intersected was hard to judge where one would lead. Next time I will definitely enter from the entrance and see if my opinion changes.



I could definitely hear some traffic noise at the beginning, but the noise was quickly muffled by a hill and trees. There were a couple of bridges and boardwalks that were in good condition. There was a sign for poison ivy, but thanks to our Canadian winters, I didn't have to worry about it.

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## Walks In Nature

There were lots of little frozen ponds and hills. Lots of dog prints were patterned over the frozen water. Keep in mind, especially as the weather warms and areas thaw and freeze, that ice can easily break. I wonder if the land will be swampy in the summer months, and how bad the mosquitos will be.

Signs indicated a swallow experiment going on. Cedar, pine, and deciduous trees were grouped and scattered along the way. The trees were all newer growth, suggesting it was reclaimed farmland, a theme I've noticed in the nature areas around Peterborough. The actual terrain had a few hills. Most were long and sloping. Only the end of either the blue or yellow was challenging (and if you walked them as they were intended, you'd only have to go down!). As I said before, the place was busy and parents brought their kids, while others brought their dogs.

Now, if I have one thing to complain about, it is the dog shit! Seriously, it was everywhere! I went when the weather was still cold and things stayed frozen. Imagine how absolutely disgusting the trails will be. Are you stepping in mud or shit? So, for all of us who use the trails, PICK UP AFTER YOUR DOG! I've hiked plastic bags of dog crap out of trails before: so can you!

I had no trouble navigating the snowy trails. I didn't need my ice grippers this time around. There were some skiers. I encountered a few pairs and saw their tracks all over. There were also a few benches and some old farming fencing; the kind that is made entirely of wood.

The views were not quite as impressive as the sweeping landscapes Harold Town Conservation Area provided.

A few notable points were a large grove of cedars on what I think is the yellow trail, and a pond encasing some old elms. I've been trekking around Peterborough for almost eight months now and I am still amazed how fantastical the woods- even reclaimed farmland- can appear! I even spotted one of those punch hole things for orienteering classes.

As I've mentioned in my previous articles on the Mark S. Burnham trails and the Robert Johnston Eco Forest, I've found shelters or teepees. Well, I found another one here! It wasn't quite as insulated as the one at Robert Johnston and wasn't quite as skimpy as the teepee in Mark S. Burnham. It seems many people have gone into the one at the Wildlife Sanctuary, but thankfully no one was living in it! I've been to parks (well north of here) where there have been people living under stacked picnic tables, unfortunately.

I enjoyed the trails, apart from the dog crap. It's not a place I'd go to if I needed to be alone for a walk. For that I have the Robert Johnston Eco Trails. Nor is it quite as technically challenging as the Harold Town Conservation Area. These trails are just a good walk. It's perfect for most people, although I wouldn't recommend those with disabilities or who need canes attempt it. While Trent Wildlife Sanctuary doesn't trump my favourite (Robert Johnston Eco Trails), I will definitely be going back with greater frequency than most other trails.







# SAY NO



**BECAUSE PINEAPPLE DOESN'T BELONG  
ON A NATIONAL TREASURE**

**GET INVOLVED:**



**or at**

**<http://bit.do/nopineapple>**

# LAY MY BODY DOWN

Tyler Majer

I don't trust myself  
Not these days  
The façade has been finalized  
In the wake of my fatalities  
Put me to sleep  
Lay my body down

Trauma trickles down  
The sides of our faces  
Tracing the outline of our  
Troubled pasts

T-T-T-T-

T-T

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Language  
What you can  
And cannot put into words  
The fear that settles  
Somewhere low,  
In the brain, somewhere 'back'

You can't shake the shadows  
In the corner of the room  
Shafted by the image  
Shadows of a closing womb  
You almost died there,  
Tied and twisted untowardly  
In the warmest place



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A body could ever know

How many deaths can a body know?

A baker's dozen

Too bad there's no Dunkin' Donuts in Canada  
If America runs on it, it should be good enough  
for me right?

My mind stews

The thought of death  
Not scary, never scared  
In the daytime

But I wake

In the night

At the brink of terror

And I do laps in a cluttered basement

While my grandfather's  
Racist art stares back at me

Fuck you AL Jolson

That fear in the night

Often resides

Sometimes I call out in fear and anger

Sometimes I cry

Sometimes I sleep

Put me to sleep

Lay my body down

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# THE BORING ALIENS

Melchior Dudley

Dear Mrs. Jones,

This is what happened to me this summer vacation. You asked for details. Details, details. So I will give you details.

A lot of the summer was pretty boring. My family can't afford any kind of special vacation. We didn't do much besides stay around home and water plants.

There were a couple of things that may excite you, though.

You know Joey, my older brother you taught a couple years ago? He broke his arm this summer. Technically, he says I broke it, but it wasn't my fault. He was being stupid and we were trying to make a video for YouTube. We were pretend-fighting, and I was supposed to "push" him down a hill (obviously he knew that I was gonna be pushing him). But when I pushed him, he fell off to the side, which wasn't what we'd planned, and he tumbled weirdly and broke his arm.

It's almost healed now, and I think he's happy he broke it, because he walks around proudly with his cast that's got everyone's signatures. It makes him look more popular than he really is. But don't tell him that. I tried telling him that and he told me that I don't know what real pain is until I've had my arm broken. And he tells me how itchy it is. All in all, though, I think the doctor's gonna have to fight him to take the cast off in a couple months. Without it he'll be the same old, boring Joey.

The other thing that happened is that aliens landed in our backyard and stayed there for two weeks in July.

...

I've thought about this a lot, and there's really nothing I can say that'll make you believe me. Even I wouldn't believe me. I don't have the greatest record of honesty. All I can say is that even though this happened for real, this'll probably be the most boring summer writing report that you ever read.

Truthfully, I don't think you actually read these reports. I looked at what feedback the other students got last year, and everyone only got a comment on the very first paragraph they wrote, and that's it. I have very big doubts that you'll even finish my story, since looking back on it now I found out that I summed up what happened at the very start, anyhow.

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The Boring Aliens



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## The Boring Aliens

But maybe you actually will get this far, in which case:

1. I'm sorry.
2. Please do not take marks off for what I said. I was thinking critical, and that's something you say we should do. So please don't blame me for doing what you asked.

Even if you do take marks off, you know, it's not a big deal. My perspective now has sort of changed since I became friends with the alien kid. His name is Yorick.

And truthfully, failing the first writing report of the school year is pretty small in the whole cosmos of things. Yorick told me that the star death of our galaxy's sun would cause light as we know it to disappear in eight minutes, and no light would mean literally everything on earth would die (except maybe mushrooms--they grow in the dark). And the sun would implode and probably make a black hole, which would inhale our dead earth in a single gulp and wipe out all history of our existence. Even mushrooms.

That's a more important dogear in the history of our universe than me flunking this assignment. And all things considered, if the universe is really infinite like Yorick say, what does it matter if humans die and our earth gets sucked into a black hole's belly button? Knowing that Yorick and aliens like him are out there is actually a comfort. Earth isn't the only inhabited planet. Humans aren't the only intelligent things. Life will continue after the sun kills us all.

Yorick helped me write that.

So if we die it's no big deal. Aliens like Yorick will take our place and the universe will just keep going.

...

Okay, the story about meeting Yorick's family. They visited us just over a month ago. I marked it on the calendar. They stayed for fifteen days. I double-checked.

The day we met them was like any other. Joey and I were sitting in the backyard, trying to think of things to do. There's this tree in our yard that's tall, old, and crooked, with thin green branches growing out of the knots like the hairs that grow out of the black mole on Mr. Rudy's chin.

Joey and I sometimes climb the tree when we're bored, grabbing the tree's hairs to help us up. The tree grows near the edge of the lawn, but it bends towards our house, and we can climb across it onto the roof when our parents aren't home. Don't tell Mom, please. She said we could climb the tree as long as we didn't go on the roof. When she said that, Dad heard her and told her, "Great, you just guaranteed they'll climb on the



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## The Boring Aliens

roof." He was right.

So Joey was up on the roof, and I was halfway up the tree, right on the part where it suddenly turns like the top corner of a square. I was sitting with the tree between my legs, scooting towards the roof, when Joey said a swear word that you wouldn't want me to repeat. He was staring into the sky. There was a yellow light in the distance, about the size of a balloon. It popped, and a blue streak of light bolted straight into our backyard. Even though there wasn't any noise when the spaceship crashed into our yard, big chunks of dirt sprayed Joey and I all the way up in the tree.

I was so scared that I scooted as fast as I could to where Joey was and tried to hold onto him. He pushed me away and said I should grow up.

I looked down. There was a yellow box in the middle of our yard. A black square appeared on the box, and grew, and then standing in the opening were three people. Except they weren't like normal people. They were bronze. They were *aliens*.

...

For a long moment, there was silence. The three of them stood still, looking right at us. There was a bigger one, who looked like a Dad. There was a medium-sized one, who was the Mom because she had long hair and a flowery dress. There was also a smaller one, about my size. I guessed he was the alien Kid. That was Yorick. All this I thought while the sun shone on their golden-brown skin and roasted the back of my neck. A drop of sweat trickled down my ribs, and the breeze billowed out my shirt. I squinted at them.

The big one raised his hand. "Gorshy," he said.

After thinking for a second, Joey raised his hand. "Hi."

"Oh, they speak *this* language," said the small one, holding out something small and black like an iPhone.

The big one glanced at the small one. He cleared his throat. "Uh, we mean no harm," he said.

I'd seen enough movies not to trust his kind. "How do we know that for sure?" I replied. Joey looked at me sharply and I noticed he had a worm in his hair. But I didn't tell him, because he was rude to me earlier.

The big one shrugged. "We're here on vacation. We're the James family. Just visiting."

"Don't you wanna invade or somethin'?" Joey asked, a hint of hopefulness in his voice.

"Not really."

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## The Boring Aliens

Silence. "Huh," Joey muttered. "Well, welcome to the most boring place on the planet."

The alien family didn't seem convinced.

"You know," I said, "you probably came to the wrong place. Like my brother Joey said, there's really not much to see here."

The Mom smiled at us. "Well, we've heard it's just *marvellous*," she said. "And we're not looking for anything exciting. It's nice just to get away and relax....I really like your sky. Blue. So peaceful -- like a blanket."

They came here for the sky? Really?

Mom and Dad didn't like them too much, especially when they said they asked to live in Mom's flower-garden for the next two weeks. And after talking to the big one, Dad called them "The boring aliens."

But me, I was happy to have a friend other than smelly old Joey for once. Yorick taught me a lot of things about space and time and how I'm here only because of an accident. And Yorick telling me I was an accident was better than the time Dad told me that.

Mrs. Jones, I'm guessing you won't believe me, but all these things happened, and I miss Yorick. Some people think they need to go all the way across the galaxy just to have a little fun. I just had to go out into the backyard. I wish I still could.

Yours truly,  
Carl



---

# HAND IN HAND

Zachary Barmania

The blue light came out of the darkness like the maw of some sea-monster, consuming and consuming and consuming. I couldn't look away; not for hours. I fell deeper and deeper into the light, and into the comfort of liminal space. Like dying; very much like dying.

*Raise.* I clicked, and the game continued. Natash\_09 folded, and my lobby on PokerDreams.com grew that much thinner...

It was down to (Natash\_09) An anonymous player, AceofNades, Asidulant\_6 and me, or as they saw me, Tyche. They were only numbers and odds to me, but somehow I knew them better than anyone outside the reach of my blue halo. Nades would never fold, regardless of their cards. Asidulant\_6 would always input his move as quickly as possible and move on to the other hand he was no doubt playing in another window.

That left Natash, the only player with a profile picture. The photo was small and pixelated, but the subject looked happy to be surrounded by green foliage. Was this her vacation I saw? Costa Rica, or Bermuda? Had she paid for the flight using her winnings?

10.9.8.

*Call.*

I wonder if this is what you feel, wherever you are: a timeless, placeless, selfless feeling. Is it heaven, hell, purgatory? Does it matter, digital or divine?



"Black coffee, please."

Gzowski college emitted the strangest combination of vibes: part airport lounge, part European prison, all inside a healthy knob of swiss cheese. It also had the fewest people in the mornings. I pushed my loonie, two dimes and one quarter across the glass countertop. All in. A few moments later, with a paper cup full of joe in my hand, I could make my way to where Sebastian sat. He was making a face and didn't seem happy,

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Hand In Hand



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## Hand In Hand

but I just couldn't place what was wrong. If people told you what they felt in number values, not by contorting their face, then maybe I could get ahead sometimes. Sebastian sat looking out the window, eyes glazed over and earbuds in. A mess of strawberry curls sat on his head, framing light blue eyes and a toothy grin; but not today.

"Morning," I said, taking my seat on Seb's right. He paused his music and gave me a polite smile.

"Late night yesterday?"

"Yep, broke even and everything. Coffee's on me, today." I said. I sipped my coffee and waited for Sebastian to reply, but he didn't. "What's wrong?"

"That's what you were doing? More poker? Jesus, Tyler." The name alarmed me for some reason, I had been without it for so long. No names; only Avatars online. Sebastian continued: "You had class all of yesterday and I didn't see you once. Now, you pretend you don't remember that you promised to come over last night and help me with stats homework?"

I panicked.

"I'm not pretending; I did forget." That was met with a scathing look. "And I'm sorry, Seb, I really am. I just..." I found myself without an explanation. Sebastian didn't...

"I know it's been hard since Jack passed, but you need to listen to me. You're addicted. Look, I smoked back in high school, so I know what it's like." He paused as if this was some kind of confession worthy of absolution. "My parents caught me, thank God, and sent me... here." Sebastian fished around in his pocket and drew a creased business card from his pocket, which he slid across the countertop to me. He flipped it right side up.

And the river.

*Dr. Calphurnia*  
*Hypnotist*



"So, how does one become a doctor of hypnosis?" I asked, but the ice didn't break. Dr. Calphurnia sat with her legs folded, peering down at him over jewelled glasses, scratching notes idly. The room around us

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## Hand In Hand

was seemingly designed to be so bland you'd forget when and where you are. The paintings hung straight, the wallpaper was sickening, and the chair was so firm I suspected plywood lurked beneath the pleather. For some reason, I couldn't stop talking. "I don't see a pocket-watch around here, should I have brought my own?"

She graced me with a response: "You'll get more from this experience if you go in with an open mind."

"If I think it's going to work, it will work. Classic bluff." I felt the need to show I wasn't some idiot, helpless and in need of repair.

"You mistake me," Calphurnia said, rising and moving towards him. "There is no deception at play; no placebo. The experiences that you will have in these sessions are real and will change who you are if you enter with the right intentions..."

"I know what it's like to look at something for hours only to fall into a deep sleep. I'm ready for this. Cure me Doc." It was meant to be encouraging, but it inspired condescension.

She said: "Free yourself from cliché's now before it ruins your experience when you're down there. This will be like nothing you've imagined before, so try to relax. You don't need to try and impress me."

I didn't think she could say something genuinely comforting if she tried. She prepared herself to begin, standing behind my chair and speaking softly. The sooner this was over, I thought, the sooner Seb would forgive me, and I would be back online.

*Sleep now...*



"Deal me in."

The player opposite me had no face but did his job all the same. The blue light was in this place, but it had no source; no screen to emit from, window to fall in from, LED RGB, or Cathode ray. The table was green velvet; classy. My hand was crap, but I put my ante up all the same. The faceless gambler moved quicker than I could've believed, with cards flashing so fast and chips darting into the pot with such precision I thought perhaps time itself was hurtling forward faster than it ought to be. He steepled his fingers and waited for my move. This continued for ten hands or so, each ending in my defeat. The faceless gambler only



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## Hand In Hand

folded his fingers and waited; not dreading or expecting, but just waiting.

“Fold,” I said, pushing my hand back. He dealt again.

“Fold,” I said, pushing my hand back. He dealt again.

I hesitated. King of Diamonds. Ace of Diamonds. The beginnings of a royal flush.

My finger began to tap, the way I once tapped on my mouse wheel when I was thinking; excited by a big win. The losses would hit me as hard as the wins- harder maybe- but I felt something at least. I reached a point (I don't know when) where I stopped feeling anything while I played; just a numbness that isn't pain.

“Fold,” I said.

I rose from my chair. In that same instant, it seemed I had just fallen right back into the same uncomfortably hard chair in the hypnotist's office.

“You were somewhere else.” Dr. Calphurnia said. I blinked and realized it was true. “You took to it like no one I've seen. As soon as you closed your eyes you were under. Incredible.”

“What happened?” It slipped away from me; as dreams do in the moments after waking.

“I don't know that, but I know you went somewhere where you can truly learn something about yourself.”

It seemed that my hour was up, so I gathered my things and made for the door, but not before turning.

“Same time next week?” I said.



My dorm seemed bigger with the curtains undrawn, though it did nothing for the perpetual mess. I looked around at it as if for the last time. It was just class, I thought, though I was treating it like D-Day.

Social anxiety turns certain things into ceremonies, and this was one of mine. I donned my jacket and scarf and headphones; ready to face the sullen wind and gazes of Peterborough, Ontario. I had done the

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## Hand In Hand

readings, taken notes, and charged my phone. I looked once more at my laptop and told myself that it would be there when I return.

I sighed a bracing sigh and turned out the light. In class, Sebastian was absently listening to music when I arrived, and the look on his face was priceless. We hadn't joked like that for months, and he hadn't looked at me like that since we first met. I took notes- I even asked a question- but I was just glad to be with my friend. When I got home, I went to sleep as soon as head met pillow.

"Deal me in," I said, but something was different. This wasn't the place where Calphurnia sent me; this was less defined. I was sitting at the same green velvet card table, but with my laptop humming dully in endless exhale before me. Even in my dreams, I was taken by that feeling of void that had come to define me. I felt something else- distantly though- like the joy that accompanies tears.

*Look up.*

I did, and there he sat. Jack, hands folded and eyes open. It didn't strike me as odd- not then. He was there, as he should have been. My laptop was gone; the blue light faded.

"Jack," I said, reaching for his hands. He looked down at mine and took them. When I looked, they were full of playing cards. Jack rose from his seat.

"No, no, you can't!" I yelled, growing more desperate as the form faded from sight.

I tried in vain to fall back asleep that morning, and return to that place where he had still been alive.



After a month I began to remember the visions; bits and pieces at first, but more and more as we continued. The faces became clearer, and the surroundings more concrete. Now, as I entered Calphurnia's office, I was surprised to see her kneeling on the ground beside a small coffee table. She addressed the change before I had a chance.

"I thought we could try something different today." From between her folded hands, she revealed a deck of cards, and from her lap she revealed a bag of Goldfish crackers. She explained: "Something to bet with."

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## Hand In Hand

“Your opportunity to use potato chips is gone now, along with all those perfectly good ‘chip’ puns,” I said, and Calphurnia gave me a rare chuckle and began to deal. Somehow, it felt different than when I was online, or even in my mind. Conversation came to me easily, as it never did, since I was preoccupied with the game. The fact that I held real cards and had to interact with another person to play totally changed the game.

“Have you been back to PokerDreams since last week? No shame, if you have.”

“Yes,” I answered, letting five little fish fall into the pot. “I was there for a few hours yesterday, and the day before.” Calphurnia was quiet for a bit as she hazarded a bluff. She inhaled sharply through her nose when she was bluffing, I noticed.

“We talk about that site like it’s a real place in the world,” Calphurnia said.

“It is real. For me it is. More real than heaven or hell to me.” Why did I say that? I raised.

“Interesting that you say that, Tyler.” She saw the raise and added four fish. “You don’t believe in an afterlife? What about God? Souls?”

“I don’t know.”

Calphurnia just looked at me for a while, so I kept my eyes fixed on my hand. She sighed and continued. “When someone we love commits suicide, lots of emotions...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your friend Jack. Sebastian told me about him at his appointment a few days ago. Now, if...”

“Stop. I came here for help with my gambling...” Anger was swelling in my chest like a balloon. “You know what, I didn’t even do that. I came here so my friend would talk to me again, but it turns out he’s had no trouble talking about me, and not to me. I don’t need you poking around my brain anymore; you’re not a doctor or a therapist. I don’t know what I was thinking.” I rose from the ground and made for the exit, grabbing my coat and bag. I knew something about this woman was false, and I was right. I know myself too well to try her way. I knew failure was inevitable.

“Call.” Dr. Calphurnia said, still seated and calm. I was about to snap

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## Hand In Hand

at her, to say I would never speak to her again when I understood she meant the poker game. I flipped over my hand, to show my pair of sevens.

“Don’t worry, I knew you were bluffing,” I said, as Calphurnia revealed her straight.

“You are sure of many things, Tyler. Don’t be.”



My door closed softly behind me, and I was alone again. Only me and my laptop. In moments I was back on PokerDreams.com, but this time I went to the options menu. A few clicks later, and the question sat before me. I wasn’t sure how it had all come down to this, but it had. Jack crossed my mind, of course; the way his face was starting to fade from my memory. I thought of Sebastian, and how worried he must feel. I thought of everyone I knew and everyone I had lost, and finally, I thought of myself. Why was I the only person I wouldn’t consider? Why didn’t I mourn the death of who I had been? Was that what this had been, all along?

*Are you sure you want to delete your account, Tyche?*



Tyche sat across the table from me; identical to the last. He dealt, anted up, and waited for me to do the same. I didn’t fold or ante up. I rose from the table and walked around the edge to where Tyche sat. He stared straight ahead as if I was still seated. His hand bled: a Joker and the King of Hearts.

“Come on; let’s go.” I said. I took Tyche’s hand, and he looked up at me.

“What’s out there?” He asked of the darkness all around the table, now held at bay by a curiously faint blue light.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Come on.”

Hand in hand, we left. Not by letting go, but by holding on.



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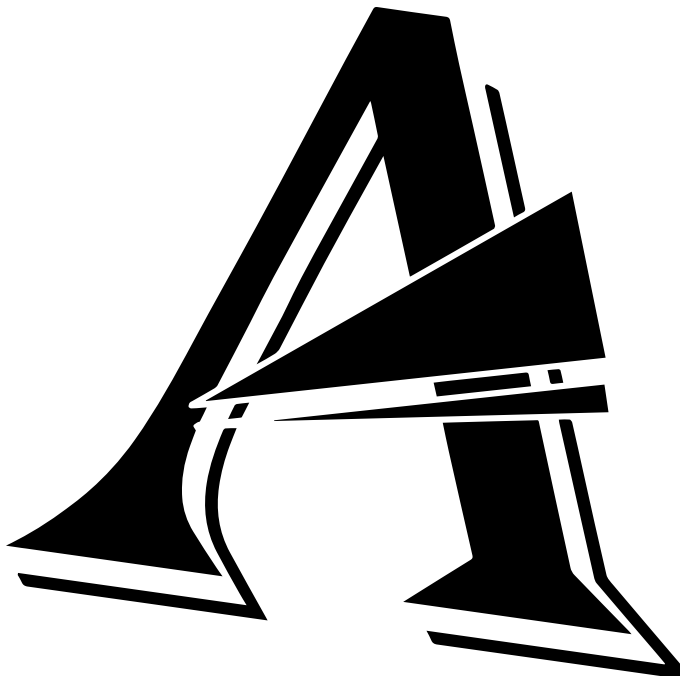
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