

## READING FOR COMPREHENSION

By Lydia DeGisi

The planet of Dermais clasped its two inhabitants tightly to its surface, with a gravitational force some percentage greater than Earth's. The air was heavier, John said. Dermais did not, of course, have any organisms classifiable by Earth's ten kingdoms, but it oozed with life. The cervices and plates of the planet's stony terrain were carpeted with organism fields, often miles long, balanced somewhere between being colonies and multicellular individuals. John called some of them slime and some of them moss, and he knew that the glossy dark one was edible.

It was the two-hour period of the day when the air grew painfully hot. The slimes and mosses quarreled and sizzled and photosynthesized, and a little boy in a cave was getting stuck on Q.

"I don't *know* what comes next," the boy said. "Can't you just tell me?"

"Start over from the beginning if you have to," John said. "A, B, C, D..."

"I don't want to. I want to find something to eat. Come on, Dad, please..."

"It's too hot to go out, you'd be fried. And this is more important. Just sing it again. A, B, C, D..."

“I told you, I don’t know it. Just *te-ell* me already!”

“Come on, Lu. You know it. Sing the song.”

Luca sighed.

“I’ll start with you.”

John and Luca began to sing. A few letters in, John dropped off, and Luca kept on, by himself.

John held his breath as his son tottered along through the song. Luca made it to K, and John tightened his fists.

“Q...” Luca drew the note out painfully long, looking to his father. John didn’t move, save for pressing his nails harder into his own palms. Then, Luca continued, “R... S, T, U, V...”

John let out his breath in a short laugh. His son finished, all the way to Z, and John clapped him on the back. “You knew it after all.”

“Can we stop now?”

“Five more times. You’ve already done it once.”

John hummed along a little longer each time. The fifth time, he sang it with him.

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John’s sweat did not glisten. It pooled. All their clean water, flowing right out of him. Even when Dermais was in its cool time, it was a furnace. But the field of the edible growth by their cave had wilted, had retracted into the earth, and he had to find something to eat. No one was going to rescue them, anyway. People didn’t *come* to Dermais. Who would *want* to?

Luca was back in the cave, where he wouldn’t be cooked alive.

The important thing was that there was food and air, and the water purifier wasn’t destroyed in the crash. They could live here for months.

It was months.

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“Tuh-tuh... teh...”

The white pages under Luca’s fingers were stained with reddish dust. John made his son wash his hands every day before touching it, and they never set it on the ground without sweeping the area clear first, but paper was paper, and it couldn’t last.

“Look at the word. Look at how often it appears in the text.”

“I don’t know...”

“Yes, you do. You know it. Remember your alphabet.”

“Is it... *the*? But that’s not what a T sounds like! How can T be *tuh* one minute and then *the* two seconds later?”

John shrugged. “Well, it does. Try another word.”

Luca crossed his arms and let out a huff of air. “*Look* at it. They’re all so long. And the pictures don’t make any sense.”

“They’re diagrams. And they’ll make sense when you’re older. You’re going to understand all of it, I promise.”

“How much older?”

“Not much.”

Luca started to trace his finger in the dirt, probably letters. “Are we still gonna be here?”

“I don’t know. But even if we’re still here, by then, it won’t be much longer. Are you getting dirt on the book? It’s paper.”

The manual was thick but flimsy, cheaply made. You weren't supposed to ever need a hard copy; if you were somehow stuck somewhere without access to a screen, you were probably screwed anyway.

"I'm not getting dirt on the book, Dad."

"It's the only one we have."

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They might've not been about to starve to death, but it was only a matter of time before they went insane, stuck here by themselves for months upon months.

When John stood outside his cave, he could see for miles, all the way out to the horizon. There was no end in sight.

Every day, John and Luca had a couple simple tasks: stay fed, stay hydrated, stay cool, hike out to the crash site to clear off the growth, and do reading exercises. Over and over again, over and over. They were going to go insane.

But John knew that people survived POW camps for longer. People survived prison for longer. He and Luca could survive each other.

They could survive for years. Earth years.

Years.

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"If the rate of ack...acceleration dips below the blue zone in... absence of an external bracing command, consult the pressure meter to address opt... opt-i-mi-za-tion trouble... optimization troubleshooting."

"Good. Now explain it to me."

"Um... in the case that the acceleration falls lower than the zone that..."

“I said explain, not substitute words. You’re never going to really learn how to read if you’re just regurgitating words.”

“If... if the spaceship is going too slow, check the pressure meter?”

“What about that middle part? The absence thing.” John pointed vaguely at the page.

“Absence, so, the lack of...”

“Not word substitution. You know it.”

The air was very, very hot, and Luca snapped. “Nothing’s ever good enough for you, is it? We’re both gonna die here.”

“We are not, Luca. We are going to make it off of here.”

“If it was going to happen, wouldn’t it have already? We’re going to die and you’re still making me do all this stupid stuff! I hate reading, Dad! I *hate* it!” He snatched the book up off the stone floor and stood up.

John’s eyes focused—no, faltered over the white smear of the document. “Put that down.” He began getting to his feet as quickly as he could—but he was so worn out...

Luca glared at him, dropped the book on the ground with a dusty thud, and ran out of the cave.

John looked down at the manual, then out through the exit, then back. He took a breath and ran after his son.

There was a gully outside their cave, that was the trouble. Its edge always snuck up on John, even when he stared as hard as he could to try to get a jump on it. So John couldn’t go fast, not like Luca could. Not unless he wanted to fall.

He called out for Luca. He didn’t reply. Until he replied, he couldn’t hope to find him.

He called out, “I’m sorry!”

He wasn't, but it was what Luca wanted to hear. He called back to him.

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John couldn't sleep right, not for the past couple months. He had had that problem even back on Earth, too. Earth kept a day/night cycle, Dermais kept a day/night cycle of its own sort, but John didn't keep a day/night cycle. Luca didn't have that problem. But of course he didn't.

He could deal with the heat, the loneliness. But he wanted to go to sleep.

His eyes hurt. They hurt from sleeplessness, from glaring sunlight, from strain. They always did.

How many days could he endure it?

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They always read when the day was hottest, because they had to, but they had other reading times, too. Luca's father obsessed over filling odd minutes with reading, reading the same book, the only book, even pages Luca had read a dozen times before.

But not that day.

"Are you going somewhere?" Luca asked. "It's reading time." His father was lacing up his boots, rather than settling in on the mass of dead moss-alien forming his cushion.

"I'm going to the ship. And I need you, too."

"The ship? Why?" Ever since the crash, they only ever visited there to clear the growth away from it, and they had already done that that day. "Did we miss something?"

"No. We're going to fix it."

Luca's heart clenched. Was his father going crazy from the heat, from being stuck here? "Dad, sit down, it's reading time. We can't fix it."

"Of course we can fix it now."

“Now? Why *now*?”

His dad smiled. “You know why.”

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They shambled over the stones and around the growths toward the ship, John shuffling his feet along slowly.

“Dad?” Luca said.

“Luca?”

“Just how bad *is* your vision, anyway?”

“Pretty bad. Pretty darn bad.”

“Oh. For how long?”

“Always has been.”

Luca drew closer to him. They walked to the ship, side by side, touching.

“You’ll help me see what I’m doing? When I’m working on the ship?”

“Of course,” Luca said. “And I’ll read the book to you.”

“And you’ll explain it to me?”

“You know I will.”

World on a String  
By Catherine Haws

Mylan Drake lived like a coo coo clock: predictable yet surprising. He jumped trains, pinched bread, and played violin in the street.

Not by the street.

In the street. At the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Summer from ten until noon on Mondays.

At first, officers would whistle and curse at him to move out of the way, but after a while they grew to like him. Mylan waved the scroll of his violin and tapped his foot signaling the pedal cars when to proceed.

He became a novelty. A landmark.

“You know the street with the little violinist?”

Some threw Prems out the window and if they could land in his hat, he jigged a dance and played a special rift.

On Tuesdays he bellhopped the elevator for the Dwindelan Sun Newspaper. Many a reporter exchanged tips for tip-offs in the space from floor to floor.

On Wednesdays Drake manned a newsstand hawking headlines and peanuts. What he didn't sell, he boiled, and I don't mean the papers.

On Thursdays he delivered telegrams, and although the code was not to peek, most didn't mind striking up a conversation with the violinist who seemed to know so much.



On Fridays he mixed drinks in a ritzy club. They laughed and pitied him, asking why he'd work on a night like this, as they slipped him one too many bills with clumsy thumbs.

On Saturdays he slept until he felt like waking, and when he woke he'd journey away, with an overnight bag in one hand and his violin case in the other, to return on Sunday night.

But one Saturday he woke early, much earlier than he'd wanted. He decided to journey farther than he had before, to a place he'd only dreamed of: the sea. He hitched on a train headed North and leaned against empty barrels. The rocking car lulled him asleep, and he woke with a jolt hours later as the screaming brakes steamed to a halt in Brinkhaven.

Emerging from the car, he held his bags close and flashed his best smile.

The first sight to meet him was a barefoot young woman with tousled hair tied up on top of her head with a long piece of twine. She smiled holding a basket of folded, red-checker napkins.

"Have you come for the clambake?" She said as if it were the only holiday of the year.

"Wouldn't miss it!" Said Mylan offering to take the basket.

She spun around, holding the basket close.

"It's my job to bring the napkins."

"Give me a job then," Mylan said keeping stride beside her.

She eyed his back.

"What are you carrying?"

"My violin."

"Then that will be your job."

They passed through town, a sandy, wooden place where the wind blew through the empty buildings as if they were trees. Other people walked on ahead carrying crates, baskets, kegs, and miniature barrels.

They crested a hill and the path paved way to a boardwalk. The houses stood on stilts as if wading through the marshes.

Stark, liquid light dazzled Mylan's eyes.

*The Shimmering Sea.*

Far, far ahead, something black sliced across the horizon line.

"Is that...The Rim?" He said.

"Yes," she said, un-phased. "The 'Shrouding Cloud' as used to be called."

"Is...are we all right?"

She laughed, a hearty laugh, and looked up at Mylan as if he thought that cheese could fly.

"You are a city boy, no?" She laughed again. "The clams will do you good."

She skipped across the boards, her hair bobbing up and down. The long string leaned in the wind. Like a schoolboy, Mylan felt an urge to grab it, but instead he eyed it wafting aside in time with the marsh grass. He hung back for a moment, etching a picture in his mind.

The girl glanced over her shoulder and smiled shaking her head.

The moment hung thereafter like a picture on the wall of his memory.

When they reached the shore, fishermen with strong, callused hands clapped Mylan's shoulders and welcomed him to Brinkhaven. They handed him loads to carry and old newspapers to set on the long, make-shift table made of crates. Soot-faced women laughed over fires giving orders to the men.

At sunset, the oldest woman with the largest lungs hollered out for everyone to take their seat. In the bustle, a small hand wrapped around Mylan's fingertips and guided him to a middle seat. The girl sat beside him, her hair fully tangled and sagging to the side.

Everyone took hands around the table as they sat cross-legged in the sand. The old woman

closed her eyes as did everyone else, except Mylan. She hummed a note and the others joined in. Then, in broken and beautiful harmony, they sang a song of thanksgiving.

Mylan gazed at the singers in the fading sunlight with the unceasing waves caressing the shore.

He decided then, he would never leave.

After the song, they tucked the checkered napkins in their shirts and ate and drank in merry company. They asked him about life in the city, but seemed more interested in his violin. When he'd eaten his fill, he sprang to his feet and jiggled some songs in the sand. The people cheered and danced and splashed until the stars shone bright in the sky. As he pealed a last note and breathed hard, the old woman called for everyone to clean up. No one complained, in fact they seemed more cheerful.

Mylan sat on his heels putting his violin to rest. The basket of rumpled, dirty napkins sank down in the sand beside him. A small hand, pale in the moonlight, extended to him. He closed the violin case, and ran hand-in-hand to the shore. As the water encircled their feet, the girl pulled out the string from her hair letting go of Mylan's hand. He watched as she shook her head, smiling in the wind.

"What is your name?" He said.

"Edwina."

"May I see you tomorrow, Edwina?"

She smiled looking straight at the moon.

"Not tomorrow." She said, as if he should have known. "Tomorrow is washing day."

With that, she bent straight over and dipped her hair in a rising wave. She twirled it, wrung it out, and wrapped the string around it. She stood up and the stubby tail of the string flung water

behind her. She looked at the moon again.

“You may see me the day after tomorrow.”

She turned away from the sea.

“And the day after that?” Mylan said, following her.

“You can tell me about music, and I can tell you about asters.”

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Some people in Dwindelan wondered what became of him. Disappointed hands re-pocketed un-tossed coins. Men with cigars cursed his absence once or twice, and some could never taste their most favorite drink quite the same, but the city soon forgot him.

The violin string calluses soon gained company as he learned to tie fisherman’s knots. He forgot about Mondays and Tuesdays and set his weeks by Washingdays.

At the next clambake, he insisted on carrying the napkin basket. It was heavier than he expected, and when they reached the shore, Edwina ripped the basket from him in glee. As he stood surprised, she unearthed something buried under the napkins, and everyone cheered congratulations.

Edwina held high a deep blue, hand-knitted fisherman’s sweater. It fit him loosely, but the men assured him he’d grown into it in time.

That night, as the moon glistened in a dance across the surface of the sea, they sat side-by-side in the sand. The string in her hair tickled his neck. He reached up and slowly pulled it out. Her hair fell to her shoulders in curly knots.

“Edwina.”

She smiled at the sound of her name. He coiled the string around his fingers and pulled it loose again.

“If all I had to give you was this piece of string, would you marry me?”

She smiled at the moon and leaned on his shoulder.

“I’d marry you without the string.”

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So they did.

And on the day of the wedding, Mylan waited at the door in his best clothes. He toyed with his pocket watch chain checking the time without registering the hour. At the thirteenth glance, he realized the hands idled unwound.

The door opened and he looked up.

Edwina stood in white with her hair down wearing a crown of aster flowers.

He never wound the pocket watch again.

**I Am Not A Robot**  
**By Meredith Lundell**

I'm not a robot.

But I play one at the Interactive Display of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Robotics at the Museum of Robotics History. It pays pretty well—it pays the bills, at least. The kids are always excited to see me and poke around with the imitation technology, and the old folks are pretty tickled about the nostalgia. Most of them, anyway. So that's good.

Except,

well

Sometimes I think I *am* robot, even once I've clocked out.

For one, my legs are stiff as I walk home. My feet feel so heavy I can barely lift them from the ground. My neck's stiff, too, and my shoulders. I'd think if you were made out of metal you'd feel that way. There are other weird things too, like how I don't sleep at night or eat food

or how people don't talk to me. They talk to me, sure, but not like they talk to *other* humans. My responses are delayed and their voices are muffled in my ears. It's been this way for weeks now.

I know, I know—if I *were* a robot, I wouldn't be questioning it. I'd know it and everyone around me would know it. I mean, robots don't have heartbeats, and that's an easy thing for me to check every morning. But I know a lot about robotics in the 22<sup>rd</sup> century, and let me tell you, artificial intelligence has developed so quickly over the past few decades that there *are* robots out there that are nearly human. Some even have artificial skin and organs to test if we can create successful transplants for humans. I've seen them on TV, and they're really neat, when you're sure you aren't one of them.

Do *they* know they're "one of them?"

Can I know if I am?

It's the kind of question that keeps you up at night. It does me, anyway.

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Up and at 'em at 6 A.M. I've liked that phrase ever since I read it in the history books. I stare at my scruffy face in the mirror and repeat the phrase until a yawn interrupts me. If I say it enough, I'll feel it. I know it. It makes me feel a little more human. Humankind has always been influenced by the sun, so I am, too.

The first piece of my robot uniform involves a skin-tight suit that looks like a snake-skin diving suit. Then there are the light-weight metal plates, but not until I'm at the museum. Who wants to walk down the street dressed as a century-old robot? Nobody that I know of. So, once I have my suit on, I grab my uniform bag, my keys, and...I pause and stare around my kitchen.

The little bit of sunshine creeping around the window blinds is all the light in the room. It's good—I don't like seeing the heaps of junk everywhere. But what am I forgetting?

I take a deep breath. It doesn't...feel right. I can't feel the air in my lungs. Everything's cold.

“Oh, right,” I say aloud, my words dropping limply from my mouth. “My coat.”

It takes a while, but I find my coat in my bedroom beneath a pile of books that's slid off my cot. The shoulders hang too big on me, but with a salary like mine, I don't have room for fashion.

I stick my hands in my pockets as I shuffle down the apartment complex stairs. I have the worst time remembering my lines, so all the way to the museum I mutter them to myself: The first of the Benebots—that's what my costume is—were built in the 2050s. They were created by B.R.I. Inc. They were meant to replace menial jobs around the house or at work. They were widely popular until the company went bankrupt and the metal shortages started. That's why we don't have many Benebots left. That's why there aren't any real ones in the museum display, but our interactive display is 100% historically accurate.

I repeat the spiel out loud at least ten times but the city's too big for anyone to care. The clamor of cars and hover cars and billboards and chatter grabs people's attention a lot faster than a guy in a leotard and lumpy coat talking about robotics history. The only people, or things, that ever notice me are the robots I pass who operate the food stands and fix street signs.

Do they know? Is that why they pay attention to me?

Ugh, that makes my heart skip a beat. Maybe that's a sign I'm human.

I slip through the back door of the museum and finish putting on my uniform in the janitor's closet. The museum doesn't open until 8:00, so I'm over an hour early, but that means I



can wander around the displays and relax before everyone comes. Sometimes the janitors talk to me, too. That's fun. I stuff my bag in the staff room closet then head up to the first floor, which is dedicated to the oldest robotics, like industrial machinery and abacuses. I groan quietly once I crest the top stair. My joints hurt, especially my knees. It can't be the metal plates, since they barely weigh a thing. I lean over slightly and rub my knee caps until the aching subsides. I yawn. Try not to think too much about how I feel. It's fine. It's all fine.

7:00. I sit down on a bench outside of the 2020's display and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. I hear the janitors and other employees talking on the floors below and above me, but their voices are like one of those old radio programs recorded in low quality. Everything feels heavy, distant, strained. I stand up. A shiver runs through me as I stretch. Electricity without feeling. Was I always this way, or am I just noticing this now?

I shuffle to the stairwell and head up to the third floor—my floor. As I near the top, I tune into the conversation between two janitors.

“Oh, you see the news last night?”

“You think I'd start watching it now?”

“Yeah, yeah.” A chuckle. “You'll regret it when the world falls to pieces for real this time and you've kept your head neatly stuffed in your mop bucket.”

“Fine, tell me whatcha saw.”

I pause with one foot on the top stair.

“News's been leaked about that old bot company, Bree—no—B.R.E.?”

“B.R.I.?”

No way that'd be true. B.R.I. Inc. shut down over 50 years ago. I shake my head a bit and step all the way up. I need to make sure my station's ready for the early tours today.

The news-watching janitor gets louder with excitement, his voice echoing off the walls, “Yeah—remember them? Some insider reported that they’re starting up again with some real high tech stuff. I mean real high tech. I’m talking humanoid robotics.”

I pause. I twitch.

“What, like they don’t already have those?”

Only half of the overhead lights are on. The janitors are down at the end of the hall so they don’t see me, and I can only see their outlines.

“Sure they do! But B.R.I.’s made ‘em and programmed ‘em to think they’re real humans. Released ‘em into the general public to see if it worked.”

There’s no way. Right? Robotics are advanced but the government would catch a company before they’d try something like that. They don’t call it the 22<sup>nd</sup> century for nothing.

“You’re crazy, Louie. I told ya’ you watch too much news—“

“Just you wait and see!”

“—They spout nothing but garbage.”

“We’ve probably passed some of ‘em on the street already and wouldn’t know it.”

“We already do. Nothin’ we can do about it.”

The wheels of the janitors’ mop buckets squeak and squeal farther down the hall, fighting with the janitors’ voices to take up the empty air. Am I holding my breath? I can’t tell—I don’t feel relief when I exhale. Why can’t I feel those sensations anymore? Did I ever feel them?

Now my head hurts. I grip it with my hands and look for a place to sit. My grip is strong and cold. I want to go on home. I want to see if that report is real. I need to know. If I am one—

If I want to know, I can go to a doctor and have them check.

But if I am a robot, and I'm illegally released into the public, then what? Will they arrest me? Dismember me? Analyze my parts? Melt me down to reuse?

Even robots want to survive.

7:30. I head down to the staff room, take off the metal plates of my uniform, stuff them in my bag, hurry out the back door. The clock in the middle of the city strikes 8:00 as I wait to cross the street a block away from my apartment.

What am I thinking? I was early for work and now I'm late.

I'll tell them I'm sick. I'll tell them it came on suddenly.

They don't have to know why I left.

I lock my door once I'm inside my apartment. I toss my bag to the side. I pull up the halo-screen of my computer and click the icon for news. There it is—the second headline: “B.R.I. Inc. Scandal: Humanoid Robots Among Us?” I click the title. My eyes can't keep up with my brain and the words jumble, though I understand them all. Secret labs. Robots who function just like humans. Artificial blood and organs. Signs to watch for: cold skin, delayed and repetitive responses, mechanical movements, glazed-over eyes. Neo-Benebots are programmed with artificial memories. Neo-Benebots think they're human.

The blue light of the screen engulfs me.

I think I *am* a robot.

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The museum fires me four days later. I don't blame them. If an employee doesn't show up for work for a whole week, what else do you do? But I'm feeling worse—everything aches no matter how I stand or sit. I can't sleep at night. I can't taste anything I try to eat or drink. I think I'm malfunctioning. That's really why I won't go out. If I do, it'll be that much more obvious what I am.

I check every hour for news updates, even though I know I can't expect them that quick. I leave the television screen up with the news station on just in case I miss something online. Something strange starts happening on Friday, though: the phone rings every evening starting at 5 until 9, about one or two calls per hour. I'm too tired, and afraid, to pick it up. By the end of the week, I'm too tired to even get off the couch. I tremble and shutter every time I try.

But the Sunday morning news gives me a start: one of the Neo-Benebots has been found down South. They put a picture of it up on the screen so people know what to look for, since, apparently, B.R.I. Inc. based them all on one design. I startle when I see it—the bot looks *very much* like me. The middle-of-the-road skin color, the brown hair that won't lay down, the dark little eyes, the plain features.

I must've known all along what I was. That's why nothing's felt right since I moved to the city.

There's a knock on my door. I freeze and hope whoever it is will go away. They knock again, harder. Then again. They really want in. Could it be the police? I glance around the room for some defense—all I see are disheveled books and old laundry.

“I know you're in there!” A sharp female voice says. “And I know you think you can pull one over on me, but not today.”

I stand. My legs lock up and wobble at the same time while my shoulders and head threaten to topple over altogether. I can't make too much noise—but if she knows I'm in here, and she knows what I am, what good will that do?

“Unless you're dead in there, you better open up!”

Well, if she's little, maybe I can take her. Maybe I have some untapped strength.

“If I don't get your rent payment, then none of y'all're gonna have a place to stay at the end of the month.” It sounds like she turns away from my door when she continues, “Y'all hear that? I've got payments to make too! If I can't make 'em, we're all out of luck!”

Oh.

That's my landlady.

I forgot rent was due yesterday.

I guess it's less suspicious if I answer the door and talk to her, right? You'd expect a robot to shy away from human interaction.

It takes a lot, but I make it to the door. I open it just enough to peek my head out while leaning on the doorframe for support. The landlady—a short, bony, middle-aged woman who looks like she's been through a war or two—turns back toward me with the ire of a rabid dog. That look quickly fades when she sees me. Instead she looks pretty horrified.

“God bless America,” she says. “You look like Beelzebub himself.”

I pause. How do I not sound suspicious?

“That's...it?”

She laughs, but with restraint. Almost concerned. “Look, sugar, if you're sick you should've just told me. I don't have a policy against renting to sick folks. Heck, it doesn't even matter if your illness is in your head or your body.”

“I’m not sick,” I interrupt.

She raises her eyebrows and sticks her chin out. “Then what are you?”

I pause. She doesn’t give me more than a few seconds to think of a response before she says, “Uh-huh. Typical men. Denying they’re sick on their deathbeds. Tell you what—I won’t penalize you for paying late if you get it to me by the end of next week. Sound good?”

I nod. My legs are starting to give out and my grip isn’t strong enough to hold me up for much longer. The landlady nods, turns around, and says as she saunters down the hallway, “Unless the rest of y’all have cancer, you better pay me by the end of the night!”

As soon as I shut the door, everything gives way. I’m out before I hit the floor.

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I must’ve short-circuited. I’m not sure if that’s even the right term—I’m more of a history buff than a scientist. When I come-to, I’m still in the doorway. It’s dark outside. My sight’s blurry. My whole body’s prickly and cold. I push myself up and crawl over to the couch. There has to be something I can do to fix myself enough without going to a doctor—or, mechanic, rather. I hold my hands out in front of me and analyze them. I press them into my cheeks. Cold as metal.

Why am I still questioning it? I *am* a robot. If all signs point north, it’s north.

There’s a news blurb on the screen about the Neo-Benebots. Two more have been found, another in the South and one out West. Nobody is saying where authorities are taking the bots. I groan and pull my hands down my face, let them drop in my lap. I’m not surprised the landlady

didn't recognize me—she doesn't seem the type to care about much but her livelihood. Not that I blame her. I'm doing the same.

I've gotta find a mechanic to tune me up, but there's not going to be a shop in NNYC that isn't on high alert. But there's one not far from here that's run by robots—maybe they won't rat me out. I've also got to go to the ATM and withdraw rent money. And I've got to do it without getting caught. I'm pretty inconspicuous so I think I can do it. I get up, steady myself, and head to my bedroom. The air is stale. I flip on the light and shuffle around, pulling out stray articles of clothing that look like they'll still fit. I put them on over the clothes I'm already wearing—aha! I find a pair of sunglasses. If they can't see my eyes, they can't see how glazed-over they are. Once satisfied, I go to the kitchen and down some liquid I find in a jug on the counter, then grab my wallet and stuff it in my pocket. I have to be brave. I can do this. The mechanic shop is just down the street. The ATM is only five blocks away. I can make it back before sunrise and I'll be safe.

I pause by the door, hand resting on the knob as cold as my fingertips. I miss the sunrise. I haven't seen it all week.

Why would I miss the sun?

I breathe in, and open the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

The mechanic shop is covered by neon lights of all shapes and colors that flicker violently when I duck inside. I've never understood why this shop is open 24/7, but now I'm thankful. The petite and glossy blue robot at the front counter looks up at me and hums as it

scans me. If I were human, I'd feel nervous. Out-of-place. But I don't. I also don't feel brave enough to remove my sunglasses.

“What do you need?” The robot's voice, though automated, is smooth and chipper.

“A repair.” My voice is scratchy.

The robot just stares at me. I know it knows what repair means. So why isn't it responding?

“A repair?” I say a bit louder.

The robot scans me again. I glance out the front windows. I must look ridiculous in three layers of clothing and sunglasses.

“I think you are looking for the hospital,” the robot replies.

I frown. “No, this is what I need.”

“You are not a robot,” it replies. “You do not need a mechanic.”

“I—of course I am.”

“You are not a robot.”

I remove my sunglasses and point to my eyes. “See? I am. And I need help.”

In an extra chipper voice, the robot replies, “The hospital is three blocks to the east. Have a good night.”

My hand holding the sunglasses trembles. This isn't right. Maybe my technology is too advanced for the robot to detect, but I can't just walk into another mechanic shop. Much less a hospital! One, my legs are trembling again, and two, I can't risk getting caught.

“A-are you sure?” I ask.

The robot says, “Yes. My analyses are always correct. Have a good night.”

The neon lights shudder as I leave.



\*\*\*\*\*

Sporadic hover cars whoosh gently overhead while I shuffle down the sidewalk. I can at least get money from the ATM before I go home. I'm just a block away. Only a few people are on the streets, so I'll be fine for tonight. But that robot couldn't have been right. Right? It must be old. That's why it couldn't read that I was one too. Maybe if I come back in the daytime there'll be a different robot that can help me. But then I'd have to risk the crowds of people. Not that they've noticed me before.

I bump into the man standing at the ATM. I shudder and step back, unsure of my footing, and he lets out a quiet "oh!" then chuckles when he turns around and sees me. I glance down. Maybe he won't notice my eyes.

"Just a minute, kid," he says. He's old and his voice is rich. "Somebody's impatient."

I try to chuckle in response, but something catches in my throat. Something hard and painful and with a grip like steel. I lower my head more, try to breathe in deeply.

"You alright there?" the old man asks. I can tell he's wary, like he's not sure if I'm going to do something reckless.

"I...don't know," I reply.

"Looks like you could use a breather. Why don't you sit down a second?"

I want to, right on the pavement. Sleep forever and not wake up. But I glance over and see a bench nearby and make it in time before my legs give out. I grip my kneecaps and take another breath. When I exhale, a little cloud puffs out of my mouth.

The old man sits down beside me. My chest tightens.

“You live around here?” he asks me.

I nod. “A few blocks away.”

“Not a bad side of town.”

“A-a little shabby, but the rent’s low.”

The old man nods slowly, contemplative. “I used to live around there when I was your age. Made my walk to campus an easy one. You go to college?”

I shake my head.

“You work around here?”

I hesitate. I try to focus on talking and not the ache in my chest. The old man reaches into his pocket. I startle and he chuckles, pulling out a little cube wrapped in crackly silver wrapping.

“Here, eat this,” he says. He hands the morsel to me. “A little something in your stomach always helps.”

I cradle it in my hand. My fingers are still trembling. Am I cold? I notice the night air cutting right through the fabric of my coat. The tip of my nose is numb—why am I noticing? All these sensations, the breath turning to mist as I exhale, the changing light of news screens, the empty tightness in my stomach.

I unwrap the cube. A candy morsel. Without thinking I stuff it in my mouth. It instantly melts.

The old man says, “Had a hard time when I was your age, too. Especially in a city this big. It can make you feel like nobody sees you, can’t it? Like nothing matters.”

I can’t reply, since my mouth is full. Something’s winding up in my chest. My heart’s racing. It’s going to burst.

There's a pause. He says, "It'll get better. Just take it a day at a time." But then he looks at me, right in the eyes, and asks, "Do you have people around to help you?"

I glance away. "People?"

"Yeah, people." He chuckles, in a hearty way. "We can't be like those robots, no matter how hard we try. There's more to us than some wiring and programming, even if it feels like it."

That twisting in my chest drops so suddenly, I have to swallow the candy so I don't choke.

"You okay there?" The old man pats me on the shoulder.

I nod exaggeratedly. Sugar dances all over my mouth.

"Ever played chess before?" he asks.

"Long time ago."

"Did you like it?"

I nod.

"Then come to the next game. A bunch of us meet in the park near the museum Sunday mornings and play."

"Do you..." I clear my throat, "let robots play?"

That gets a roaring laugh from him. "Nah, there's gotta be some time for us humans to visit. Just bring yourself and you'll do fine." With a soft grunt he stands and pats me on the shoulder again. As he shuffles down the sidewalk, he adds, "You take care of yourself, kid."

It takes me a second to register his words, and by then he's yards away from me, but I say, "T-thanks—goodnight."

He waves his hand over his head without turning around.

When I breathe in, I feel it. Still heavy but a bit warmer. Kinda like the feeling you get when you glimpse the rim of light on the horizon as the sun begins to rise.

The old man saw it.

My landlady, too.

Was the mechanic-shop robot right after all?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

My breath turns into a cloud.

I'm not a robot.

The Bird  
By Aidan Bender

*Day One:*

*The strange people who came here today forgot their little dead bird. Or at least I thought he was dead. This evening he opened his eyes and stared at me. I tried to throw him away (he seems to be frozen), but he just ends up back in my bedroom. I will give him back when they come again.*

*Day Two:*

*The bird is still watching me, its little lifeless eyes moving back and forth as it takes in my features. Every once in a while it lets out a little chirp, making me jump. I wish it never came to me.*

*Others in the village know about him, now. They think he is a curse left by the strangers to haunt me for some sin. I swear to them I have done nothing, nothing. The priest doesn't believe me. I think... I think he wants to peer into my soul and see what I have done. I swear I've done nothing wrong.*

*Not even...*

*Not even with Dale.*

*I swear.*

*Day Six:*

*Today the priest declared a Search. I want to cry. But the bird is watching me. It's not the only one: everyone else stares at me in terror. They expect my shadow to start dancing, or at least to speak. Sometimes, so do I.*

*Was it Dale?*

*No. No it can't be. We did nothing wrong! Nothing!*

*I tried to get rid of the bird again, this time I threw him in the firepit. He burned to ashes and I found him in my room the next morning.*

*Ever since, he chirps whenever I move toward him. It hurts my ears. Being near him hurts.*

*It's worse now that the bird is starting to move. First it flaps its puny little wings, and then turns its neck to follow me as I move. It flexes its talons twice every minute, as if reminding itself (and me) that it has weapons.*

*Day Ten:*

*I think it grew overnight.*

*Now it talks to me, in my mind. It begs me to set it free. Demands. Sometimes I dream of it, moving, flying, soaring. Diving. At me. I see its eyes glint in the sunlight as it dives toward me with beak open and talons wide. I wake in a cold sweat each time, shivering. And there it is, sitting frozen, staring at me with those calculating eyes.*

**LET ME GO-**

*I... I swear I did not write those words to you. I swear. The bird is taking me, he is taking m-*

**LET ME GO-**

*I want to escape.*

*The priest has begun his Search and his Search is painful. It tears at my soul and digs into my heart and I am always left breathless and sobbing. But he has not found sin. Not yet.*

*No. No he won't. He won't.*

*Day Twelve:*

*The strangers came back. They want to know where the bird is, but they only ask me. No one else seems to know that they are here. They come to my house and they knock on my door and they demand to know. I can't say anything now that will betray the bird. He is very insistent that I say nothing of him, and so I can't. If I so much as think of telling them my tongue glues itself to the roof of my mouth.*

*Every night I dream of him, tearing me to pieces. He's still growing; he can spread his wings a little, too. They reach as far wide as I am tall. The thoughts he speaks to me with scare me.*

*Day Fifteen:*

*They keep coming back and demanding to have their bird returned. I try to tell them I can't, but it won't come out so I have to tell them that I don't know what they're talking about.*

*The priest has begun to find those lies in his Search. He doesn't know what they are, but he knows that they are lies and he's angry.*

*The whole village is angry.*

*They know I lie. Not to whom.*

*I can't tell them.*

*Can't tell anyone.*

*The bird will hurt me.*

*Day Nineteen:*

*Today I wish I was dead. The bird was gone when I awoke. There was a single feather left on his perch, and a note scrawled in dark red blood on my doorstep:*

***I will return for you.***

*Day Thirty:*

*The bird has not returned. I could at last tell the strangers what happened.*

*They do not blame me, although they were angry. They know I couldn't have told them, even if I wanted to.*

*The world has changed. Everyone in the village blames me. Crops are found scorched the night they are planted. A cool night. Fires rage even during storms, and those storms are infrequent now. I'm isolated from everyone. Even Dale, and I thought he loved me. No one speaks to me, and I am silent.*

*Perhaps it is the curse.*

*At least the Priest has ended his Search.*



*They think it was my lies.*

*My lies did this.*

*Not... not... Dale. Thank gods, not Dale.*

*Day One hundred twelve:*

*I'm living in a nightmare.*

*No one is left:*

*Kate, Greg, all dead. Dead, dead, dead.*

*Dead.*

*Dale.*

*Dale is dead.*

*I'm alone and Dale is dead. I mourned for him and I wept. I sat on his grave and cried until I couldn't cry anymore. I stood in my house for hours waiting for him to walk back in, to be fine, to be not-dead.*

*If... if the bird was a curse, it was because of him.*

*And me.*

*And him.*

*I didn't mean to; we didn't mean... to. One... one little sin. It wasn't... was it?*

*Day One hundred twenty:*

*The bird came back today. He's as tall as me, and his feathers emanate a strange heat.*

*The grass withers beneath his talons, each as long as my arm. He just stood there staring at me.*

*I'm naught but a shadow of myself: I've not had much to eat or drink, and no shelter. The houses are all burned down. My clothes are rags, my once-long hair is knotted and disgusting.*

*I hate myself, and he hates me.*

*Why does he me?*

*I know why I hate me.*

*I hate me.*

*Why do I hate me?*

*But I cannot make myself care enough to answer.*

*Day One hundred twenty-one:*

*He came again today, and stood staring at me for almost two hours this time. I sit in my own refuse, unable to move or speak to him. It hurts too much, the heat of his presence.*

*Day One hundred seventy:*

*I hate him.*

*I hate me.*

*I hate the ground I sit on.*

*I hate the people who betrayed me.*

*I hate every scrap of decency left in this world.*

*I hate the darkness, the light, the sun, the moon.*

*I hate being wet, dry, hot, cold.*

*I hate, and yet he still comes.*

*I hate living, but cannot die.*

*I hate that the bird stares at me all day, now.*

*I hate.*

*Yet I live.*

*Day Two hundred:*

*At last he speaks to me.*

***"Why are you so desolate?"***

*The bird's voice is croaky, broken and ticking and rasping. I cover my ears and say nothing. He looks at me, looks at me, looks at me.*

*Day Two hundred two:*

*He asks the same question every single morning at dawn:*

***"Why are you so desolate?"***

*I wish I was dead.*

*Day Two hundred ten:*

*I tried to kill myself today with a sharp rock. I cut my own neck, and bled to death by noon. I awoke this evening, with the bird still watching me, and my blood on the ground around me.*

***"Why are you so desolate?"***

*Day Two hundred thirty:*

***"Why are you so Desolate?"***

*Day Three hundred:*

***"Why are you so Desolate?"***

*Day Three hundred ninety:*

***"Why are you so Desolate?"***

*Day Three hundred ninety-nine:*

*I answer him today. My voice is far raspier than his, now. I don't drink and don't eat, but do not die.*

"Because of you," I tell him.

***"Me?"***

"You cursed me." It's been so long since I've said anything at all. My throat constricts when I speak.

***"Me?"***

*The heat emanating from him disappears and he seems to shrink, shrink, shrink. He's smaller than me now, smaller, smaller, smaller.*

"What are you?" I ask.

*He looks up at me and says nothing. He shrinks further, until he is the same size as he was, all those days ago. So many days.*

"Please," I say, "don't go."

*I say it, and I mean it. I don't want him to go. There's nothing left if he goes. Just me and Dale's flat grave and the scorched fields and the ashes and ashes and ashes.*

*His voice speaks in my head:*

***YOU CHOSE DESOLATION YOURSELF. SINNER.***

*He's petrified again, rigid as rock and silent as one. I stare at him, unable to speak, unable to respond or form a response or think or imagine what he means or understand why he says this.*

*Day Four hundred:*

The bird is gone.

The Four Lives of Marjorie F. Scott

*by Sam Cooper*

Fourth Life

By now, Marjorie has been many things.

This is her worst life played out for you like a record. Savor it in the privacy of your own home where the crackling sound won't break the walls and spoil the air. Where the only thoughts come from your own head and your guilt—inevitable, so inevitable—has no interruption.

*Because you've  
been many things, too.*

Set the needle. Give it a spin.

Marjorie's worst life is this: One crusty home on a slit of sand between pine trees and ocean. There are two doors on the house, a front door and a back, that are only ever touched by

her hands. Three pieces of furniture sit inside. Four paintings hang in the kitchen. A little more silence than necessary sucks up the excess air in each room.

This morning is her fiftieth birthday, and she celebrates by digging her fingers into the seams of the house and pulling, ripping, and undoing. Everything.

*But it didn't start  
that way.*

It started with cleaning last night. She straightened the curtains and polished the banister. She swept her living room and banished the dust to the porch. And there it was, sitting on her dilapidated welcome mat. A letter with an emerald stamp stared up at her and smiled a perfect V, the round sticker sealing the edges as plump as her own lips.

Marjorie slammed the door shut.

It had been years since the last letter.

Her heart held onto her ribs. She told it to let go, but it only squeezed tighter. She forced herself to breathe and peered through the peephole. Outside, the letter smiled wide.

V.

See, in this life, there are no more letters allowed.

So Marjorie opened the door and peeled the envelope up from the doormat. Holding it between her thumb and her pinky finger, she rushed to the fireplace. There was no hesitation. The paper hissed as it entered the flames, a sliver of steam lifting into the chimney.

*Happy fiftieth,*

*Marjorie.*

She spent the night trying to forget, but now that it's her birthday she needs to celebrate. Now she pulls her house apart to find the copies of the letters *she* sent all those years ago. A stew of unwelcome memories boils up in her mind.

It's a box. It's somewhere in a corner. Somewhere dark and unassuming, and somewhere it won't jump out when she's not expecting it to jump.

Today: a day to destroy everything. When she finds the box, it might be hard to let go, but then everything else attached—sweaters, books, pens—will burn easier. She'll let the fire lick them all into ashes. Let the wind blow them into the sea. Let them vanish.

Because in this life, she's forgetting about him.

It's the only way to hush the despair.



---

First Life

In Marjorie F. Scott's best life, she thinks of herself as one person.

*Same as you, surely.*

*Same as you.*

Why is it the best? They are still together.

The two of them are much younger, and they both believe life is a spool of thread to unwind until you reach the end. Perhaps the end is a little bittersweet, but there's still a line to trace back through history, if you please.

On a warm Tuesday afternoon, she unlocks the door to her village apartment. The shade-cooled air drifts out and carries a sweet smell. There's a call from the kitchen, sudden and elated.

She's home early. He's excited.

Marjorie hangs her bag on the coat rack. Thanks to the smell, she imagines the kitchen in disarray, dishes heaped in the sink and dirty towels hanging off the counters. Is this not how it always ends when he cooks? But she refuses to be apprehensive, takes another breath of the sugary scent, and walks to the kitchen.

It is, of course, in disarray.

*What a  
surprise.*

But he made her something sweet, and after the day she's had, all she wants is something sweet.

They eat the cookies. Marjorie doesn't think about the cost of the flour he used, the mess they'll clean later, or even that the odds of her skipping supper in favor of another sweet bite are high. For now, the apartment glows as bright as his smile.

—

#### Fourth Life

The box of letters stays hidden.

Marjorie leaves the house a mess and stomps out the door. She clenches her fists and presses them to her aching gut. It feels just like the other days her life split apart. Like the exact moment.

The world trembles, so weak it could snap around her or snap her. The world doesn't care which one happens.

If only she could sew herself into this place.

Marjorie takes a walk. She kicks her boots along the coastline, feeds the gulls and glides through deathly still air.

A thick wall of fog blurs the water into oblivion and loosens the pine trees from the dirt. It's much better here on the coast than in town. It's a world away from everything.

*A world  
nowhere in particular.*

The walk turns up nothing of value, so she wanders back to the kitchen. Still avoiding the search, she takes inventory of the pantry. Dusty cans and crinkled paper bags shift position. For the next trip to town she'll need coffee, flour, canned corn, and oatmeal. But she can't go yet. The calendar screams not to leave leave until after the weekend.

The town has memories this weekend.

*She won't need to search  
for those.*

It's the week of the university science fair.

*It will stitch itself  
into her.*

Where does she go? Where the hell can she go to avoid this self-inflicted celebration?

She knows. Marjorie crawls into the darkest corner of the house and picks up her knitting. Blue and green, brighter than anything else in the house, she adds to her current sweater, one in a vast collection. They all hang in the closet.

*They  
just hang.*

Because in Marjorie's worst life, she wakes up every morning to be caught in the same routine. Split apart between different times. Different appointments through the decades that end up the same. This appointment is the one she can't stop making.

*Because he does not write  
to this life.*

She's stitched herself into the wrong time.

—

### Second Life

This is Marjorie's first clue things are not alright. Her first appointment through time ends today.

*Check your watch,  
it's coming.*

The science fair brings out the unexpected side of people. Whether you are creative, artistic, or plain strange, these three special days pull your heartstrings up to where everyone \ can see them and point at them and marvel at them while saying, "Oh, I hadn't thought of *that* before."

Marjorie has always been proud of how he performs in the science fair. Even though her own wonder seems to shrink with time, he keeps it alive.

It pulls out his best.

It pulls out something else—a competitor and best friend.

After the glory of the exhibit hall dies and the competitors return home, Marjorie is the one to find him on the back porch. With his friend. And when she thinks *friend*, she puts blood-red quotation marks around the word. It drips in her mind. The stains are dark. The stains don't come out.

*This is all  
she knows to do.*

Because "friends" don't normally stand that close. And if they do, they don't face each other. And if they are both boys, he doesn't close his eyes and the *friend* doesn't smile like

someone has caught the smile on a fishing lure and is reeling it out of his chest.

The shock of it doesn't even hurt.

But then Marjorie doesn't know what to say to him. He's the one who talks. All weekend it's an endless string of explaining and asking if she's alright and apologizing and *not* apologizing. One thing is clear: she is not alright.

But she never waits to hear him out.

*This is what  
she knows to do.*

The first time Marjorie's life splits apart, she never thinks of asking him if *he* is alright.

Never once.

—

### Third Life

The knitting begins with anger.

*As do  
most crafts.*

The physical sensation of taking yarn and forcing it into a different shape heals *some* part of her wounds. She thinks. Or perhaps she just wants to see that spool unravel until it reaches the end.

—

#### Fourth Life

Today, she might miss his letters.

*A strong word,  
might.*

Knitting another sweater is merely a distraction. Yarn breathes between her fingers. Some strands are smooth as the inside of a sea shell, and some are rough as the sea itself. Blue, blue, blue so deep it winds around her heart.

She's got ten fingers working hard.

After she found him on the porch, Marjorie didn't look at him for ten days. Ten solid, unbreakable days when all she *wanted* to do was break apart.

She's got three hours before she'll make herself search for the box to burn.

And about three unnecessary knitting sessions until the newest sweater will hang on the wall. Will it fit her? No. But it will fit him.

At least, the memory of him.

---

First Life

You don't think about memories while you make them.

*No,  
it's impossible.*

---

Second Life

You only think about the bad ones. Memories as they happen.

*This will be  
a piece of history.*

---



Third Life

In Marjorie's third life, things are better.

Potentially.

They have a system, the two of them. After parting ways—too late to save themselves from shimmering gashes and bone-breaking blows—they begin corresponding in notes. He sends the first. It shows up at Marjorie's seaside house one October day when the sun is a little warmer than it should be. She puts down the knitted tangle of a sweater sleeve and retrieves the envelope from the welcome mat. Just by the off-kilter handwriting on the return address, she knows who it's from.

*She expects it.*

*An apology.*

But this is not an apology.

He doesn't plea for forgiveness or tell her he was confused. His actual words twist Marjorie's stomach into double-knots. She holds the paper so tight her fingers turn purple and reads it again. She reads it nine times. She slides the note back into the envelope and pulls it out once more, a baptism, a renewal, hoping it's something different.

It's not.

*What a  
surprise.*

He says, "This is my new address, if you want to talk."

V.

So she talks with him, one letter a week. Things are better because every talk is a step closer to reaching that apology. That renewal.

Does separation have to last?

—

#### Fourth Life

Marjorie feels herself splitting up again. The feeling starts in her bones and cracks outward until her skin burns with the pressure to break and let it out.

*The anger,  
of course.*

—

First Life

In this life, they're both in school. They both wander into the kitchen at the same time every evening, Marjorie for tea and him for hot cocoa. When they've made their steaming drinks, they land on the sofa together, the debris of their papers and books and pencils and ideas flung around them. Not exactly discarded and not exactly arranged.

Marjorie dives into her grading work and tries not to think about the long shift at the post office she has the next morning before classes. He sinks into his studies of everything—

*under the sun,  
that is*

—and sips his cocoa. Marjorie soaks up his peace.

How does he sit next to her and breathe the same air without choking on worry? If only Marjorie knew, perhaps she could be happier. Perhaps she could stop thinking. About everything. All the time.

In her first life, Marjorie savors their differences.

---

Second Life

The fallout happens much later than it should. Even after Marjorie stops talking to him, they live in the same apartment for three more years.

*One, two, three  
too long.*

Here is what she sees when they separate: A little brown bag filled with his shoes, because he didn't have room in his suitcase. A train ticket sticking out of the back pocket of his blue jeans. Sleeves a little too short, barely reaching his wrists. Wind picking up his hair and moving it away from where he wants. Cherry blossoms bloom above the sidewalk, so alive the colors hurt her eyes, but he balances out the view.

His shoulders are tight and his stride weak as a he walks away from her, because he's defeated.

*So is  
she.*

How did they grow so different?

—

Third Life

Splitting yourself in two is hard enough, but as the letters keep coming in, she knows she will be torn apart once again. When he writes, he doesn't apologize. He explains. It feels like a knife cutting a deep line on the underside her stomach.

With an explanation, she can't hold her anger in her hands. She has to put it somewhere else.

*The same happens  
with the other feelings.*

Marjorie bleeds ink. Black, oily ink blossoming over paper to fill the places she doesn't understand. What else can you do when you have that much love for a person? You can't make it fit in the spaces between their words.

He can't expect her to do that, can he?

*What can you do with  
so much love?*

Marjorie's third life feels like progress, but the night hours spent in her tiny house tell her—and she already *knows*—that both of their pens are just making a black mess.

—

#### Fourth Life

So, Marjorie gives up.

*This is  
how it looks.*

An estimated one hundred sweaters hang on the back wall, and all of them fit a memory, but not how things really are.

Sea spray from the incoming tide splatters the outer walls and mixes with the hiss of the radio. Her candles shiver without the sun to hold them steady. Marjorie takes down a sweater. She finds a loose strand and tugs it out of the weave, then she pulls and rips and unravels the entire thing.

The seconds of ruin blur together. She gives up counting and channels all her energy into undoing these sweaters like she tried to undo her house. She sleeps on the aftermath of her destruction, a loose pile of yarn in twenty different colors.

An estimation: one hundred memories.

---

First Life

It's early in the morning.

*You know the kind  
of early.*

Not bleary-eyed early, when you put on your clothes inside out and fumble with door handles. The kind of early when the air is cold, the grass is sopping wet with dew, and the sky blushes when you look up. Marjorie sits on her porch to take it in. She likes to take the pressure off her shoulders before the day even begins, and these sunrises are the best relief.

The wind tickles the tree leaves, then her face, then the fallen flower petals on the sidewalk. Wrapping her arms around her stomach, she breathes. Breathes. Breathes one more time.

Has she worked hard enough for this?

*The sunrise. Peace.*

*The apartment. Him.*

Is it enough that she slaves at the post office, teaches the university students, and still takes care of her home? Is it enough she goes to the grocery store and refuses the smallest of pleasures for herself, just so she can find something he likes?

Just before the colors in the sky quiet down, the front door opens. Marjorie looks over her shoulder. He stands there wearing nothing but his sleeping shorts. No socks, no shirt, no shame, no cares. He flips a pencil over in one hand and holds a slip of yellow paper in the other.

"Aren't you cold?" Marjorie asks.

He shakes his head and steps out. "It's fine."

"What have you got there?"

"Something." The door clicks shut. He tiptoes across the cold pavement and sits next to her. "Never mind. It's cold."

Marjorie wraps her arm around his shoulders. "I know."

"I wrote you a letter."

Marjorie takes the yellow paper and spreads it over her knee. Even though the sun hasn't quite crested the horizon, she doesn't need it. This is bright enough.

*May I sit here with you? It seems like  
the right place to be at 6:40am.*



She smiles. "Why do you have to ask?"

Still turning over the pencil between his fingers, he answers, "Because it's yours. This is your spot."

"It isn't, though, Caleb."

And it's decided just like that.

Now he sits with her to see the sky bloom every morning. Never a shirt, never any shoes, just Marjorie's arm around his shoulders and her hand running through his hair.

Marjorie feels like she has earned her first life.

---

### Second Life

After he leaves, Marjorie decides it's been a waste.

His absence doesn't bring a raw sense of release like she expects. It brings an ugly mirror that only shows her herself, her life, and the absolute waste of it all. Her time stretches until it breaks. Her money trickles down the sink. Her heart flings light in all the wrong directions.

What a waste, what a waste, what a waste.

She should have known.

---

Third Life

His first letter came like a storm, all pounding rain and wind and lightening. Over in a few minutes. Marjorie remembers it too well.

His twenty-seventh letter is more of a flood. Marjorie opens the envelope with the skill of a postal worker (or a professor) and holds the paper to the light. Rose colored sun filters through the page and the morning wind curls the edges.

*Marjorie,*

*It's time for me to stop.*

*Thank you for writing me. Really, thank you. I know it hasn't been easy for you and I appreciate that you kept with it. But I just want you to know that it has been worse for me. Every day, I wait for the mail and hope that I won't be cut with another paragraph of memories you refuse to forget.*

*I don't mind the memories. I love them.*

*But I don't like the way you use them.*

*— C. M. Scott*

And here is the water. This note washes in so fast Marjorie doesn't have time to take a breath. First, she coughs. Then she closes her eyes and tries to shut out the pressure building between her ears. Now she tumbles as the currents take her where they will.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he didn't call her by her name. Why did he have to call her by her name?



Fourth Life

Awake.

*Cold,  
night.*

The last blue light of the day drips through an open window and suffocates the candles. It's time.

Yarn still a mess beneath her, Marjorie breathes. She stands up and scoops the colors into her arms. It's hard to open the door with no hands, but she does, and she walks only a few feet to the ocean.

The yarn hits the water and clumps together, sinking further and further into the gray. No more, no more. She wants everything to vanish.

So the sweaters disappear—every last one swallowed by the waves—and Marjorie walks back to her house in a daze. She flicks off her old radio. The static hiss no longer seems like good company. She washes her dishes. She sweeps her floor and dusts the furniture and pushes all of her clutter out the front door. And she cries.

*To clean inside, you must first clean  
the outside.*

This is Marjorie's fourth life laid out for you to see, all of the worst parts spinning over and over like a broken record. But she understands, now, that perhaps it doesn't have to end at the worst.

—

### First Life

In Marjorie's best life, she's called many names.

He has a lot of names for Marjorie. Sometimes, when he feels especially funny, he calls her *Dear*. When he feels like

breaking a few rules, he calls her *Marj*. On days when he's sad, he never calls her anything.

But Marjorie's favorite name is what he calls every day. She's proud of this. She's scared of this. Her ears never get sore of hearing the same thing.

When he calls her *Mother*, Marjorie feels right.

---

### Second Life

Marjorie hates to be alone.

And yet, at this time in *his* life, she wonders if he has ever even felt loneliness. They've always been together. They've lived under the same roof, eaten the same food, breathed the same air.

*There is  
the lie.*

They were alone long before they left each other.

---

Third Life

Perhaps splitting apart is something that will always happen to Marjorie F. Scott. After her son—her son, her own damn son—stops writing, her house on the shore becomes a yawning mouth. She sleeps inside it every day and tempts it to swallow her, but it never will. Not fully.

Perhaps she'll move to a different danger.

Or perhaps she'll stay and try to keep this life together. Together is something, after all, even if it's ugly.



The Fourth Life

Knocks on the door. Two of them.

First, Marjorie thinks it's a bird pecking the old walls. They do that, sometimes. Then she thinks it's an echo from another time. She imagines echoes more often than she should.

Four knocks later, Marjorie answers. A man in blue and white stands on her porch. His shoulders hang heavy with rain and his messenger bag drips water on the welcome mat.

He coughs from deep in his chest. "Took me two hours to find this place in the fog."

Marjorie stands still. The mailman?

He doesn't seem to know what to do with her silence. "I'm new to this," he offers. "Nobody has delivered up here for a good stretch."

"Yesterday."

"Nobody yesterday, Ma'am, but somebody did last week."

How long had that letter sat on the mat?

She answers, "Then no, they haven't."

He flips open his messenger bag. "Well, here I am."

"What the letter?"

"Jury Duty notice from town. Another one."

"Oh. Excellent."

"Didn't you get the first?"

Marjorie doesn't answer.

"They'd like you to contact the court house."

She takes the envelope. "May I send something back?"

He shrugs. "It's why I'm here."

"I don't," she mutters, "have it quite yet."

Marjorie has refused to write him for so long she doesn't exactly know what to say. She needs to find her old letters again, and this time—

*burn them?*

—read them.

The mailman says, "Well."

Marjorie asks, "Will you be back with more mail?"

"If someone sends it."

She nods. "I'll burn this notice. When they send another, I'll have something to post."

—

### Fifth Life

By now, Marjorie F. Scott has been many things.

*Not all of them  
are good.*

And some of them are.

When she lifts the pen from her most recent draft of the letter, she feels right. She smudges the ink of her signature to make it feel a little more like it came from *her*, then folds it in thirds and drops it into a long envelope.

*What a  
surprise.*

The new words won't close the rift between them, but she knows they don't have to. Not yet.

She's got a few more lives to get where needs to be.



## STARSTRUCK

By Marissa Norris

### PART I

I am lying on the asphalt of a grocery store parking lot.

I have skin and bones and sinew.

I am screaming.

I scream to rid my newfound lungs of the air trapped inside them; scream to try and dispel the pain tearing at my limbs; scream to remind myself of what I've done.

The truth is this:

The Fall is only graceful if you weren't pushed.

I asked to Fall but not for this.

Someone Upstairs really, really has it out for me.

#

I am lying on a pile of soft sheets.

No screaming, this time, just the aching—a deep blue hurt that emanates from the inside of me. Being sane is still a long stretch but at least I'm conscious.

I open my eyes.

Stretch my fingers and hear the apartment key fall from my hand to the floor.

The landlord's copper voice speaks from my memories to tell me *sardines will cure any bad hangover, son.*

Now, I smile.

I smile because I've done it.

And the only person on Earth who knows what I've done is me.

#

Moving feels like trying to crawl back from hell.

Sardines aren't going to fix this, but I turn on the shower as hot as it will go and let the entire room fill with steam as I stand there holding onto the crucifix around my neck. Seeing your own body physical enough to stare back at you in a mirror is something people take for granted. I lose myself studying the way it's built, fingers connected to hand connected to wrist connected to arm.

It's a living art form.

My shoulder blades won't stop itching. I imagine that's what happens when you attempt to stick an angel and his entire wingspan into a single body. I twist and turn but all I can see is redness, twin scars curving along the edge of my shoulder.

I wonder, for a moment, if I scratched hard enough, my wings would unfold. I almost miss them.

But the feeling of stepping into the shower when it's hot enough to burn is almost as satisfying.

#

It's strange, being human; not in the ways that you would think, but in only having some amount of certainty.

I know that it is going to happen.

A broken angel is more obviously broken when you put it inside a human body. Some people would call me *sick*, and I guess having fits full of blood and headaches and a body fighting with itself qualifies as *sick*.

I'm just waiting for it to happen.

But for the first time in my life, I'm not sure when it will.

So for the first few days, I take some time. I sleep. I figure out how to use the coffee maker. I take a lot of showers, because the hot water makes my shoulders hurt less. I say my name again and again to try and get used to it: *Cole*.

I guess it fits.

I discover that routines are a lot like rituals.

I like them.

But my fingers twitch when I sit still. When it's quiet and I've run out of things to do, to pray, and all I have left to think about is where I'm not.

Who I'm not helping.

I promise him that I'm coming. I tell him to hold on.

I'll be there soon. I'm just not strong enough

Or human enough

Yet.

#

Leaving the apartment makes my shoulders itch. It's like my wings have been folded up beneath my shoulder blades and being out in the open city air makes them want to tumble out to take flight.

My feet are bound to the ground.

There's a tug in my chest that needs to be tended, nurtured, murmured to, but I tip my head back for a second instead.

The city holds me.

Dense air curled inside of my lungs, sidewalk steady beneath my feet, buildings in front of me and around. Sounds (cars, yelling, baby's cry) and smells (smoke and food and stench of sewer) and a ballooning feeling that no one knows who I am or why I am here.

The clouds sit above it all. The barrier between this new home and my old one.

I'm beginning to prefer this one, broken or otherwise.

My chest tugs once more and I let it pull me this time. People part on the sidewalk to avoid me, heads down, murmuring to children or to their phones, and for a moment I wonder if they can see me.

Maybe they just don't want to.

The church hums across the street, like it's happy to see me. The low clouds nestle against the highest spire like a not-so-subtle signal from Upstairs that this, at least, is mine.

I stop on the corner. I slip a bill into the jar next to a sleeping woman and her dog. My chest tugs harder, so I can't stay. But I say a prayer as I cross the street.

The door opens easily.

It's thicker inside. There's a small hum from a fan in the corner. It's missing the flickering of candles. I guess they've been waiting for me.

I breathe.

Or else, I try to. The air seems to get thicker the further I walk down the aisle past the pews. I can still breathe. It just—sticks to the inside of my lungs.

“Father?”

There's no answer. There's not much reason for there to be anybody here on a Tuesday afternoon, so I just find the matches instead.

I strike one. The smoke is almost suffocating but nearly provides relief from the air, and I just end up coughing.

The candles sit, lined in front of Mary, waiting to be lit.

Mary looks at me expectantly.

My hands shake and the flame wavers.

I swear.

Yeah, in the church, but it's a cruel joke for it to happen here, just when I was beginning to live, before I could even light incense, and I don't have a choice but to let it have me.

I'm coughing and there's something stuck in my throat that's probably blood and I can't breathe at all and I'm sinking to my knees in front of the altar.

I tell God this isn't fair.

But he probably knows.

Blood sprays from my lips onto the carpet and I feel my body fall into it, see it from the outside for only a moment before everything goes black.

## PART II

6 months

Ezekiel Williams.

It took me too long to find him, and when I did, he was worse off than Upstairs ever said he was.

He's getting better. Really.

For a nineteen-year-old with a kid, abusive girlfriend, and a brain that likes to dabble in schizophrenia, he could be worse off.

I still help him clean up after his girlfriend scratches his arms up.

He still says that he loves her.

(He asked once if angels could fall in love.

I told him I didn't know.

I don't know.)

But he asked me to take care of his kid for the night so he could pull a double shift (avoiding going home; we're working on it), and Ava's in my arms now, a small and innocent thing, heavy in her sleep and probably not aware that the bed she'll sleep in is mine and not hers.

I hold her against my shoulder and listen to her breathe as I unlock the door; nudging it open as quiet as a stuck door can be.

My kitchen light is on.

Kick the door shut considerably louder, hold Ava while she shifts, shoot a glance at the roof and ask,

"Hello?"

There's a shifting. A scraping of kitchen chairs and I lay Ava on the couch to keep her asleep.

Ezekiel's voice comes back to me:

"I got fired."

Close eyes. Let out a breath.

I turn into the kitchen and he's sitting on the floor, beneath the table. The chairs are spread around the room, knocked over, on their sides, one still standing.

His knees are tucked up against his chest, arms wrapped around his legs, and the bruise that's on his wrist wasn't there this morning.

He blinks at me.

"The door was open."

I sink down to the cold tile and I slide under the table with him.

I hold my hand out and he puts his injured one inside of it and he doesn't cry.

Zeke never cries.

Zeke talks, like he's praying, but instead to the floors and the kitchen table legs and the night outside.

It's all I can do to sit with him and listen.

And send my own prayers toward Upstairs.

#



There are a lot of people in this city who don't seem to know what they've got.

Besides Ezekiel, I've helped two others escape from bruises and into a life that was at least better than before.

All of them just needed a little help.

But this one is different. This one is like a big question mark straight from Upstairs, dropped into my lap just to see what I'd do with it.

For now, I just watch her.

She's angry.

The gym is dark, and her hands are wrapped (crookedly, like she was in a hurry, or didn't really care if it hurt. Or both.) and her skin is covered in a sheen of sweat and she swings her fist and the hanging bag *thunks* deeply.

Her shoulders are heaving and she's breathing hard and instead of the tension draining out of her, it looks like it's building with each hit and kick and shoved out breath.

It's growing and pressing from the inside out, so intensely that I can feel it from the doorway across the room, and I stop breathing because she needs to stop before she breaks.

Einne screams.

She shoves the bag with her hands with everything inside of her and she's still hitting with her palms as she sinks to the floor on her knees, screaming again, this time less out of frustration and quieter.

More helpless.

I just have to let her. I want to hold her like I have for others, but she needs this.

She needs to know how broken she is before she'll let me help her fix it.

I stay until she starts crying and my chest starts aching and I have to leave because it's echoing off the walls and I just can't take it any longer.

I step outside and my shoulders start to itch again.

Damn it.

#

I think about Einne and her rage.

It's bothering me, the fact that she has every capability and resource to kick the hell out of anyone that touches her.

But I watched her for a week, and she'll let him take her to the bar. Let him drink, let him get angry, let him kiss her and tell her to drive him home.

And I think about it now, putting Ava to sleep in my bed again while Ezekiel is driving around town with a stack of resumes.

Everyone I've helped in these six months has needed something simple. Ezekiel needs strength. Others needed compassion, or a few extra dollars, or somebody to make a promise and keep it.

The more I think about Einne, the more I think she needs something massively more complicated.

Something that I don't know if I can just give her.

I check my phone for a text from Ezekiel and I sing Ava a quiet hymn to keep her asleep  
and I wonder,

If Upstairs is playing a cruel, terrible joke on me,

Or if I'm supposed to love Einne like she needs.

#

It's been three weeks since I saw Einne, and it's two AM, and I'm on the streets because I  
woke up with a sick feeling pressing my heart from the inside out.

There's an ache in the base of my skull, too, but I follow the twist in my chest as it tugs me  
because it's new.

It hurts. It's urgent. Something's about to happen and I need to be there.

The wind tosses me around the crosswalk and I raise a hand at the car that nearly runs me  
over.

It's getting harder to breathe the closer I get and I swear to God, if I have a fit now, I'm  
never going back Upstairs.

Ahead, there's a bridge.

On the bridge, one of the lights is out, and against the lights of the city, I can see the form  
of Einne on the wrong side of the railing.

My heart screams.

It makes sense, now. Her rage and her inaction and her last attempt at love in her lingering  
hopelessness and I run.

I run even though I don't have a solution, even though I've never spoken to her and all I have to prove my sanctity are the scars on my back.

I watch her as she moves, feet teetering over the edge and her hands curled tightly on the railing behind her.

The wind's caught her hair, pulling it away from her face. Her arms straighten and she's hanging over the water, held only by her fingers on the railing behind her.

She's smiling.

I stop running.

I say, "Einne."

The wind wraps itself around my word and flings it across the city instead of to her and I step up behind her on the other side of the railing.

I pray:

"Einne?"

Something snaps inside of her and she pulls herself back, shoulders pressing into the rail and her knuckles turning white. She doesn't look at me, just looks down at the water instead.

"I'm not going back with him," she says.

I move slow. I lean my elbows against the railing and I look at the outline of her face in the dim light.

For just a moment, I don't care if this is what Upstairs wants. Instead, I ask,

"Do you believe in angels?"

She laughs. It's loud and beautiful and bitter and she takes one hand away from the railing to rake her thick hair back from her face.

“Where do you want to take me, guardian angel?”

My heart *thump thumps* in the back of my skull. I shrug and I say,

“The hardware store.”

She laughs again, shakier this time. “If this is some sort of pick up line...”

I can't help but smile. I hold a hand over the railing and shake my head.

“You need new locks for your front door.”

Einne takes my hand.

My fingers start to tingle.

### Part III

I knew that it was easy to love.

Loving was the reason I came here.

(I say that when I feel like pretending that my brokenness didn't bring me here.)

I didn't know that it was so easy to fall in love.

I've held people. People hurting, broken things, people that I would have been tempted to kiss and hold and call my own, if I didn't know better.

Einne is different.

Einne doesn't want to be held. She also doesn't know that it's what she needs.

I knew that I needed to love her so for the first few weeks, that's all that I did. I held her fists when she almost put a hole in the wall of her apartment. I made her look me in the eyes and promise, truly, that she didn't want to hurt herself.

I just didn't realize that the human part of me had corrupted enough that I realized that I couldn't heal her and leave her.

She's fallen asleep on my chest tonight. There's raw skin on her arms but no blood, and her ex's phone numbers got deleted. Her skin is still red from crying, but she looks peaceful. Gentle. Content, at least.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand.

*help*

From Zeke. I close my eyes and I count out sixty seconds. Einne's breathing deeply and her hand is on my ribs and I just can't bear to move her.

I count out sixty seconds. Five more times. I finally move her into the pillows and I text back:

*Coming.*

I look at Einne one more time before I reach for my shoes.

#

My insides feel like a yellowish sort of green and my stomach twists again as I heave.

Knees aching and head pounding and somehow, Einne's fingers around my wrist. I don't even remember explaining it, but she tells me,

"You know that Zeke's happier, now."

Zeke. Zeke who never cried, with his head bashed inwards next to the bloodied corner of the coffee table.

Zeke with the mysteriously missing girlfriend and a baby girl scared and alone in the other room.

"Ava."

Einne's cool fingers are on my jaw and my forehead and her voice is distant when I hear her say,

"She's asleep in your bed. She'll be okay, angel, I promise."

This is backwards. Very backwards. She touches my chest and when my stomach twists to heave again nothing comes up.

She's so gentle. She touches me like I touch her to calm her down, on the insides of my wrists and on my chest on my collar bone where my cross lies, the hair at the nape of my neck.

I don't know what this means, why he had to die before I could mend him, why I can't even fulfill my purpose and help Einne without getting attached.

But she's helping me back and I'd never considered this.

I never knew I wanted this.

Anything, anything at all, in return.

Every inch of my body hurts, and my soul is aching and my shoulders are burning because the part of me that's still angel knows that this is *wrong*.

But she whispers,

"Cole?"

And I find enough breath to reply:

"Yes?"

Her fingers stay on my sticky skin and there's water on my tongue, and I get so far away for a moment that it almost feels like she kisses my forehead.

"We'll be okay."

I try to count sixty seconds.

I don't get that far.

#

Aching knees.

This time, at the altar. This is the first time I've felt a little more than human in weeks. The church is quiet and this is where Ezekiel's funeral should've been. But I couldn't draw attention, so Zeke's buried twenty miles away from here.

The only people who know where he is are Einne and I.

And Ava, but she was asleep.



The justice system isn't really on the best of terms with the big man Upstairs, so all I can do right now is pray that his girlfriend gets what she deserves.

In a more cosmic sense.

After I've prayed that, I don't really know what to pray.

Usually I pray for my next job. But after Zeke, and the fact that Einne hasn't left my apartment since then, I've had a hunch that I'm not on the best of terms with the big man Upstairs, either.

So I pray for forgiveness.

I'm quiet, but I don't like praying in silence, so the words bounce back from the walls to haunt me.

I can't really end it properly. Not when I hear Einne behind me.

I glance up at the roof in lieu of a real amen and I sit back to see her.

It's stupid how angelic she looks. The light from the windows hits her and makes her hair shine and her eyes glitter. Ava has her thumb in her mouth and her gaze wanders over the walls like she's happy.

"Why are you here?"

The words themselves are harsh but I can't make them come out any louder than a whisper.

Einne just smiles. She sinks down in the middle of the aisle between the pews and crosses her legs. She finally says,

"I have something to say, Cole."

I glance at Mary, once, because with Einne there's always a chance that what she has to say is nearly sacrilegious.

She's kissing me.

It catches me by surprise and I hold onto the cross around my neck and it's way too long before I realize that I don't know how to kiss back.

She laughs when she pulls away.

I start to apologize before she kisses me again, quicker this time.

"Don't quit."

Her words are warm against my mouth and I have to ask why and kiss her at the same time and it just comes out as a noise.

"You love the world too much to quit."

She's pulled back this time, her fingers against my jaw and a smile on her lips. I don't remember closing my eyes.

I want to tell her.

I want to tell her that I love her.

I love her for staying and for believing that I'm an angel and that I love her more than the rest of the world.

I love her for no reason at all and I didn't mean to.

I swear, I didn't mean to.