



Phantasm

LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

A phantasm can be defined as a figment of imagination that one believes to be real, and for a long time that's what this literary magazine was. A piece of my imagination that I never thought possible. In the Spring of 2023, when this magazine was founded, these figments materialized into reality allowing me to pursue something I've only ever dreamt of.

Aside from the literal definition of the word, *Phantasm* is also a campy horror film from 1979 wherein the malicious "Tall Man" (yes, that is the monster/villain name) opens a portal to his home planet to reincarnate the dead of Earth and take them back through that portal to be an army on his homeworld. What? Yeah, I don't know either. However, despite it making absolutely no sense, the film has netted itself a "cult classic" status. To me, this movie represents a desire to shed expectations (of the horror genre in this case) and let the mind wander to something strange, fun, or fulfilling. Something that I kept close to my heart while naming, planning, and facilitating this magazine.

David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* (2017) also plays a significant role in not only the creation of this magazine, but in my life as a whole. This film changed my life, there's no other way to put it. It follows the ghost of a man who recently died and he discovers that he is tethered to the land on which he passed, forcing him to watch passively as time continues to move on without him. It is deeply tragic and emotional, but also represents the importance of living, doing things, and enjoying what you can while you're here.

That symbol of the tangle ghost, just like the cheap Halloween costumes we used to make as kids, represents this very idea. Therefore, it was a simple decision to employ this ghost as the branding for this magazine. *Phantasm* is a product of my own attempt at seizing the opportunity in front of me and creating something special from it. And because of that, it has grown into something larger than I could've hoped.

There's a monologue about three quarters of the way through *A Ghost Story* where a man (played by Will Oldham) discusses the bleak meaninglessness of everything in the universe. He says, "You can write a book, but the pages will burn. You can sing a song and pass it down, you can write a play and hope that folks remember it and keep performing it. You can build your dream

house. But ultimately none of that matters more than digging your fingers into the ground to bury a fence post.”

This monologue has stuck with me for most of my undergraduate career and will likely continue to be a foundational thought as I move beyond college. Though he is talking about how meaningless everything we do is, I find the words to be deeply comforting. If nothing matters at the end of the day, then we can do anything. We can chase dreams, or take leaps, and not have to think about what comes next until we’re already there. Who cares if it doesn’t work out, because all of the atoms in the universe are going to contract one day anyway. So, let’s do the things we love and find what truly makes each and every one of us happy.

Phantasm, at its core, is a passion project and a dream come true. My goal, in all of the various places I work and write, has always been to build and foster a community of amazing, talented individuals who are capable of doing unbelievable things together. That is what we did together here. I am indebted to each and every one of you who have contributed and helped me bring this to life. *Phantasm* is as much yours as it is mine, and I couldn’t be happier about that.

Thank you all, and enjoy.

- Ryan Hiemenz

Cover photo by Jewel Miller (thank you).



Artwork by Thomas Mulcahy

Jesus of Antietam

Dylan Germann

September 17th, 1862. The battle of antietam, fought between the union and confederate armies. It had been only a minute since the battle had begun, rifles fired the air reeked of spent black powder.

I laid upon a hill, loading a powder charge and bullet into my rifle. The shot hammered my ears, dropping the confederate soldier charging the hill. His body slid beneath the mud, soldiers trampled over him like horses on a track. As the soldiers reached the top of the hill it had turned to a melee battle, viscera flying with spats of blood. No foothold remained stable. With a consecutive motion I bashed a soldier with the but of my rifle, cracking his head on impact. Following with a swift bayonet thrust to the gut of another. I looked into his eyes, holding despair—as the trifold bayonet pierced his lungs. I pitied him for only but a moment until I had been forced to dodge a bayonet charge from his comrades.

The throng of soldiers thrashing, with blades and clubs, jostled each motion of attacking. I pulled out my knife, intent to gut the confederate in front of me—shots still rang out—one would never know whether they were aimed at them. My knife was poised right below the neck of a soldier, with motion to cut—yet I instead received the wrathful butt of a rifle. Falling on my back I slid down the mud hill, stepped over and trampled. I covered my head. Tasting the blood within my mouth, I felt the same disparity as the men I had killed. Time became non-existent under the trample of men—only pain remained the constant of assurance.

My knife was gone, I had long ago let go of it. I had no protection, nor weapons to fend for myself. The most I could do was lay still, to be a dead body underneath the trample of men, I was soon joined one by one—by the corpses that slid down and met me, ones that had covered me. I stared within the eyes of the corpse and saw myself within them, a soon to be dead man.

—Beneath me I felt the ground shake, our cannons were in use—it was only a matter of time until the battle had ended. Though light came to my eyes, as dirt and mud poured from above. All gunfire had come to a halt, and the air was permeated with cacophony of the ground erupting. Above me I saw the rising figure of a giant, naked cept for the lioncloth across his waist. Men of both armies fell from his body as he rose, falling along with the dirt. The Giant stood in full view, a tan man, with full beard and hair. Yet his

expression held no malice nor anger—only that of happiness. A jubilant expression as he walked across the fields, apathetically crushing those beneath him.

Our hill was gone, and all the soldiers could do was gaze upon the behemoth that walked among the earth. It shimmered with a golden grace, dared not to look upon the ground it walked nor the people it crushed. Simply staring into the distance with a content nature of happiness. It was biblical in nature.

Our moment of awe had been silenced with the common of our generals. Calling across the fields, we were directed to the beast—to kill it. Soldiers of both armies ran alongside the giant, for miles and miles. Our legs had grown tired—straining to catch up with the long strides of the beast. Our shots no longer aimed at human kin, rather the body of our giant that trekked across land. It was volleys chaotic and not, bullets rained along the beast—one dare not fall behind to face the horde of soldiers behind. It had been hours, hours—yet the giant remained happy and simple, uncaring to our weapons.

I grabbed a rifle from a soldier who was once crushed, my powder was spent—yet I still ran with the giant. Detaching the bayonet from the rifle I leapt onto the leg of the giant, climbing over the small few that held the same idea. I climbed and climbed, along its body—gripping the protrusion of muscles supporting myself with the stabs of the bayonet. My eyes had turned red, I felt no oxygen within my body as I—and I alone climbed upon his shoulder with exhaustion. Beneath me I saw the soldiers that tried, fall to their deaths. There was pity, but seldom amount.

My breathing was harsh, I mustered the force to climb his beard. Seeing just above the clouds, it was a beautiful sight. Yet as I turned around I saw his eyes had turned to meet mine. Within the orbs of his eyes I saw many things, the lives of others, the lives of myself. The golden ratio, which imprinted itself on the Mona Lisa. Lions feasting upon red meat. I had seen everything. I felt engulfed for an hour, yet it was within the same second that I let go of fear—and within his eyes I had seen my death.



Artwork by Jewel Miller

Sex Machine Today

Connie Lonnagin

Maximus was a little pimp with his hair slicked back. Some pimps might be a tad insecure by only being five foot three. Some might be embarrassed about having a crippling fear of birds. But Maximus wasn't the type to take any shit from anybody. He made sure that nobody in their right mind would ever try to fuck him over. Maximus was known around the neighborhood to have a bit of a Napoleon complex. Now Max wasn't sure exactly what that meant when word traveled around, but he made sure that nobody had the gall to tell it to him. When Travis asked him once if he was ever embarrassed that his woman was sleeping around, Max told him no by taking a glass bottle and smacking it across his stupid dumbass face. Men wanted to be Maximus and any woman worth anything wanted nothing to do with him. It would only be a matter of time before he would get Big Jim and Flat Nose the hell out of town. Soon every whore worth anything would crawl across a path of fire just to be at his side. His Woman Maxine said this was all just a pipe dream and that he wasn't worth shit. But what the fuck does she know. She's just pissed that he missed dinner because he was busy fucking Sally. Anyway, none of that mattered to him right now. Right now, he had to see the old man because his testicles were on fire. It had been like this for the past couple of weeks, and normally he would be able to get over it but today he was in no mood to take it. He had shit that needed to get done, and his burning testicles would only be a distraction. As he walked down the street he couldn't remember the last time he had been home. All he could think about were his testicles, two bums across the street fighting over a blanket, and that James Brown was gonna release a new record. But right now he needed to focus on the issue at hand. It was windy and the cool breeze was making his balls feel tingly. He was so busy thinking about his balls that he didn't notice that he just walked right on top of a blind man's guitar. Fuck him, his balls don't hurt. I'll buy him a new one when Shanice brought him his keep for the month. And now at last he arrived at the Old Man's house. He walked up the steps and rang the buzzer. He waited but nobody answered. This fucking guy Max thought. He rang again, and this time the Old Man answered. "What the hell do you want?" The Old Man asked. "I got a problem Wolf; my balls have been treating me like the world treated Jesus." That's not good. "No, it's fucking not." "Watch your goddamn mouth boy!" This is a Christian household, and I will not tolerate

any blasphemy.” Max would have told this old fool to shut his goddamn mouth, but he really needed this sage to help save his balls. “Alright, I’m sorry man. But you know how it is. My balls man. They’re burning, They’re burning bad. And it’s just driving me outta my mind man. Please I really need it.” “Whatta you do rub tiger balm on em.” “What, no, why the hell would I rub tiger balm on my balls.” “The kids these days do it for kicks. Don’t believe in Jesus no more. So now they get into some weird stuff. They rub tiger balm on their balls. Ain’t it the damndest world we live in?” “Ya Wolf it is, it really is, now could you please let me in. I’m on fire.” “Ya, ya you can come in, Nothing worse than a man at war with his testicles.” After that the buzzer sounded and Maximus went on up. The Old man lived on the seventh floor of a twenty seven floor building. Normally it wasn’t that big a deal for Maximus to make the trek but normally his balls didn’t burn as excruciatingly as they did today. “Just one step at a time.” Maximus thought. “All you need to do is walk up seventy steps and you’re already at five. You didn’t think you could make it out of bed this morning, And now you’re as close as you’ll ever be to curing your balls.” Maximus made it to the second floor and continued his long journey. As he made it to the third he realized that he hadn’t thought about that bitch Martha. The second the thought came into his mind he knew he had just used his mental prowess to thoroughly fuck himself over. The door at the end of the hall opened. He didn’t even have to hear her voice to know who was shouting at him. “Oh I know that I ain’t looking at no goddamn, good for nothing, hustling, gutter trash miss matched sock wearing motherfucker right now am I!” Martha accosted him. As she continued down what seemed to Maximus and infinite hallway she continued “Where the fuck have you been!” I waited all night last week for you to come and pick me up. I put on makeup. I put on my dancing dress and my push up bra, and I waited all night.” Maximus sarcastically responded, “I’m sorry. I forgot.” “Oh you forgot. Oh you forgot. Did you hear that world? This broke motherfucka forgot. Well Lord, I guess I gotta forgive him. Even though my mama said that he ain’t nothing, has never been nothing, and won’t ever be nothing. But he says he’s sorry and he really fucking means it. So I guess I just gotta get on my knees, suck his dick and shout at the top of my lungs that you are forgiven. You hear that God, I forgive this mothafucka. You are forgiven! You are forgiven! You are all forgiven!” Maximus thought about his hot balls and realized that he could not pretend to care about this woman any longer and so he simply turned around and continued on his way. As he ventured up the stairs he was still being yelled at. “Oh, I aint good enough for a response, is that it? Well then, how could I forget. I’m a sack of shit. I don’t deserve a response. I could never even begin to imagine why I thought that Maximus Little would ever spend a single second thinking about a woman like me. How could I forget that Maximus Little is a sack of shit pimp who’s whores can’t tell the difference

between giving a blowjob and eating a banana. Well fuck you Maximus Little, Fuck you, fuck your wife, fuck your kids, fuck your whores, and fuck every last piece of shit you've ever laid eyes on. My daddy didn't raise no fool Maximus. My daddy didn't raise no fools." The remaining floors went by rather quickly for Max. But the pain in his balls was still an ever growing problem. He finally got to The Old man's door. He knocked three times and after two minutes he heard a growling at the door. "What is it sweetie?!" he heard in a loud raspy voice. He heard Wold drag his cane all across the floor as he finally got to the peephole at the door. "Aww this turkey." he heard. "What the hell do you want?" asked Wolf. "I just told you." replied Max. "Ahh, tiger balm on your balls." "No Wolf, I did not put tiger balm on my balls. They just hurt because of natural reasons." "A man's balls do not hurt for natural reasons." Maximus did not have a response to this. And decided he would wait until the door would be opened. It did not open. After a minute Maximus softly yelled. "Hey Wolf, could you please open the door? "It is open. Some punks broke in and stole my locks." "Why would people steal your locks?" "Hmmm, I didn't seem to ask them? Your mamma sure did raise some fools didn't she? "Now get in here before your damn balls drop off you jackass!"



Artwork by Kyle Hiemenz

What Do You Know About Love?

Sammie Neibloom

Harry always comes second best to his older brother, Marcus. Marcus is their parents' golden child. Marcus is tall, handsome, rich, and married to Mayor Connor's daughter, Rachel. Marcus is not the reason their parents are always fighting. The reason they are always fighting is because they are always frustrated with Harry.

Harry is short and has been called attractive by a few people, okay one, okay none, but that's okay. Harry might not be smart and he might not ever be rich, but he has other things going for him. He has.. Harry is... Okay, I've got nothing.

Harry wants to make his parents proud and when he hears President O'Donnell's daughter is coming to their small town of Tallulah Falls, Georgia for a publicity event at Tallulah Falls School, he knows exactly what will make them proud.

Harry goes to school that day with full intention to talk to President O'Donnell's daughter, Kennedy. At the school assembly, there are secret service agents everywhere, from the back of the stage to the side stairs. They even followed her into the bathroom. Harry finally gets to talk to her for a few minutes while she is walking by a waterfall outside.

"Hi, I'm Harry," Harry says, extending a hand towards her. Kennedy looks surprised, but takes it. She looks around for one of her service agents, slightly worried this boy could kill her at any moment. It's the fear that comes with meeting a stranger as the President's daughter.

"Kennedy. You go to school here?" she asks, and a service agent finally comes into view. The man starts walking closer and calls a few men over.

"Yeah, I'm a senior. I'm going to UNC at Charlotte in the fall. What about you, are you going to college?" Harry asks, beaming at her. It was slightly creepy, but he was happy he even got this far.

"Yeah. I haven't decided where I'm going to go. I might defer for a year, maybe after my father's term is over," Kennedy says and one of the men gives her a thumbs up, asking if she's okay. She nods and they take a few steps back to not crowd her.

"Yeah, that makes sense. You would probably get a lot of attention. I know, you can disguise yourself! Maybe even get some special effects make-

up to make your face look different. Kennedy goes here? Are you sure? No, I don't think so. It's certainly not the girl over there with the big nose," Harry says slightly exaggerated. Then, the most amazing thing to ever happen to Harry occurs, Kennedy laughs. The president's daughter, the most beautiful girl he's ever seen, has just laughed at his joke. They talk for a few more minutes and then one of the agents waves her over to tell her it's time to go.

"Well, it was nice meeting you... Harry, right? I hope to see you again sometime," she says, smiling at him.

"Yeah, same here!" Harry calls as she walks away. Harry smiles as she leaves with hearts in his eyes. After a few minutes, he walks over to the bus line and stands next to Beaux. They've been best friends since she moved here in the 8th grade.

"So how'd it go? Was the president's daughter everything you thought she'd be, or worse?" she asks mockingly. She has this belief that anyone with power and money is an asshole. Harry once tried to give his brother as an example in his rebuttal, but Marcus' got a pretty big head thanks to their parents.

"Ha ha! Very funny! She was amazing and she laughed at my jokes! Mine! I think I'm in love, Beaux!" he says. Beaux rolls her eyes. This wouldn't be the first time Harry claimed to be in love. First, it was Jenny P. in 9th grade. Then, it was nerdy Olivia from his English class in 10th grade. Last year it was his lab partner Vivianne who had less brain cells than my pet turtle. He was convinced Vivianne was in love with him, she just wanted the A, shocker!

"Harry, I mean this as gently as possible, you're not in love with her. You had a five minute conversation with her," Beaux says. She puts a hand on his shoulder and gives him the look she usually does when he starts talking lovestruck teenager nonsense.

"Beaux, it's different this time I swear. I feel it in my soul," he says. Harry seems to call after Beaux as they walk onto the bus. Harry is being his loud unapologetic self so they get a few head turns in the process. Beaux actually laughs out loud as this is the most ridiculous thing Harry has ever said to her.

"Okay Romeo, what are you going to do? She's three states away. Are you going to drive to see her?" Beaux asks jokingly.

"Oh my god! That's perfect Beaux! Can you drive me? Pretty please!" Harry asks. He clasps his hands together like in prayer, begging. Beaux peers over their seat to see if anyone is listening to them, considering it would be kind of hard to not hear Harry talking at normal volume.

Harry failed his road test 4 times, another reason for his parents to see him as a failure. Beaux passed on the first try, but didn't have her own car. She knew her mom wouldn't be using the car this weekend, but she didn't

know if she wanted to drive however many hours it took to get to the White House for a five minute conversation, even for Harry. She wants to give Harry the benefit of the doubt, but she knows Harry well enough by now to know he's exaggerating the whole situation.

"No, Harry! That's ridiculous. We can't drive to Washington D.C. this weekend," she says. Beaux turns away from Harry, inching as close as she can to the window, but her shoulder still touches him.

"What, you got a paper to write or something?" Harry asks. Beaux turns back to look at him with her brow scrunched together and her mouth in a frown. Harry had never cared as much about getting A's as Beaux did. The only thing Harry's parents approved of in his life was having Beaux as a friend because they thought she was a good role model for him. He didn't necessarily get bad grades, but he wasn't going to an Ivy League and Beaux was in the running for valedictorian. The thought of doing something so educational made him want to barf.

"It's due Monday for Mr. Gray's class and you have it too!" she says. She groans, turning away from him again. Harry pleads again and gives her those damn puppy eyes. He starts whining like a dog and people start to look at them. She knows the only way to get him to stop will be to say yes. She can count on one hand the only times saying no to Harry actually stuck.

"Fine. Fine. Fine! Well leave right after class on Friday," she says. Beaux puts in her earbuds and turns to look out the window.

"Yes! You're the best!" Harry cries jumping on her to give her a hug. A smile tugs on her lips, but she tries to get it to leave. Harry smiles, noticing Beaux's, but doesn't say anything.

Friday morning at the breakfast table, Harry tried to tell his parents about his weekend, but they were barely listening. Harry does his normal routine and talks anyway, hoping something sinks through.

"I'm going to do something this weekend that's going to make you proud, probably prouder than you've ever been of Marcus," Harry says. He leans back in his chair like he'd won.

His parents have praised every achievement his brother Marcus has ever done, from winning spelling bees, to eating his vegetables, to getting all A's on his report card, to dating the mayor's daughter. The kid could rob a bank and they'd still probably throw him a party. Everything Harry has done has consisted of demands to do better, a shaking head of disappointment or ignoring of Harry for prolonged periods of time.

Harry's dad stifles a laugh and his mom doesn't even look up from her laptop. Harry groans and speaks slowly, mocking them.

"I, your son Harry, am taking a road trip, a trip on the road, by car—" he starts, but his dad cuts him off.

"Get on with it, Harry," his dad says sternly and Harry gets an-

noyed. They weren't even listening to him and now they have the audacity to be the ones who are mad? Harry thinks he'll show them how wrong they are to ignore him when he comes back on Sunday night as the boyfriend of the second most important woman in America, after the first lady of course. Harry stands up and marches up to his room.

Five minutes after the last bell, Beaux pulls up her car right in front of the school. She has her hazards on even though parents park there all the time to pick up and drop off their kids. She honks the horn and Harry comes running down the stairs. He throws the duffle bag that was in his right hand into the trunk.

"Wow, Mama Jeanne's car is still running?" he asks, jumping into the passenger seat.

"Hey! Leopold was using the new car to drive to poker and I don't see you pulling up with a car." Harry holds his hands up in defense before they break into a fit of laughter. Beaux turns the music on and they start dancing as they begin their drive.

"Beaux? Can I ask you something? Have you ever been in love?" Beaux is taken aback by Harry's question. They were the friends that joked around. They weren't known for getting deep. As long as Harry had known Beaux, she'd been in a few relationships, but nothing long term. Harry had to drag Marcus to pick Beaux up after a few bad dates, but he didn't even know the details on those.

"I don't know. Maybe, but only once and I'm still not sure if that's what I felt," she says calmly, looking back towards the road. Shockingly, the deep moment doesn't last too long.

"Aren't you going to ask me?" Harry asks, smiling. Beaux knows that Harry wears his heart on his sleeve and has told Beaux every feeling he's ever had. Harry can't talk about emotions with his three guy friends. They just wouldn't get it. That's just one of the reasons he loves having Beaux in his life.

"I already know the answer, no," she says the last part mockingly, like she's tired of talking about this. After all, his most recent "being in love" has led her to be driving across four states to get to the girl, about a nine hour trip.

"Hey! Maybe I've been wrong in the past, but I'm definitely in love with Kennedy and I think she might like me back." He looks at the picture he has of her on his phone that he took during the assembly. Harry was so excited to see Kennedy after their last chat. She also said "I hope to see you again sometime." This could seem like just a polite greeting to some, but to Harry it was his "in."

"Harry, I'm telling you this again, because I'm your friend. You can't fall in love from a five minute conversation. It's impossible!" Beaux

throws her left arm up, keeping her right hand on the wheel. Harry starts talking her ear off about love so Beaux just turns up the music so she can barely hear him.

About an hour later, Harry's stomach begins to loudly grumble. He begins shifting around in his chair like a toddler. Beaux darts her eyes between the road and Harry, waiting for the whines to come.

"Ugh, Beaux! I'm so hungry! I need food!" Harry's whining is getting unbearable and Beaux rolls her eyes. Sometimes Beaux feels like she's babysitting when she goes anywhere with Harry.

"We can stop for food if you want," Beaux says. She's smiling. She knows Harry doesn't want to stop and though she went to the bathroom before they left, she kind of needs to go again.

"We can't stop, Beaux, that'll take time off the trip." Harry throws his arms up. He knows that Beaux is just saying this to bother him which makes him even more frustrated.

"There's snacks in the black tote in the back seat." Harry squeals like a child and Beaux chuckles to herself. Beaux has always been such a mom friend. Harry assumed that it went with her good grades as she was always prepared for anything and everything. Harry starts to go through the bag and his smile falls.

"These are horrible! These aren't road trip snacks! I need chips," Harry says. Beaux chuckles because she expected this. It was her excuse to stop somewhere with a restroom and stretch her legs.

"Oh well, guess we'll have to stop," Beaux says. The sarcasm comes through and Harry shakes his head. He always knew Beaux was an evil genius.

They stop at a gas station and Beaux fills up the car while Harry runs inside to get slushies and snacks. Blue for Beaux and red for Harry. They used to get slushies every Friday after school on their walk home freshman year. They took a few years off from it, but they were happy to have it again. After finishing up with the gas, Beaux runs to the bathroom. She makes it back at about the same time as Harry. Harry hands the drink to Beaux and they get back in the car. He immediately starts snacking and Beaux looks down at the brown bag filled with snacks.

"How much did you buy?" she asks. Beaux tries to focus on the road, but she keeps looking down at the full bag. Harry's going to spend all his D.C. money before they get there and she knows it.

"Enough to get us to D.C." Harry says. Harry is oblivious as usual. Shocker, he doesn't even notice Beaux's worrying. I swear that kid is one brain cell away from being brain dead sometimes.

Another hour into the trip and Beaux's own stomach grumbles.

Harry laughs as he shoves more chips and cookies in his mouth. He's been tracking how long it takes her to cave; about three hours into the trip.

"Alright, pass me something. Got anything good in there?" Beaux asks. She takes her hand off the wheel and starts to dig through the bag in Harry's lap, eyes still focused on the road. Harry slaps her hand away and she puts it back on the steering wheel.

"What the hell, Harry?" Beaux yells.

"Keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the road. I'll hand you whatever you want. There's Sour Patch Kids, Takis, Doritos—" Harry starts. Beaux cuts him off.

"What kind?" she asks. Her eyes narrow.

"Red," Harry smirks. Beaux reaches over and slaps his shoulder.

"Loser," she groans. Harry knew she only ate the blue ones which made it even worse. He probably even knew she would want them, but he still got red. She did say she had food in her bag, but he should've known to bring her blue doritos. That was a must.

"Hey, that just means they're all there for me." Harry smiles. Beaux practically grows at Harry and gives him dagger eyes.

"Anything else in there?" Beaux quickly tries to look inside the bag and checks to see if Harry is looking at her.

"Hey! Look at the road!" he yells. Harry throws his arms up and they both laugh.

"Food!" Beaux yells this exaggerating the o's so now she sounds like a child. Harry liked being in control like this. Beaux usually doesn't rely on other people so it was extremely amusing for him to control if and how fast she ate.

"Hmm, let's see there's hot pockets, pretzels, potato sticks, oreos, gummy worms..." Harry trails off. He knows Beaux's eyes are going to widen before they actually do. When they finally do he laughs as she turns her head like one of those creepy dolls in horror movies. She can't decide if she wants to be annoyed with him for not starting with the gummy worms or be nice so he gives them to her. There's a creepy smile planted on her face with wide eyes.

"Give me the gummy worms, Harry." Now Beaux sounds like a creepy doll from a horror movie. Harry chuckles. The driving madness is slowly starting to get to her more than three hours into the trip and he is extremely amused. Harry holds the gummy worms out to her and pulls them away every time she reaches for them. Her mouth forms in a line and he can tell she's getting mad, but he still laughs.

Finally, Harry takes a gummy worm out of the packaging and holds it in front of her mouth. Beaux sniffs the worm and looks at Harry with weary eyes.

“Are your hands clean?” Beaux asks. Harry puts the gummy worm in his own mouth. Then he takes her sanitizer and squirts some in his hands. He rubs them together until the excess is gone. He knows Beaux is a stickler about this so he makes sure to carry out every detail carefully.

Aww, look at Harry being so thoughtful. I don't trust it. Beaux doesn't either as she eyes him carefully as the keeper of her gummy worms. Harry takes another worm out of the bag and holds it in front of Beaux's mouth. She almost bites his finger when she lunges for it. She sighs in relief at the familiar gummy tastes. She gives him a look saying she wants more. She eats them so fast that Harry is shocked when the bag is empty just two minutes later.

“More!” Beaux yells. Harry chuckles again. He really likes seeing Beaux in her natural gummy worm loving habitat. She was never like this at school and he didn't even think she was like this with her other friends. He was happy to be one of the few, besides her parents and brothers to see the true Beaux.

“There's no more. You ate them all!” Harry chuckles again. Beaux turns her head slowly. He knows what she's thinking before she even says it. He did only buy one bag, but he thought it would last her longer than it did.

“Why would you only get one bag! That's the only thing I want,” she groans. Harry apologizes and puts a hand on her shoulder. She pretends to bite the air in intimidation, but Harry has never found Beaux intimidating, ever. She's a sweetheart and everyone knows it. She's also his favorite person, but he'd never tell her that.

Do I need to hold a fucking sign over his head or something. This kid is so blind, the highest glasses prescription wouldn't do anything for him. After driving for a total of over six hours, because of rush hour traffic, Beaux starts to pull into a motel parking lot. Harry reads the sign “Greensboro Motel.”

“Whoa. Why are we stopping?” Harry asks. He looks around like the White House is going to miraculously come into view. He seems to have more energy than he did five minutes ago when he was falling asleep on the passenger door.

“It's late. I'm tired. I need to stretch my legs and I'm hungry. I need vending machine chips and I need to lay down,” she says, clearly done with him for the night. She parks her car in one of the parking spots and grabs her bag before walking towards the main entrance door. Harry always admired Beaux for her confidence and lack of fear. It was dark, she was a young girl, and they didn't know anything about where they were. She had every right to be scared, but she was walking around like it was her childhood neighborhood.

Harry grabbed his own bag and started running after her to keep

up. When they get inside, Harry thinks the motel is okay. He is sure it doesn't get five star reviews, but he assumes there won't be bedbugs in his bed tonight. The guy at the front desk is clearly a grouchy old man that did not want the night shift and was certainly unhappy with his position in life.

"What do you want?" the old man grumbles. Harry flinches, but Beaux stands perfectly still. Harry backs up while Beaux walks closer to the desk.

"Good evening, sir. We need two rooms please?" she asks and the man grunts before flipping through a book that looks like it had one too many coffees spilled on it.

"Sorry little girl, there's only one room left. You'll have to share a space with a boy, don't worry, we don't have cooties." He was clearly making fun of how young they were with his mocking. Beaux could tell this man was just unhappy with his life and she wasn't going to let his words get to her. She hands him her card and he hands her a key.

"Room 31 on the left. Checkout is at noon. Don't be late," he grunts before picking up his newspaper again. Beaux stands tall even though she's clearly more tired than Harry who stumbles on his own feet. She walks down the hall and slips the key into the door of room 31. Beaux walks in first and she stops after only taking two steps. Her eyes are wide and her mouth has slightly fallen.

"Why'd you stop Beaux?" Harry asks, finally entering the room. He walks in and looks at her eyes then follows to their staring. There's only one bed in the room. Beaux finally closes her mouth and brings her eyes back to normal.

"I'm, uh, going to go to the bathroom. It was a long drive." Beaux seems to bump into everything as she makes her way to the bathroom. Harry looks around the room now that Beaux is in the bathroom. Beaux had been his friend for a long time, but they had never been in this close of a shared space. They've had like two sleepovers and that's only because he fell asleep on her couch a few times after watching a movie. He had no feelings for Beaux so it shouldn't be a problem. So why was he still uneasy about the situation?

Beaux emerges from the bathroom in her pajamas. He'd seen her in pajamas before, but this time it felt different. This was an intentional sleepover and this would be the closest they've ever been physically to each other. She gets into bed and covers herself with the blanket.

"Night Harry," she says, closing her eyes and adjusting herself to a comfortable sleeping position. Harry doesn't respond. Instead he practically runs into the bathroom. He closes the door then realizes he forgot his bag to change so he quietly comes back out and grabs his bag. Beaux's eyes are still closed so he doesn't feel too embarrassed. He changes into his own pajamas

and then stares in the mirror for sometime.

He didn't understand why sharing a bed was changing things. Beaux was his best friend and they've talked about a lot of things together. It was probably just because she's a girl, he tells himself. His experience with the female population was quite minimal. He splashes some water on his face then emerges from the bathroom. The light is already off so he bumps into a few things on his way to the bed. He gets under the covers and pulls the blanket slightly, but it doesn't budge. Beaux is taking up over half the blanket. He chuckles a little.

"Hey! Stop pulling on the blanket, Harry," she groans, adjusting herself and he laughs again. He finally realizes that it shouldn't be awkward. Beaux is fine and he's the one making it awkward.

"Beaux? You're taking up more than half the blanket," he says and she opens her eyes. She adjusts herself to give him more of the blanket. "Sorry," she groans. "Listen Harry, you're my best friend and you know I'd do anything to make you happy, but is this really what you want? Chasing a girl you had one conversation with who you might not even be able to see because she's the president's daughter?" She doesn't look at him yet. She doesn't want to laugh and she knows if she turns their faces will be inches apart and she will laugh.

"Aww, I'm your best friend, Beaux? I'm honored," he says. Harry playfully nudges Beaux with his shoulder. She gets further annoyed with his deflecting.

"I'm serious Harry and you know you're my best friend," she says, still facing the wall. Harry turns to face her in the bed, but he's looking at the back of her head.

"Actually Beaux, I know you have other friends, but I've never met any of them. I've seen you talk to other people, but you always send them away when I walk over to you. Are you embarrassed to be my friend or something?" Harry's voice sounds quiet in the darkness. Beaux turns over. This was a moment to turn over for. Even in the darkness, Harry can tell she looks surprised.

"Oh my gosh, Harry never! Trust me, you don't want to meet them. I swear I'm not embarrassed by you. I just want to give you my full attention because you always have some story to tell me. Plus, I thought you wouldn't want to share it with a complete stranger," she says looking up at him. Harry suddenly realizes how close they are. The bed feels smaller. She always smiles so brightly when he walks over to her, but he always has that underlying feeling that she would rather be talking with someone else, one of the other friends he's never met.

Harry didn't know if that feeling came from always feeling like a burden in his own home or if it was because sometimes Beaux talked to him

like he was the child she was babysitting. He also sometimes felt like he was bothering her when he talked about his “lovey dovey” stuff. His guy friends have previously told him to shut up when he brought it up. Harry knew Beaux didn’t feel as confident in the relationships as he did, but he hoped his best friend would never see him like the burden he felt he was for everyone else in his life.

“I want to meet your friends, Beaux. As your best friend, I want to know them and why you are friends with them. I want to know how you act with them and if it’s different from the way you are with me. As your best friend, I want to know all sides of you, every part,” Harry says and it’s the most serious he’s ever been with her. Yeah, they talk about the girls he’s liked and it’s serious to him, for the most part, but they always end up joking. Beaux grabs his hand and squeezes it. Harry knows that she’s telling him “okay.” Harry starts thinking again about how Beaux has never mentioned any guys to him.

“Beaux? How come you never tell me about any of the guys you’ve liked?” he asks and her soft expression changes. Her face turns slightly red.

“They’re not important. They’re temporary. We’re not,” she says, not meeting his eyes.

“Well, if you ever do want to talk about it, I’m around and willing to listen. You don’t have to save it for girl talk with your girlfriends,” he says and even though it’s dark he knows she can see him beaming at her. He nods and sometime later they fall asleep.

When Harry wakes up in the morning, he’s holding Beaux in his arms. Her head was resting on his chest and his head was resting on top of her head. Their arms are wrapped together in a hug. His first instinct is to get up, but then he stops. He doesn’t want to move. Fuck.



Artwork by Carly Maloney

You Take After Your Father

Sydney Howse

“This is a serious conversation,” My mom warned.

She was sitting in the driver’s seat, leaving me to peer at the right side of her face in confusion. I had asked her if my hair was anything like my dad’s, if it had any hint of red because of his ginger genes. The question had been simple, but it had left my mom quiet. I hadn’t been expecting ‘a serious conversation’. You didn’t have a serious conversation on the way to the library, my eleven-year-old brain rationalized. My mom took me nearly every week to pick out more books; it was supposed to be our routine ten-minute drive. The drive that I had never once had a serious conversation with my mom. So of course, I reasoned, it couldn’t be that bad, that serious.

“Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

There was no way I could be ready when I didn’t know what would come of this conversation. There was no way I could have possibly said no. No, Mom, I’m not ready. Let’s put this off for the foreseeable future. My thoughts would have festered in my head if I had been left to think of all the possible scenarios, all the things she could have said. The words would be waiting for me around every corner. A serious conversation would be waiting after every simple question I asked.

So of course, I didn’t say no, but I wonder what would have happened if I had. I don’t know how much longer my mom would’ve left me living this lie that wasn’t really a lie at all.

My mom told me, “We tried to have children for seven years.”

I listened with rapture, with dread. Something was coming. It was so obvious looking back on it, but of course, it wasn’t obvious then.

“Do you know what In-Vitro Fertilization is?”

I didn’t. Until that moment, I had never heard the term.

“Your biological father was a sperm donor.”

It was too late when I realized that I, in fact, was not ready to have this conversation.

I had been raised my entire life to believe that I was my mother’s and my father’s child. I thought I got my brown eyes from him. He had so many freckles up and down his arms and legs that it was no wonder that I had so many on my face. In reality, I got them from some stranger they had picked out after their years of trying, years of heartbreak. My mom was given five

fertilized eggs and two of those turned out to be me and my twin brother.

“It was our last option before adoption.”

I wonder how different it would have been if I had been adopted instead. If I hadn't been related to either of them, known either side of my biological history. If I didn't have to explain what IVF meant to the people I decided to tell. Everyone knew what adoption meant. They didn't understand how my mom could be my mom, but my dad was not completely my dad. And for a while I didn't understand either. At the time I really didn't want to understand. What I wanted most of all was for this conversation to be over. I wanted to be able to forget this thing that changed how I perceived myself but didn't actually change me at all. I was still me. My dad was still my dad.

“Do you have any questions for me?”

I looked out the car's window, turning my face away. The houses were blurring by, and my eyes tried to latch onto anything, anything at all. I tried to change the topic, to get the conversation away from the emotions and words swirling within the car that tainted the air like an overrun skunk. My mom called me out for attempting to change the subject and eventually the car petered out into an oppressive silence.

The air was weighed down with unsaid words when we arrived at the library. I don't remember going into the building and picking out new books. I don't remember the drive home either. I don't remember if I looked at my dad when we got home. I'm not sure what I was thinking; maybe I was just a blank slate, a fertilized egg in a petri dish.

I remember the first time I looked at my brother afterwards. I saw him and I wondered if he knew. I wondered when his life would be turned upside down. He idolized my father even more than me. My mom spent her time carting me to tennis practice whereas my dad and brother had their own special bond that had solidified in the hours spent in the car on the way to hockey games and lacrosse practices. I wondered if he would feel like I did, my stomach churning whilst being an empty pit inside me. I remember wanting to talk to him about it. I wanted a companion in this weird state of grief, while at the same time wishing he never had to know. I kept my mouth shut. If the words were held inside maybe I could forget that they were even there.

Later that night, I laid in my bed trying to go to sleep, but not being able to. That feeling in my stomach was back and something burned at the back of my throat, the back of my mind too. It was the thoughts of my dad not really being my dad. I wondered if he would think differently of me now that I knew. I didn't want to think of my dad differently, even though in a small way I absolutely did.

After laying in my bed for a long while, the monster clawing at my insides, I got up and walked downstairs. The lights were still on, my parents were still awake, and I told them my stomach hurt. My mom asked me wheth-

er I was going to throw up. No, I said. It wasn't like that. It wasn't something I had eaten, but the thoughts that churned inside my gut.

My mom couldn't know what was running through my head, didn't realize that it might be better to have my dad comforting me and my mind. I wanted to be lying curled under my dad's arm like I used to when I was little. I would come downstairs early in the morning, before my brother was up, to ensure that I got the good spot next to my dad. My dad's quiet laughter would shake my cheek as we watched *Full House* or *George Lopez*. Instead, it was my mom who laid me down on our little loveseat sofa with my head in her lap. She rubbed my stomach and brushed my hair back from my forehead. Somehow, I felt better and worse at once. I was still young enough to cling to my mom for comfort, but old enough now to know this secret about me.

And it was a secret.

It had been kept from me. And I learned all too soon that it was now my secret to bear. It was held tight when family friends would tell my brother and I how much we resembled our dad. When people saw how tall I was and insisted that I got it from my dad, I kept the truth inside. I felt like some fraud anytime we showed up to the family reunions on my dad's side; they all thought I was one of them, but I was an outsider. I didn't know which of my family members knew and who didn't. It was best to just keep my mouth shut that first time and the times after.

I kept it quiet for years while simultaneously trying not to think about it. In late middle school I told my best friend. I remember feeling like I was going to cry even though I didn't believe it was something to cry over. I was loved. I was wanted. It didn't matter that my dad wasn't my dad, but my throat didn't believe me, didn't want me to say the words, but I forced them out anyways. It was my story to tell just as it was my genetics to bear. No one could take that from me, not even myself.

Over time the words came out easier. They didn't have to be forced from my mind or meticulously planned out. The thoughts came and went, and they no longer churned my stomach. It became a part of myself, a simple fact. I eventually asked my mom questions. She showed me the profile of my biological father. She told me about all the injections she had to take beforehand. My mom said she got to look at us in a petri dish.

My mom told my brother when he was fifteen. I wasn't there, I wish I had been. It was only a few years ago that I had the first conversation with my brother where I learned his thoughts and feelings. He talked about wanting a picture of our biological father, just to see what he looks like. I talked about wanting to know if we had any half siblings. We agreed that we loved our dad all the more for the part he has played in our lives. My brother is the only other person who could possibly know how I feel. I wish we could have been there more for each other. We try now with our 11pm FaceTime calls and

our busy schedules, but it doesn't always work.

I have yet to have a conversation with my dad. He is a quiet man that listens more than he talks. I would tell my dad how much he means to me. He would listen when I reveal that I love and respect him even more than if he had been my biological father. I would tell him that if I could have chosen any dad in the world, it would be him. The man who checked my closet for monsters and killed all the bugs that terrified me. The dad who took me on father-daughter breakfast dates to IHOP, so we could eat pancakes and have the time to talk without my brother or mother interrupting. The man who sang Bob Marley as lullabies to get his infant daughter to fall asleep. The father who always tells me he loves me and shows it with his constant support and appraisal.

Without my dad I would not be the person I am today. I would not be able to ride a bike or drive a car. I learned how to cook because of the hours we spent in the kitchen together with our identical aprons. He taught me kindness every time he stopped to help an animal on the side of the road. I was shown love each time he tucked me into bed or every day when he waited for me and my brother at the bus stop. I remember the times we would wrestle, and it would inevitably turn into a giggling fit with him tickling the bottom on my feet. He is always the first to tell me to go after my dreams and will be the last person left cheering for me on the sidelines.

It's true that I don't know who my biological father is, but I do know who my dad is. I will always know who my dad is. He is the man who has given me so much more than some genes.